

Monday
8 February 2021

Volume 689
No. 173



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 8 February 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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Monday 8 February 2021

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 689

TWENTY-FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 8 February 2021

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings continued (Order, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Indefinite Leave to Remain

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What proportion of applications for indefinite leave to remain have been successful in the last 12 months. [911919]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The UK offers a wide range of routes for people to settle in the UK, including those in need of protection and those who settle through marriage or work routes. There were 80,710 decisions on applications for settlement in the UK from non-European economic area nationals in the year ending September 2020, of which 97% resulted in a grant.

Douglas Ross [V]: Since I was elected in 2017, I have been supporting Matt Jun Fei Freeman in his efforts to secure indefinite leave to remain. Matt has been in the UK for 17 years, and for the last nine he has made Lossiemouth and the wider Moray community his home. Will the Home Secretary agree to meet me to look at the

considerable case for Matt to remain in Moray, so that he can continue to benefit from the friendship and support he gets here and so that Moray can continue to gain from Matt choosing this part of the world to be his home?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises a very important case. He spelt out the duration for which Matthew has lived in the UK and in his constituency. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss the detailed nature of the case, and I am happy to follow up on the concerns he has.

Police Officer Numbers

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [911920]

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers in Humberside. [911923]

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of police officers. [911938]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): This Government are recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers by March 2023—an unprecedented increase in the next three years that reflects the biggest recruitment drive in decades. I am pleased to tell the House that, as at 31 December, the police have recruited an extra 6,620 police officers—620 ahead of target and three months ahead of schedule.

Alexander Stafford [V]: It is great to hear about the huge increase in police numbers, especially here in South Yorkshire, but what we really need is these new police to be visible and accessible. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need these new police officers to be front of house at Maltby police station, so that they can speak to residents

and address their concerns, and to be established at a new base on Dinnington High Street, to clamp down on antisocial crime?

Kit Malthouse: It is no surprise that so diligent a Member would take every opportunity to maximise the benefits from this enormous uplift in police officers for his constituents. While the decision on particular police stations is an operational matter for the chief constable, in consultation with the police and crime commissioner, my hon. Friend is quite right that an expansion in numbers on this scale means that all police forces should be reviewing their property strategy, to ensure that the presence he looks for in his constituency is felt across the country.

Martin Vickers [V]: Under the leadership of our chief constable Lee Freeman, Humberside police has made good progress from the position it was in a few years ago, and we have benefited from increased officer numbers. If we are to maintain that progress and meet the expectations of my constituents, we must continue to increase force numbers. Can my hon. Friend give an assurance that we will be able to further increase the number of officers in Humberside?

Kit Malthouse: In my nearly six years in the House, I have watched with admiration as my hon. Friend, terrier-like, holds the Government to their commitments; he is doing exactly the same today, and I do not blame him for it. He is quite right that we have seen a big increase in police officer numbers, but there is much more to come. We have done 6,620, which means that there are 13,000-odd yet to go. The Government's commitment to the number of 20,000 is about as solid as it gets. It is the same as if the ravens were to leave the tower: if we fail to fulfil this promise, there will be fundamental problems and consequences for Government, not least, I am sure, from my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: We have lost the main raven; be careful of what we seek.

Peter Gibson [V]: I welcome the brilliant work of my hon. Friend's Department, putting more bobbies on the beat in Darlington. Does he share my concern that those same officers will spend more time ferrying detainees across County Durham and less time on the beat if the plans of the acting police and crime commissioner to spend £21 million on a single custody suite for the whole county go ahead, robbing my constituency of its accessible custody suite? Does he agree that this decision should wait until after we have elected a new, democratic police and crime commissioner?

Kit Malthouse: What a joy it is to hear a Conservative voice for Darlington once again! You will be interested to know, Mr Speaker, that in my very first general election in 1987, I fought in Darlington for the then young and fresh-faced Michael Fallon, who was the successful MP in that election.

My hon. Friend makes a fair point. When deciding about the disposition of custody suites in police stations across a particular force area, chiefs must have in mind the amount of time that will be spent by police officers in ferrying miscreants to and from those custody suites. I applaud him for pushing his temporary police and

crime commissioner, and I hope there is soon to be a Conservative one—George Jabbour is a fantastic candidate—who will make a sensible decision in favour of all the people of Durham.

No Recourse to Public Funds: Covid-19

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What support her Department has provided to people with no recourse to public funds since the start of the covid-19 lockdown announced in January 2021. [911921]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The Government remain committed to supporting everyone through this pandemic. Many of the wide-ranging covid-19 measures the Government have put in place are available to migrants with NRPF, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, statutory sick pay and discretionary hardship payments for those who have to self-isolate. In addition, migrants with leave under family and human rights routes can also apply to have the NRPF condition lifted, something that is successful now in 85% of cases, in just 17 days.

Ian Byrne [V]: After hearing evidence at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on homelessness, I know that the unwillingness of the Home Office to suspend no recourse to public funds and a lack of clarity over support have had devastating consequences during this pandemic for many. Despite being over a month into this lockdown, policy is still opaque around section 4 eligibility for individuals with no recourse to public funds. Will the Minister provide an update on this as a matter of urgency?

Chris Philp: There is absolute clarity about the benefits. I have mentioned things like the coronavirus job retention scheme already, and I have mentioned how people on family and human rights routes can get the NRPF condition lifted, but I did not mention the over £8 billion available via local authorities for NRPF-eligible migrants to apply for. In addition, the hon. Member asked about section 4: people on section 4 support do get accommodation provided by the Home Office. We currently now have, I think, about 61,000 people in accommodation. That is up from about 48,000 before the pandemic, precisely because we are looking after the people most in need.

Refugee Resettlement

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What plans her Department has to continue refugee resettlement after the conclusion of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. [911924]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The United Kingdom is a world leader in resettlement. My hon. Friend will know that, in the last five years, we have resettled nearly 30,000 people—more than any other country in Europe. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we will be completing the 20,000 people under the VPRS in the coming weeks, and after that we will be continuing to offer further resettlement places beyond that, as far as we are able to, given the current coronavirus circumstances.

Beyond that, we will be making announcements—my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be making announcements—in the relatively near future about how we plan to continue resettlement beyond that.

David Simmonds [V]: My hon. Friend has rightly championed the record of this country and this Government in providing support to the most vulnerable people here and abroad, and it is clearly vital that safe and legal routes to refuge in the UK are available to disrupt smuggling and people trafficking. Is my hon. Friend confident that using the very successful current scheme as a template, the new UK resettlement scheme will have the necessary level of support and funding to resettle refugees effectively and in line with our aspirations?

Chris Philp: I can absolutely give that assurance. Of course, our resettlement work will have the financial support it requires. We intend to build upon, but also learn the lessons from, the previous resettlement scheme. There are going to be significant ways in which we can improve it. Not only was our resettlement scheme over the last five years the largest resettlement scheme of any country in Europe, but there is more we are doing. Our refugee family reunion provisions see 6,000 people a year or more come into this country, and just a short while ago our BNO—British national overseas—route opened up, allowing people being persecuted by the Chinese Communist party to seek refuge here as well.

Anti-vaccination Extremism

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle covid-19 anti-vaccination extremism posted online. [911925]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The United Kingdom's world-beating vaccination programme is saving lives and livelihoods, and it is always vital that we arm ourselves with the facts and call out wrong information on vaccines. The counter-disinformation unit is responding to the misleading online content and working with social media platforms to ensure that all action is taken to remove harmful disinformation so that authoritative sources of information are promoted.

Kate Hollern [V]: I have seen the brilliant work Labour councillors in Hounslow, Swindon and Blackburn have been doing to appeal to communities to take the vaccine. This work is being undermined by misinformation on social media, and is literally a matter of life and death. What plans do the Government have to bring forward legislation on, for example, financial and criminal penalties for social media companies that fail to act to stamp out this dangerous anti-vaccine content?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady raises a really important point at this very delicate time with the vaccine roll-out, and I would like to make two comments.

First, the Government are absolutely focused on zapping down the disinformation and misinformation that is circulating around the vaccine, because we cannot allow people—lives will be lost—basically to be duped into believing that this vaccine is not safe. I urge everyone—Labour councils, Conservative councils, and everyone

in positions of authority—to get the message out to take the jab; it is safe, and it will protect individuals and their families.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asked about legislation and actions by the Government. A lot of work is taking place across Government, by the Home Office, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and other colleagues, around sanctions and penalties, and work has also taken place with the online harms Bill very much to target social media platforms and the way in which they operate.

Finally, it is worth concluding, as we see the vaccine roll-out taking place, that everyone should, when called, take the vaccine, and collectively—no matter what our backgrounds politically or in terms of gender or ethnicity—everyone should be out there praising the efforts on the vaccine and making sure that people take the jab.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The spread of disinformation and anti-vaccine content on social media is presenting a real danger to the NHS in its efforts to vaccinate against covid-19, and some communities are hesitant to accept the vaccine, with people risking their own health and, in some cases, their own lives. In an agreement with the social media giants it was revealed that their only commitment was not to profit from or promote flagged anti-vax content, but there was no commitment to close down these groups, so is it not time that the Government got tougher to stop the anti-vax message getting through?

Priti Patel: I very much refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments that I have just made: a lot of work is taking place with social media platforms. False information, disinformation and manipulated information are intended to deceive and mislead people, and when it comes to the vaccine that is going to risk lives. The Government are very clear about that, which is why action is taking place across all Government Departments, as I have outlined.

It is worth nothing that Ofcom's latest research shows that the NHS remains the most trusted source of information on covid-19, and therefore it is right that we continue absolutely to put pressure on social media platforms when disinformation materialises, but also make sure that we maximise the right kind of information going out about the vaccine through respected channels of communication.

Knife Crime

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce knife crime. [911926]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) [V]: After a very difficult weekend in London, our thoughts are with the families, friends and neighbourhoods affected by those incidents of violent crime. Across England and Wales we are increasing police capacity in the forces most affected by violent crime, investing £176 million over two years. We have recently consulted on serious violence reduction orders, which will give the police stop-and-search powers to target individuals previously convicted of knife offences, and we are investing many millions of pounds in early intervention schemes to stop young people being drawn into violence in the first place.

Edward Timpson [V]: After the recent tragic knife-related murder of a young man in Winsford, Cheshire police have secured funding for 25 16 to 18-year-olds to take part in an employment mentoring programme led by We Mind The Gap, as well as identifying a former community centre to deliver youth and apprenticeship activities. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Cheshire police on a constructive and long-term problem-solving approach to this issue and ensure that they have the funding necessary to prevent knife crime from happening in the first place?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has a distinguished record of helping the most vulnerable children in our society, and I join him in welcoming the investment in this and other intervention projects in Cheshire to tackle the root causes of violent crime. I commend the work of Cheshire police in supporting such projects. In this financial year, Cheshire police will receive up to £219 million in funding, and it has already recruited 91 additional officers under the police uplift programme.

Emergency Services Network

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What progress her Department has made on the delivery of the emergency services network. [911927]

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What progress her Department has made on the delivery of the emergency services network. [911930]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): The programme continues to make steady progress, and confidence in the technical viability of the solution continues to increase. The core network has been built, and much of the ultimate functionality has already been demonstrated. We are working hard to demonstrate the emerging product and agree realistic plans with users for the final stages of delivery and deployment.

Craig Williams [V]: I know that my hon. Friend knows the critical importance for the shared rural network of delivering the ESN. It is vital for my constituency, to deal with the notspots that are sadly all too common in mid-Wales. As well as the technical capabilities he outlined, will he update us on the delivery of the ESN, alongside the shared rural network, in Montgomeryshire and other rural areas across the UK?

Kit Malthouse: I share my hon. Friend's frustration. Representing a large rural constituency myself, I know exactly his experience and therefore his keenness to have his constituents better connected—all the better to reach him with their various problems and difficulties, which he will no doubt solve with skill and speed. We are rolling out the programme. I am pleased to say that, after a difficult period, shall we say, last year, the programme is back on track. We expect to appoint contractors to allow the execution of the shared rural network later this year, but I am more than happy, once we have clarity on the programme, to write to my hon. Friend with details of where and when he can expect his mast to be lit up.

Andrew Bowie [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), many communities

in my constituency, in particular around Auchenblae, Drumtochty and the wider Mearns area, remain unable to get an adequate phone signal or even any at all. Having been promised that the emergency services network would contribute to solving that issue, many are still to be connected to decent 4G services. May I ask what the delay seems to be in opening up mobile telephone masts to commercial operators, as was initially planned?

Kit Malthouse: I know that living in one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country is not sufficient compensation for a lack of connectivity, although it provides some commiseration to my hon. Friend's constituents. As somebody who found out just the other day that, frustratingly, the fibre network in my constituency stops 200 metres short of my house, I understand the impatience for connectivity in his area. It is true to say that we have experienced some delays, not least on legal negotiations last year. Happily, those have now been overcome, and I am confident that we can now proceed with all speed to make sure that the shared rural network, alongside the emergency services network, is rolled out on schedule to 2025.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab) [V]: The new emergency services network, which is much needed to replace our outdated system, has become yet another embarrassment for the Home Office. Costs have spiralled to an eye-watering £10.3 billion, and constant delays mean that the project will not be finished for up to seven years. Local police forces, already under strain from cuts and covid, have to foot a large part of the bill, and their bill has just increased by £600 million. That would fund around 8,000 new police officers, yet when I asked the Minister about this in a parliamentary question, he said that the extra cost was “minimal”.

There is a pattern: £600 million is “minimal”; the catastrophic loss of 400,000 essential data records is brushed aside and still no answers given; and the Home Secretary breaks the ministerial code and we are all somehow to brush that aside as well. When will the Government accept that their incompetence is wasting taxpayers' money, delaying vital work and putting the public at increased risk?

Kit Malthouse: I understand that the hon. Lady feels that her job is to trade in hyperbole, but I think she has slightly overstated her case today, not least on the cost of the emergency service network, which is actually only—“only”—£4.2 billion, not the £10 billion-plus that she quoted. Governments of all stripes—and, indeed, many private companies—experience challenges, shall we say, in executing large technical IT projects, and this project has been no different. Having said that, we have made significant changes to the leadership team and we have reset the project. It is broadly back on track and, critically, we now have a new system of, effectively, joint decision-making with the end users—the police and the other emergency services—which we believe is breeding much greater confidence in the programme at the moment and hopefully over the next two or three years as we bring it to execution. This is an absolutely vital piece of equipment for police officer safety and, indeed, for the better prosecution of crime, and we are determined to get it right.

Asylum System: Reform

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reform the asylum system. [911928]

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reform the asylum system. [911929]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The asylum system is in need of fundamental reform, and the Home Secretary and I will be introducing legislation in the relatively near future to do exactly that. Too many people come into the UK having first passed through a safe country—for example, France—without having claimed asylum there. We are determined that we are going to have an asylum system that will protect those people in genuine need of protection while preventing the abuse that we sadly too often see.

Mark Logan [V]: I completely agree with the Minister: our asylum system needs to change ASAP. My constituents are vocal about how long it is taking to process their applications, often leaving them in limbo for months on end. For example, Shahid suffers from severe depression and has been waiting 16 months while he cares for his disabled wife. He cannot get carer's allowance while his application is pending. Likewise, Aswad was told that their application would take a maximum of six months to process, but it has now been 13 months. May I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss how we can bring some closure to my constituents?

Chris Philp: I would certainly be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the particular case that he raises, and I will follow up to arrange that. I agree that we need to do more to speed up the system. Coronavirus has had a significant impact on asylum decision making, as it has on so many other areas of our public life. In the short term, we are hiring considerably more decision makers, we are introducing better IT and we are spending £20 million next year on system transformation, but beyond that, we need to legislate to make the system work more fairly and more efficiently, for the reasons that my hon. Friend has laid out.

Damian Collins [V]: Can my hon. Friend confirm that Napier barracks in Folkestone is only a temporary facility to accommodate people in the asylum system, that it is unsuitable for individuals to be placed there for prolonged periods, and that, post-covid and with a reformed asylum system that is swifter in processing applications, we should avoid using facilities such as this in the future?

Chris Philp: I can confirm that Napier was set up in response to the enormous pressures placed on our asylum system by the coronavirus pandemic. We have set it up in such a way as to be safe, and it is of course accommodation that was previously used by the brave men and women of our armed services. We ensure that it is clean and secure and that there is health provision on site. It is not intended for use in perpetuity. I know that my hon. Friend spoke to the Home Secretary over the weekend, and we would be very willing to maintain a close and active dialogue with him and the local council to ensure that it is managed as well as it possibly can be.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: The repurposing of disused Army barracks to house asylum seekers is proving a disaster and a disgrace. What is worse, the leaked impact assessment shows that this dreadful policy was justified by wild notions that proper support and accommodation could undermine public confidence in the asylum system. In short, the Home Office was pandering to gutter politics. Will the Home Office apologise for suggesting that people in the UK oppose decent support and care for asylum seekers, and close these barracks urgently?

Chris Philp: No apology is due. As I just said, the barrack accommodation units in question were previously used by the brave men and women of our armed services. They were good enough for the armed services and they are certainly more than good enough for people who have arrived in this country seeking asylum. We fully comply with all the relevant guidelines.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about this country's stance on asylum seekers, we now spend getting on for £1 billion a year on accommodating them. That record bears comparison with any country in Europe and, indeed, around the world. No apology is due and certainly none will be made.

Stuart C. McDonald: The sad fact is that the policy undermines the UK's reputation as a welcoming place. Almost as bad as the impact assessment are the Home Office claims that people who criticise the use of barracks are insulting our armed forces: it is the Home Office that insults our soldiers by using them as cover for such disgraceful policies.

The former senior military legal adviser Lieutenant Colonel Mercer has agreed that it is "wholly inappropriate" to house asylum seekers in disused Army barracks, saying that

"this treatment is nothing more than naked hostility to very vulnerable people."

If the Minister will not listen to me, will he listen to Lieutenant Colonel Mercer and a host of respected medical organisations and close the barracks quickly?

Chris Philp: The closure of the barracks would be made a lot easier if more councils in Scotland—other than only Glasgow—would accept dispersed accommodation. That is the sort of thing that puts pressure on our accommodation estate. Thanks to the generosity of our approach, the number of people we are accommodating has gone up from 48,000 to 61,000 during the pandemic, because we have taken a thoughtful and protective approach. That is the right thing to do and we stand by it.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab) [V]: On Napier barracks, the equality impact assessment makes it clear that the use of disused barracks as asylum accommodation is absolutely a political choice. The Government have consistently refused to confirm the numbers of those who contracted the coronavirus while staying at Napier barracks, but I understand that, out of around 400 people, 105 who did not have the virus were moved out, leaving us to draw our own conclusions about just how massive an outbreak took place there. Does the Minister not agree with me and others that the use of barracks as asylum accommodation has been both a moral and public health disaster and that people must be moved into dispersed accommodation as a matter of urgency?

Chris Philp: I do not agree with that. As I have said already, we have closely consulted Public Health England throughout this episode. The use of accommodation of this kind is appropriate and suitable. We need to have regard to a range of factors, including value for money. We have had to use a large number of hotels to accommodate people during the coronavirus pandemic and they do not represent particularly good value for money. Barrack-type accommodation is not only suitable but a great deal cheaper than hotels. We all owe the general taxpayer a duty to ensure value for money and the Government make no apology for that.

Covid-19: Border Measures

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of covid-19 health measures at the UK border. [911931]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster) [V]: Throughout the pandemic we have kept our border measures under constant review, including through regular liaison with the devolved Administrations, given their responsibilities in this policy area. On 27 January, the UK Government announced further action for outbound and inbound passengers to minimise travel across international borders and reduce the risk of covid-19 transmission.

Martin Docherty-Hughes [V]: I am sure I am not the only person on these islands who has been left to wonder why the party that has spent so much of the past five years talking about taking back control of borders seemed to completely fluff the opportunity to do so when there would have been almost unanimous support in the House. Will the Minister advise the House what defence the Prime Minister previously offered to the Cabinet for not closing the border on the Home Secretary's advice?

Kevin Foster: Given the overall positive engagement that we have had with the Scottish Government in this policy area, it is disappointing to hear the tone of the hon. Gentleman's question. In deciding on border measures, the UK Government must take into account a number of factors, including the rather obvious need to keep open key supply lines across the short straits, and routes to and from the Republic of Ireland.

To give some background, since the health measures came in we have conducted more than 3.7 million spot checks of passengers arriving at the border, as part of the new testing requirements, carriers are required to check test results, and a fine of up to £4,000 in England and Northern Ireland and £960 in Scotland and Wales can be levied on passengers who fail to comply with the requirements.

Migrant Channel Crossings

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English channel illegally. [911932]

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to stop migrants crossing the English channel illegally. [911934]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The Government are taking a huge range of measures to prevent these dangerous and illegal crossings. Most notably, the Home Secretary reached an agreement with her French counterpart in late November to increase the number of gendarmes deployed on the French beaches and to take a variety of other steps aimed at preventing embarkations from the French shores. To anyone considering this trip, I say that it is dangerous, they are putting their lives at risk, it is illegal, but, most of all, it is unnecessary because France is a safe country where it is perfectly possible to claim asylum.

Caroline Ansell [V]: Last month, the Eastbourne Royal National Lifeboat Institution rescued more than 30 migrants who had got into difficulty in the channel. I commend its sterling work. Its mission is simply to save lives at sea. I have every concern for those it rescued, but, as my hon. Friend has just outlined, there are serious concerns that this is pump-priming human traffickers, and the fact remains that people are putting themselves at risk. Can he outline to the House the work that is being undertaken with the French and with our European neighbours to intercept and close down human traffickers long before they reach the channel coast?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Let me start by paying tribute to the RNLI for the work that it does at sea keeping people safe in what are often very treacherous and difficult circumstances. She is right to outline the work that we need to do to disrupt and prevent these dangerous criminal gangs before they even launch the boats in the first place. The National Crime Agency and many other law enforcement agencies across Europe and beyond are working together to disrupt these criminal gangs. We regularly prosecute people for facilitating these small boat crossings. Last year, we successfully prosecuted 50 or 60 people. There have been several more prosecutions just in the last week, in addition to the law enforcement work we are now doing with the French, doubling the gendarme patrols, for example, which, just in the last few days, has resulted in literally hundreds of people being intercepted before they even set off. So these measures are now working, but we are certainly not going to give up: we will continue working with our French colleagues until these dangerous, illegal and unnecessary crossings are completely stopped.

Mrs Elphicke [V]: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking Kent police and the police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, for their important work on this issue of migration and border policing? Can he assure me that, across my whole constituency, in Dover and Deal and at nearby Napier barracks, Kent police are having extra funding for carrying out this vital work?

Chris Philp: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done in consistently standing up for her constituents on this issue, and to Matthew Scott, who does such a fantastic job as Kent's police and crime commissioner. No doubt he will be triumphantly re-elected shortly. On the question of resources, Kent has had an extra 162 police officers recruited so far and I believe that there are many more to come. Assuming the precept is used, it will have an extra £19.5 million in the next

financial year as well. In addition to that, if there are particular issues caused by small boats or, indeed, by the barracks at Napier, it is able to apply to the Home Office for exceptional funding and, if it feels that that is merited, I would certainly encourage it to do that.

Unauthorised Encampments

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help prevent unauthorised encampments. [911933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) [V]: We will bring forward legislation this Session to give the police the powers they need to tackle unauthorised encampments by moving people on and seizing vehicles where necessary. Intentional trespass will become a criminal offence, and we will broaden the range of harms that can be considered by the police when directing trespassers away from land.

Sarah Atherton [V]: The Home Secretary will know that I wrote to her back in June regarding unauthorised encampments. I thank her for her response. Although the majority of Travellers stay on authorised sites, a disproportionate amount of council and police time is spent dealing with the effects of unauthorised encampments. Does the Minister agree that communities such as mine in Wrexham need more protection against trespass on sites where there is no right of access?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head in standing up for her constituents on this issue. People want to see greater protection for local communities, and for the police to be given enhanced powers to crack down on trespassers. That is why we consulted on how we might strengthen police powers and why we will introduce legislation in this Session. We will act on these concerns, and I very much look forward to working with my hon. Friend in so doing.

Covid-19: Support for Police

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What additional support her Department is providing to police officers during the covid-19 outbreak. [911935]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Throughout this pandemic, we have given the police not just guidance but funding to support them in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak. That also means working with them on increased support around guidance, changes to regulations and legislation. Of course, we also work with them every single day as various measures are constantly kept under review.

Robert Largan [V]: So far, more than 1,000 local people have taken part in my High Peak crime survey. Many residents have raised concerns about antisocial behaviour and drugs, particularly on Fairfield Road in Buxton. I am really pleased that Derbyshire police are being proactive and just last week made multiple arrests in the area, but I want to make certain that they have the resources that they need. Will the Home Secretary assure the people of High Peak that we will get our fair share of the 20,000 additional police officers?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these issues. On a fair share of police officers, I understand that his force has already recruited 67 more police officers, and our plans to recruit 20,000 police officers go from strength to strength. I note that Derbyshire police have received over £400,000 in covid surge funding very much to step up on enforcement and fines, and to deal with issues such as antisocial behaviour, which is a particular issue that my hon. Friend has raised on behalf of his constituents.

Violent Crime

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of violent crime. [911936]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): According to the crime survey for England and Wales, overall levels of violent crime have reduced since the peak in the mid-1990s. However, this trend has begun to stabilise and there is growing public concern. We are taking action by surging police capacity in the forces most affected by violent crime, and investing in early intervention to prevent young people from being drawn into serious violence.

Vicky Foxcroft [V]: Last month, I found out through an answer to a written parliamentary question tabled in September that the serious violence taskforce has been discontinued. Are the Government still committed to a long-term public health-based approach to tackling violence affecting young people? I fear for other measures they may be looking to scrap via the back door.

Kit Malthouse: I am slightly mystified by the hon. Lady's attempt at surprise, not least because I think there was an exchange at this Dispatch Box some months ago when we discussed the serious violence taskforce, and, indeed, there have been previous questions. The Prime Minister—given that he had been a renowned crime-fighting Mayor—decided on coming to office that he wanted to take leadership of the crime effort himself, so we created the criminal justice taskforce. Beneath that sits the National Policing Board, and a performance board sits beneath that. That is all focused largely on fighting violent crime.

Our commitment to fighting violent crime remains strong. Just this morning, I was able to announce an extra £35 million of funding into violence reduction units, a very large proportion of which will obviously come to London. Both the Prime Minister and I have experience of fighting crime, and along with the Home Secretary—who was previously chair of the all-party parliamentary group on victims and witnesses of crime—have shown enormous commitment to this issue over a prolonged period, and that will continue into the future.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Crime has not stopped because of covid-19. After a brief respite during the first lockdown, the Department's own figures show that overall violent crime is rising, and that drug and firearms-related offences are back at previous levels. The Government received the findings of Sir Craig Mackey's review into serious and organised crime last February and told the House in June that the recommendations were being considered, but, as of today, they still have

not come forward with them. So can I ask what we are waiting for and what it is that Ministers have been doing for the last year?

Kit Malthouse: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, we have been dealing over the past year with a pandemic—it might have passed him by, but it has not the rest of us. That pandemic has had a significant impact on UK policing, its disposition, what it has been involved in and, critically, the types of crime and the trends in crime that it has been dealing with.

The hon. Gentleman is correct that post the second lockdown we saw a surge in violence for one particular month. That number has stabilised since, and we are trying to understand, by research and analysis, what the implications of the pandemic have been for crime and therefore what they are for the police. Alongside that, we have been in conversations with our partners at the National Crime Agency, with chief constables involved in serious and organised crime and with territorial forces about what the disposition of serious and organised crime should look like into the future, and we will be making announcements about how it will be disposed in the near future.

Topical Questions

[911979] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I am proud to say that on 31 January the Government launched the Hong Kong British national overseas immigration route. The commitment to create this route was made following the Chinese Government's imposition of the new national security law in Hong Kong. It is an unprecedented and generous offer and reflects the historical and moral commitment of this country to the individuals who retained ties with the UK at the point of Hong Kong's handover.

Through this route, we will welcome BNO status holders and their family members to the UK on a pathway to citizenship. From 23 February, those with a BNO, Hong Kong special administrative region or European economic area biometric passport will be able to apply for the route through the fully digitalised process, using new technology developed through the UK's points-based immigration system. I am clear that we must give BNO status holders every opportunity to thrive in the UK, and officials are working with colleagues across Departments to look at integration. This absolutely speaks about global Britain and how we will always stand up for what is right in the world, welcoming those who come to the UK in the right and proper way.

Damian Collins [V]: On 20 January, my constituent Andy Aitchison, an accredited journalist who had taken photographs that morning at the demonstration at Napier barracks in Folkestone, was arrested by five police officers at his home, charged with criminal damage and held for questioning for seven hours. The police confiscated his mobile phone and photo camera card. Last Friday, the charges were dropped and the case closed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be a review of the guidance given to police before such actions are taken against accredited journalists, and does she agree that Mr Aitchison should have a clean record, as he has committed no offence?

Priti Patel: Regarding the case that my hon. Friend has highlighted, he will know that Kent police were called following a report of a particular protest and an incident. All decisions on arrests are an operational matter for the police, and the police make arrests in line with their duties to keep the peace and to protect communities. I am afraid at this stage that is all I can say, because an arrest has been made, but I have no doubt that Kent police will continue to keep all interested parties, including my hon. Friend, updated on this particular case.

Mr Speaker: In fairness, I was contacted as Speaker as well, so it did go a long way.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I would like to begin by wishing the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) a swift recovery following his recent surgery.

Hotel quarantine for travellers will be introduced on a far too limited basis for 33 red list countries on 15 February, more than 50 days after the South African variant was discovered in the UK. To prevent a variant reaching our shores that could threaten the vaccination programme, that should be a comprehensive policy. Worse still, analysis over the weekend showed that, of the 41 countries that have confirmed they have cases of the South African strain of the virus, 29 are not subject to the hotel quarantine controls. Neither are a further six with the Brazilian variant. When will the Government publish the specific scientific basis for their existing red list?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman and I have spent some time at this Dispatch Box discussing this particular issue, and I think it is important that I make a couple of points to emphasise the work of the Government. The new health measures at the border are necessary to protect public health and our world-class vaccination programme. We have throughout the pandemic kept all measures under review, and that is absolutely right. He mentions new variants. However, I do want to emphasise, in the light of the many discussions that have taken place at the Dispatch Box between the hon. Gentleman and me, and colleagues from other Government Departments, that the Labour party has repeatedly flip-flopped on hotel quarantining measures. The Government have been very clear about measures that will be announced, some in due course, because a lot of operational and logistical planning is taking place around these measures. At the same time, it is worth recognising that there are many people on the frontline looking at the implementation of this policy, which is based on the advice by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and other Government advisers. It is important that we take time to absolutely make sure that these measures are put in place in the right way.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, the Labour party has not flip-flopped on this. The 14-day blanket quarantine was only necessary because of the Government's own failure on testing. Secondly, although the Home Secretary and I have had plenty of discussions about it, she was very clear about her own views last March that the border should have been closed, and we have all seen that on the video.

Is it not true that Ministers have been behind the curve throughout? There was no formal quarantining system until June last year, and when it was introduced, it proved ineffective. The South African variant is already here. Border testing was only introduced in recent weeks. On the hotel quarantining policy, we hear today that no formal contracts have been agreed—too little, too late. Is not the truth that the borders policy is a gaping hole in our defences against the virus? When is the Home Secretary going to take charge of this situation and put in place the proper protective measures that she knows are needed to protect the health of the British people and safeguard the vaccine roll-out?

Priti Patel: I appreciate that it has been a while since Labour has been in government, and Labour Members will obviously fail to realise that there is cross-Government work on the delivery of these measures. We are in a pandemic. Just to restate this to all colleagues in the House, health measures at the border have been in place since January last year. Those measures have been developed, as everyone would expect, as the situation changes; they are calibrated measures. I think it is an absolute shame to see the hon. Gentleman joining his colleagues in playing party politics with this crisis while attacking the Government, because although he originally welcomed the measures on the border that we brought in last year, he then wrote to me calling for the “blunt tool” of our border quarantine to be lifted quickly. Labour’s behaviour throughout this pandemic has shown the British public that it has no interest in being constructive or acting in the national interest, and that is exactly what we can see right now, while the Government are getting on and dealing with this hotels policy.

[911981] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con) [V]: The Government have made it clear that they want to change the law to make it easier and swifter to deport illegal immigrants, foreign national offenders and those making bogus claims for asylum. That is something that I fully support and the overwhelming majority of the country will support. Will the Home Secretary give us some idea as to when that legislation will be brought forward to Parliament, because, as far as I am concerned, the sooner, the better?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes some very good, strong and important points that, absolutely, the British public support the removal of foreign national offenders, those who come to our country to cause harm, and also those who are, quite frankly, making asylum claims that are not legitimate. We intend to introduce legislation later this year. I have spoken frequently about the need for a firm but fair asylum system, with fairness to target those who genuinely need our help. I have already spoken about one new safe and legal route that this Government have supported. Absolutely, fairness is needed, and firmness is needed to stop abuse of our system and to make sure that we remove those who come to our country to create harm and participate in criminality. I should remind my hon. Friend—he will know this—that Labour has been campaigning against that over the past 12 months.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: The South African variant has now been identified on many continents, and the risks to the vaccine programme are concerning. Can the Home Secretary

confirm, following her letter to me last week, that even under her future plans, the majority of passengers will not be covered by hotel quarantine, no one will be tested on arrival before going on public transport, and less than one in four travellers will get a follow-up phone call check? Is this worrying information correct, and why are there all these gaps?

Priti Patel: The answer to the question is no, because as I have repeatedly said in this Chamber throughout the pandemic, all our measures are kept under review. We already have 100% compliance checks taking place at our airports. Ironically, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) was complaining at me three weeks ago about queues at Heathrow airport, but those queues were there because compliance checks were being undertaken. It is absolutely right that those checks take place, including through the passenger locator form, the pre-departure testing, and the impacts and liabilities that are now on the carriers.

I have already stated that my colleagues across Government will report to the House on the subject of hotel quarantining, but it is really important to say that, yes, there are concerns about new variants. We are working across Government—and, I have to say, a lot of people are working valiantly on the frontline—on vaccine roll-out, but we keep all our measures under review, obviously to protect the vaccine but also to ensure that as the number of passengers coming into the country reduces, full checks are in place.

[911983] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con) [V]: Our police have had to deal with a wide range of issues during this pandemic, including selfish people who have ignored the restrictions, behaved irresponsibly and risked the health of themselves and others. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now more than ever, we should be supporting our brave police officers as we roll out the vaccine?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has already heard me speak about the amazing work of people on the frontline, which includes our police officers but also our serving fire officers, who are working in local resilience forums to deliver and safeguard the vaccine and make sure people are getting vaccinated—including, no doubt, at local sites in my hon. Friend’s constituency. The British public are fed up of seeing egregious breaches. It is the police on the frontline, day in and day out, who are not only protecting the public but putting themselves in harm’s way, and we are absolutely right to support them.

Mr Speaker: We are going to have to speed up the answers, I am afraid.

[911980] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): We have heard several times today about Napier barracks in Kent, very near to my constituency, and I support calls by the hon. Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), the Bishop of Dover, Kent Refugee Action Network and others for the Home Secretary to close this facility. Meanwhile, Clearsprings Ready Homes, the company awarded the contract to run Napier, stands to earn £1 billion from its Government work. Does the Minister or the Home Secretary disagree with all those I

have mentioned and believe that company is doing an adequate job in providing safe, suitable accommodation and services to asylum seekers, most of whom have fled war, torture and persecution?

Priti Patel: It is absolutely right that we provide accommodation—the right kind of accommodation—for people who have come to our country to claim asylum, and we have a statutory duty as a Government to do so. No one would dispute that at all. With regards to Napier, I spoke to one of the ward councillors at the weekend, and I have been in touch with local MPs and representatives from the local authority. We are working with everyone to make sure that base is secure, which it absolutely is; that it is covid compliant, which it has been from day one; and that all the suitable accommodation measures are put in place, which is absolutely correct.

[911984] **Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): Workington has a significant problem with unauthorised Traveller encampments. Can my right hon. Friend update me on planned legislation, but at the same time offer reassurance to groups such as 1st Seaton 5th Workington scout group in my own village, which has relayed concerns to me about the impact on individuals and small groups who might wish to get closer to nature?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, we have already mentioned this afternoon that the legislation will soon be coming before this House, and I am sure that his constituents and many other constituents will welcome the change. I would like to give my hon. Friend and his constituents reassurance that the legislation we will bring forward will address many of the issues related to groups that have that disproportionate impact on the local community.

[911982] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: Organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees are reporting that vaccine misinformation is spreading among those communities. How is the Home Office working to counter that misinformation, and what steps have been taken to ensure that accurate information on vaccines is available in refugees' and asylum seekers' native tongues?

Priti Patel: First, on misinformation and disinformation on the vaccine, as I said earlier, we are working across Government to ensure that the right information is being put out. With specific reference to refugee groups, we have health facilities, and refugees have access to medical help and support, and obviously that has continued throughout the coronavirus pandemic. When it comes to people getting the vaccine, as I said earlier, everyone should ensure that when their turn comes, they take the jab and ignore this misinformation. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry that the hon. Member is shaking her head; everyone across Government is working night and day to deal with misinformation. I have said it many times; I hope that all colleagues in the House will unite across the board and forget political divisions to ensure that everybody who should get the jab absolutely takes a jab.

[911985] **Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I have been running a campaign in Wolverhampton to raise awareness of what support is available should people become victims of crime. I thank the Secretary of

State for all the work she has done in our great city, but can she tell me what more can be done to provide support for these victims and ensure a safer Wolverhampton?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend, and I look forward to coming back to Wolverhampton, obviously when circumstances permit. I also thank him for the great work he is doing with local groups, organisations and police to protect the victims of crime, but also to do much more on preventing crime. The police uplift, more police officers, the record sums of cash that we are putting into policing—all of this will go towards preventing crime, but also ensuring that victims are safeguarded.

[911988] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Today's reports of hundreds of travellers coming from the United Arab Emirates via Dublin show loopholes in the existing quarantine arrangements. Why are next week's new quarantine arrangements not plugging all those loopholes and making sure that everyone who comes here, from whichever country, is covered, in order to prevent further incoming variants such as the South African one, which is already in my borough of Sefton, stamp out excess variants coming into this country and protect people here while we roll out the vaccine?

Priti Patel: As I have said several times already, all measures are under review. Colleagues across Government are working to implement the hotel quarantine policy and the logistics involved in that, but this is not just about hotels. This is absolutely about compliance and enforcement, and we have measures in place at our ports and airports to ensure that people are being checked and to ensure compliance.

[911987] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) [V]: In Stoke-on-Trent, one in every 250 people is now an asylum seeker, putting disproportionate pressure on local services. What is my right hon. Friend's Department doing through Operation Oak to ensure that genuine refugees are proportionately spread, instead of putting all the pressure on places such as Stoke-on-Trent?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about this previously, and I very much recognise the pressures experienced in his constituency. Obviously we have had accommodation pressures throughout the pandemic, and we are implementing a recovery programme, with which he is familiar. Within that, we are looking to accelerate, where we can and in a covid-compliant way, working with Public Health England and all the relevant organisations that he is familiar with, the movement of people out of contingency accommodation and into much more dispersed accommodation across the UK.

[911990] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab) [V]: The Home Secretary must have seen the survey by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers of attacks on shop workers in 2020. Of the 2,700 surveyed, 88% had suffered verbal abuse, 61% had been threatened by a customer and 9% had been attacked. When will the Government bring forward legislation to protect shop workers, who are in the frontline in combating this virus by providing so much support to us?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman will know my very strong views on this—I have spoken about it previously.

Last year when the pandemic started, we saw the most appalling abuse and attacks on shop workers. We are working with colleagues in Government, so please let me give the hon. Gentleman my assurance on that. This type of violence and abuse should never, ever be tolerated at all, and we will also continue to work with employers to ensure that they are doing everything possible to protect shop workers—their employees.

[911989] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: At the same time that many elements of our lives have moved online, so too has crime. From emails phishing for online banking details to covid-19 vaccination scams, cyber-criminals are using increasingly diverse and sophisticated methods to steal our details, take out money and put us in danger. Can my right hon. Friend outline her Department's latest intentions to tackle cyber-crime and keep us all safe?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises such an important point. He is right to say that throughout the pandemic we have seen criminality manifest itself and reinvent itself—and, quite frankly, become far too agile and a bit clever as well. Cyber-security and cyber-crime absolutely top the list when it comes to criminality, and there is a lot of work. We now have a new national cyber-security strategy supported by almost £2 billion of investment. Through the national cyber-security programme we are constantly bolstering our police and law enforcement response at a national level, working with those organisations at grassroots level—local levels and regional levels—deemed to be vulnerable. I am afraid there are far too many vulnerable organisations that absolutely need to step up and enhance their own cyber-security.

[911992] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will surely be aware that the new fixed rosters imposed on Border Force staff at Heathrow last month are simply not working. In fact, staff say they are shambolic and not covid-safe. Indeed, the Public and Commercial Services Union balloted for strike action as a last resort and got a 96% yes vote. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that she will advise management to return to the previous roster system and work constructively with the trade union to agree a package of covid-safe measures based around the previous arrangements?

Priti Patel: First, it is important that the House recognises we always work constructively with the PCS union when it comes to the protection of Border Force staff. Secondly, the rosters were changed to enhance covid-compliance measures and so that there was fairness across all staff, who could be protected in their shift work. We continue to work with the union, and we are committed to doing that, but my absolute priority is to ensure that Border Force staff are protected, because they come into contact with members of the public every single day.

[911991] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) [V]: What progress has been made on determining new nationwide operators of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend will know the details of the scheme and the numbers that were published six or so weeks ago. We are working on the new scheme with

the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which as the lead Department will look at the roll-out with seasonal agricultural worker providers. We have a number of providers, and he will be familiar with them, but we are happy to provide him with a written update because I know that is of great interest in his constituency.

[911993] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I, like many, have serious concerns about the suitability of William Shawcross as the independent—[*Inaudible.*] Can the Home Secretary explain how a man who called—[*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: I am sorry about that. We will now go to Margaret Ferrier.

[912002] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Will the Home Office exercise discretion and flexibility for current UK-based Hongkongers by incorporating the time they have already spent in the UK under a tier 4 or tier 5 visa, should they wish to apply for the new British national overseas scheme?

Priti Patel: The scheme has only just been launched. I reassure the hon. Lady that we are working with all sorts of civil society organisations, and I have spent a lot of time in dialogues and roundtables with a range of representatives. Therefore, having just launched the scheme, which is a bespoke humanitarian route created for BNOs, we are absolutely looking at how we can ensure that the route works well. We are also engaging with non-governmental organisations and civil society to ensure that we do not miss people.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Given that planning permission for the asylum seekers temporary accommodation at Penally in Pembrokeshire is due to run out at the end of March, can the Home Secretary confirm that the local community will this time be fully consulted on the camp's future and that all new transfers to the site will cease in the intervening period?

Priti Patel: If I may, this is an important point that the Minister responsible for immigration compliance and the courts, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), touched on. I am so disappointed to hear that colleagues across the House are not supportive of asylum accommodation, when many local authorities fail to co-operate with the Home Office to identify sites in their constituency. Quite frankly, the hypocrisy of basically saying, "We don't want asylum seekers here, send them elsewhere." is simply not acceptable. We consult with everybody—I can assure the right hon. Lady—

Mr Speaker: Order. Home Secretary, I am sure that you did not mean the hypocrisy of a Member. It was a general term.

Priti Patel: I will correct that, Mr Speaker. In the broadest possible sense, we cannot have this situation where local authorities literally refuse to engage with us while at the same time saying that consultation is not taking place.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): We know that Greater Manchester police are in special measures and that the chief constable is on gardening leave. We know that victims of crime in Greater Manchester are at risk.

We even know that police officers going out on calls are at risk, because they are not getting the information. The Mayor of Greater Manchester tells us that he is not getting the information from the police. I know that the Home Secretary has previously replied that she is not getting the information from Greater Manchester police. Can she tell the House when she expects to get the information from Greater Manchester police that will enable us to know if there is an improvement in the appalling situation?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right: it is an absolutely appalling situation. He will also know that the Mayor's responsibility is to ensure that Greater Manchester police act immediately on the force improvement plan. My hon. friend the Minister for Crime and Policing has

been working assiduously on this and has met the deputy Mayor and the acting chief constable. We have a force improvement plan and we intend to use it to get information and data as well as to hold everybody to account over what has happened with that failure in data collection and, ultimately, the impact that has had on victims.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House for three minutes to allow the necessary arrangements for the next business.

3.41 pm

Sitting suspended.

Yemen

3.45 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, if he will make a statement on Yemen.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for asking a question on this important matter. The ongoing conflict and humanitarian situation in Yemen remain a challenge for the international community. The new Houthi offensive in Marib has only made our efforts to bring peace and stability even more difficult. Nevertheless, we continue to work with the international community to find a peaceful resolution, with an emphasis on the political process.

The UK is playing a leading role in responding to the crisis in Yemen through both our humanitarian response and our diplomatic influence. We actively support the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, in his work to reach a political solution, and we pay tribute to his tireless efforts to bring about peace. The UK has pledged over £1 billion in aid to the humanitarian response since the conflict began.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have regular calls with partners on Yemen. Recently, the Foreign Secretary spoke to Secretary Blinken in the new United States Administration and to the Saudi Foreign Minister. Last month, I spoke with the Yemeni Foreign Minister to offer my condolences after the attacks at Aden airport. The UK has also used its role as the penholder at the UN Security Council to help move the Yemen peace process forward, working with our partners and allies at the United Nations to ensure that Yemen continues to be a top priority for the international community.

We welcome the recent statement by President Biden to instigate a review of US foreign policy towards Yemen. Our ambassador in Washington has already spoken with the new US envoy to Yemen. I also welcome reports that the US may reverse the previous Administration's designation of the Houthis as foreign terrorist fighters. The UK has engaged closely with the US Administration on that very matter.

However, we cannot—we must not—ignore the Houthi actions. Those include the use of children and sexual violence as tools of war, the persecution of religious minorities and attacks on civilians. On 30 December, the Houthis attacked Aden airport, killing 27 civilians and injuring more than 100 others. We must address the Houthi sense of impunity, to make the peace process meaningful, and that must extend to other actors in the region, notably Iran. I note the US decision to pause its arms exports while it reviews its policy towards Yemen. I reassure the House that the Government take their own export responsibilities extremely seriously and assess all export licences in accordance with strict licensing criteria.

The political settlement is the only way to bring about long-term peace and stability in Yemen and to address the worsening humanitarian situation. The Government remain committed to bringing an end to the conflict.

Mr Ellwood: Last week, President Biden gave his first foreign policy speech, reversing many of the isolationist policies of his predecessor and seeking to re-engage with like-minded allies in order to revisit major global hotspots neglected by the west. The complex civil war in Yemen, now entering its seventh year, was named specifically. Today, it is the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the world. The US President has appointed a new envoy, as we have just heard, and will end support for the offensive operations and connected arms sales, seeking to establish the conditions for a ceasefire and fresh peace talks.

The war in Yemen is complicated. The country never properly stabilised following unification in 1990, and President Hadi has struggled to handle corruption, unemployment, tribal disputes and, most critically, separatist and extremist agendas pursued by the Houthis and al-Qaeda respectively. The Houthi advance into the capital in 2014 led to UN Security Council resolutions that legitimised a Saudi-led military coalition to support President Hadi. Despite many rounds of talks—some of which I was involved with, as a Minister—six years on, we are no closer to peace. Indeed, the conflict has spilled out into a wider proxy war.

The US reset is to be welcomed, and this poses our first big test of what global Britain means in practice. In that spirit, I encourage the UK to fully align ourselves with our closest security ally by ending arms exports connected to the war and to reverse the cuts to our overseas aid budget. I recommend that, as the UN Security Council penholder on Yemen, the UK offers to host a UN summit that looks at political options for peace and that the UK is willing to commit British forces to any UN stabilisation effort that may be required once a political settlement is reached. This is a real opportunity for Yemen to end the war. I hope the Minister can confirm today Britain's resolve to play a leading role.

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for his thoughtful contribution and the work he did as Minister on this portfolio. I can absolutely confirm that the United Kingdom's desire to bring about a peaceful settlement in Yemen is unwavering. We will continue to work with our international partners—both the United States and regional partners—to bring that about.

My right hon. Friend made a number of specific points. The UK has—indeed, I have on a regular basis—spoken with the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, and we fully support his work. We will look at ways to bring together the various parties around the negotiating table. I note my right hon. Friend's idea about a UK-hosted summit. He will understand that I cannot commit to something like that at the moment, but I welcome his thoughtful contribution. Similarly, he will completely understand that it would be inappropriate for me to speculate about what a military intervention might look like. The Saudi-led coalition was mandated at the UN Security Council; as he said, this is something he worked on during his tenure. We also note that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a legitimate right to defend itself against attacks, and we completely condemn the attacks both within Yemen, at Aden airport, and cross-border, into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) [V]: We are not a bystander to this conflict—UK arms, training and technical support sustains the war in Yemen and the worst humanitarian

[Lisa Nandy]

disaster in the world. More than 80% of Saudi's arms imports come from the US and the UK. The US's decision to end all support for offensive operations, including relevant arms sales, is welcome, but it leaves the UK dangerously out of step with our allies and increasingly isolated. What is worse is that the UK is the penholder for Yemen at the UN. We cannot be both peacemaker and arms dealer in this conflict.

It was the Foreign Secretary who said:

"human rights will be at the forefront of our leadership this year"—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 178.]

This is the first test since that statement just four weeks ago, and he has failed it. It is surprising, given the obvious panic in Downing Street about relations with the Biden Administration, that the Government were so reluctant to challenge President Trump's decision to change the designation of the Houthis and are now determined to continue to be an outlier in arming Saudi Arabia. It puts us out of step with our US and EU allies, despite the compelling moral and diplomatic case to change course.

When the Foreign Secretary re-emerges, perhaps he could confirm that he will now take long overdue action to end arms sales and support to Saudi Arabia and explain what possible reason there could be for not doing so earlier. Can he tell us whether he spoke with Secretary Blinken about this announcement before it was made and whether the US Government have asked for UK support in this matter? Will he tell us what he will do to live up to our responsibilities to reinvigorate the peace process and help bring this appalling conflict to an end?

James Cleverly: I do not know where the hon. Lady gets her assessments of Anglo-US relations from. I was very pleased that our Prime Minister was one of the first world leaders to speak with President Biden upon his taking office, that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke with his counterpart shortly after that appointment and that we have engaged with both the last Administration and the current Administration on our concerns about the implications of the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist fighting organisation, particularly the implications for the passage of humanitarian aid, to which the UK has committed over £1 billion since the conflict started.

Obviously, the decisions the US takes on matters of arms sales are decisions for the US Government. The UK takes its own arms export responsibilities very seriously, and we continue to assess all export licences in accordance with strict licensing criteria.

I mentioned in my opening response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) the very recent assault by Houthi forces on Marib and the Government of Yemen's need to defend themselves and to have support from the international community to do so.

I can assure the hon. Lady that our relationship with the United States of America remains very strong indeed, and we welcome the commitment that President Biden has made to the United States' international responsibilities and his engagement on this most important of issues.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I am glad that my right hon. Friend mentioned Marib, because does he recognise that much of this dispute is about water and the missile technology now being used to threaten Saudi Arabia's water desalination plants on both the western and eastern side of the country? Will he stand up for Britain's interests in the regions and our partners in the area, and oppose the Iranian action that is causing a spread of violence across the Arabian peninsula the like of which we have not seen since perhaps even the year of the elephant?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. We are clear that we must see an end to Iran's destabilising interference in Yemen, which has stoked further conflict through its support of the Houthis. As I have said, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the legitimate right to defend itself and its key national infrastructure. We have raised the issue of Iran's behaviour with the Iranian Government. Iran's provisions of weapons to the Houthis contravenes United Nations Security Council resolution 2216, and while Iran has stated that it supports UN-led efforts to bring about peace in Yemen, we encourage it to ensure its actions are consistent with its comments. It is important that Yemen is not used as a theatre for the escalation of conflict in the region.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: The Scottish National party is in fundamental and deep disagreement with the UK Government position on Yemen. It is impossible to pretend to be the humanitarian honest broker on one side while also simultaneously being the biggest arms dealer to the conflict; we are tackling the symptoms of a problem that the UK has in no small part helped create. The situation in Yemen is, of course, complex, but this is a test for global Britain, as the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has said; the US policy change is to be welcomed, and I would be the first to welcome a similar announcement from the UK Government, because they risk being behind the times. Surely now is the time to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia while we work towards a peace?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the fact that we have a fundamental disagreement on this issue. The UK's position is that we have been not just the penholder at the United Nations but an active player in attempting to bring about peace. Both my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have engaged extensively with the regional players, including with the Houthis directly and with the Government of Yemen, to try to bring about a negotiated political settlement to bring peace to the people of Yemen. The best thing that we can do in terms of pursuing our humanitarian aid is to bring about an end to the conflict, and we work tirelessly with international partners and the United Nations to do that.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: On 18 February, the UK will chair the UN Security Council meeting on Yemen, where the Security Council will consider the final report of the UN panel of experts. The publication of the panel's latest report has caused a stir in Yemen and the wider region. It has

alarmed numerous organisations in Yemen, which suggest procedural irregularities in the report's drafting and raise questions about the credibility of its content. Ahead of the Security Council meeting next week, will the Minister urgently consider representations from parties in Yemen and the international community to hear their concerns about the report, including fears that inaccuracy in the report could lead to the food security challenges on the ground being compounded in what is already the world's worst humanitarian crisis?

James Cleverly: The food insecurity situation in Yemen is of great concern to us in the United Kingdom, which is why we have focused so much on our humanitarian response. I am more than happy to receive details of the concerns that my right hon. Friend raises, but he will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to comment in more detail until I have seen the points that he has brought forward.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The Liberal Democrats have long called for arms sales to Saudi Arabia to be suspended in response to its consistent targeting of civilians in Yemen, in clear breach of international law. The humanitarian impact of this conflict is hard to put into words. At least one child dies every 10 minutes because of preventable disease, and 100,000 children are on the brink of starving to death. On the issue of arms sales, the Minister rightly says that the US's decision to stop selling arms was a matter for it. The matter for this House is whether we continue to sell arms, so I ask him to answer plainly: will the Government follow the example of our ally and finally stop all arms sales supporting this horrific war—yes or no?

James Cleverly: The United Kingdom takes its arms export licensing responsibilities very seriously. We will not issue any export licences for items where there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law. Every licence application is rigorously assessed against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he said about Iran, but is he as surprised as me that we rarely hear from the Opposition parties about Iran and what it is doing in Yemen? Unless Iran stops its malign activity there, it will fundamentally affect the progress of peace.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I publicly welcomed Saudi Arabia's unilateral ceasefire last year, and I was very disappointed to see attacks and attempted attacks on both Riyadh and key national infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. We have been clear that we must see an end to Iran's destabilising activities in the region, and it would be nice if some of the comments from those on the Opposition Benches were more balanced when they are holding parties responsible for the terrible situation in Yemen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question. In 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office "Human Rights & Democracy" report asserted that in Yemen:

"Freedom of religion or belief was widely denied in 2019."

It further noted that the Baha'i minority was the "most visibly persecuted" group, but that many others are also facing difficulties. For example, according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Yemeni Christian community that once numbered 41,000 has shrunk to a few thousand. What steps are the Minister and our Government taking to address freedom of religion or belief violations in Yemen?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. As he knows, freedom of religion is something this Government take very seriously. We welcome the long overdue release of six Baha'is from Houthi detention, but it is worrying that they were detained for their beliefs in the first place and that they cannot live freely in their country. We continue to follow the treatment of the Baha'is in Yemen closely, including through meetings of their representatives in the UK and lobbying the relevant authorities, and we strongly—strongly—condemn the continued persecution of religious minorities in Yemen.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The actions of the Iranian regime continue to destabilise the middle east, as my right hon. Friend has said. In particular, the supplying of Houthi rebels with arms is only prolonging the conflict in Yemen. Is my right hon. Friend able to update the House on what discussions he has had with the new US Administration about their policy on Iran and any potential implications for the current conflict in Yemen?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point. I can confirm that on Friday, the E3, which of course includes ourselves, and the United States discussed a united approach—or discussed how a united approach—could address our shared concerns about Iran. We will of course continue to work with the new Administration in the White House as well as with our European partners to pursue this agenda.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: Will the Minister accept that there is a serious and huge humanitarian disaster in Yemen at the present time: 80% of the population are in need of aid and, as others have pointed out, hundreds of thousands have died and many more are on the brink of starvation? Britain's contribution over the last five years has been to sell to Saudi Arabia billions of pounds of arms and logistical equipment that have been used to bomb Yemen. Will he welcome the moves by Martin Griffiths to go to Iran to try to broker a regional peace agreement that will bring about a long-term peace, but will he also give a clear commitment that we will no longer supply any arms to Saudi Arabia so long as the war in Yemen goes on?

James Cleverly: I have spoken with Martin Griffiths on a number of occasions, and the United Kingdom fully supports his role in trying to bring about peace. The right hon. Gentleman speaks about the provision of arms to the conflict. I do not remember recently hearing him criticising Iran for their support, with weapons, to the Houthis and the devastation that Houthi military activity has caused to the people of Yemen. Were he to do so, I think his criticisms of this Government's actions might carry a little bit more weight.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) [V]: It is extraordinary that there has still been no mention of the malign influence of Iran in this whole tragic situation. The humanitarian crisis has got far worse since we last debated the situation in Yemen back in September, with 2 million children now out of school, half of all medical facilities having been destroyed and at least one child dying every 10 minutes, as we have heard. Will the Minister undertake that, at the pledging conference in March, the UK will maintain its very generous aid towards Yemen and perhaps work with partners to see how we can make vaccines available in the battle against covid, which is just one of many battles that that country faces at this time?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the UK's contribution in Yemen. As I have said, we have contributed £1 billion since the conflict started. He will know that the official development assistance budget will be constrained because of the economic situation brought about by coronavirus. He also made the very important point that cash is not the only way that the UK is supporting people in Yemen. We have worked with our international partners to try to pursue peace. He also mentioned vaccinations in response to the coronavirus. I am very proud of the leading role that the United Kingdom took in working with international partners to raise funds to roll out vaccinations to those countries that were unable to do so, and I have no doubt that the UK will continue to be a leading player in the equitable and global distribution of vaccinations, as they are manufactured.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: For too long, Yemen has been the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, so what steps is the Minister taking to protect UK aid spending to Yemen from his Government's cuts, and how is he encouraging the participation of women and girls in conflict resolution and peacekeeping in Yemen?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Lady for the points that she has made. As she knows, coronavirus has, in the UK and around the rest of the world, had severe and detrimental effect on our economies, and this will have an impact on our aid spend. Nevertheless, Yemen will remain a UK priority country, and we will continue to use the full force of our diplomatic efforts to bring about peace. I am also glad that she raised the importance of women peacebuilders. I myself have spoken—virtually, unfortunately—with women in Yemen. I am the ministerial lead for women, peace and security, and I have on numerous occasions called for the voices of women in Yemen and further afield to be right at the heart of decision making about peacebuilding. I will continue to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Two of the most worrying aspects of the role of the Houthi rebels in this conflict are, first, their use of increasingly advanced and increasingly long-range missile technology procured from Iran, targeted indiscriminately at civilians in Saudi Arabian cities and, secondly, their persistent recruitment and engagement of child soldiers. How are these two issues best addressed?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is right to say that we have seen recent news about long-range attacks by the Houthis on Riyadh and, as I mentioned in my response

to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the use of child soldiers is of very significant concern. Ultimately, the best way to address both those problems is to bring about peace in Yemen as quickly as possible, and that will absolutely be a priority in the work that we do. We fully support Martin Griffiths and the UN-led peace process, and we speak directly with regional partners, with the Government of Yemen and with the Houthis directly to encourage them to the negotiating table to bring about a political solution, because that is really the only sustainable way of protecting the very people that my hon. Friend has identified.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: May I say once again to the Minister, as I have to his predecessors, that the Scottish National party unequivocally condemns the actions of Iran in this conflict and the atrocities committed by the Houthis and by everybody else? The difference is that the United Kingdom is not providing weapons to Iran or to the Houthis, but it is providing £5.5 billion-worth of weapons to the Saudis. The only reason that the British Government have no evidence that those weapons are being used in deliberate attacks on civilians is that they have made a great point of not looking hard enough in the right places where everyone knows the evidence is. So will the Minister explain how the continued provision of weapons to one party in this conflict is helping to end the conflict? If he cannot do that, will he agree that the best contribution that Britain can make to peace in Yemen is to stop arming Saudi?

James Cleverly: I am genuinely amazed that the hon. Gentleman in some way equates a UN-recognised state—the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—and its legitimate right to defend itself against the attacks that we have heard detailed by Members of this House, with an organisation that is not a state actor.

The UK supports the pursuit of peace. We do speak with the Houthis, but ultimately we look to support the legitimate Government of Yemen, which was, in our assessment, attacked by the Houthis. To equate the actions of a nation state in defending itself with the actions of a group of people trying to prevent peace embarrasses the hon. Gentleman and he should reflect on making a false equivalence between the two.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have a long personal memory of Houthi atrocities and well recall the activities against my father's battalion, the Aden Protectorate Levies, when I was a boy in Aden. Several of my father's brother officers were killed—one in a very brutal way—by Houthis in June 1955. It does not surprise me that the Houthis have utterly failed to reciprocate the Saudi-led coalition's unilateral ceasefire, and they have recently made a grievous attack in Aden. Apart from fully supporting the United Nations special envoy Martin Griffiths' efforts to secure a lasting peace, is there anything more that we in the UK can do about it?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend and I have spoken privately about this issue and he knows that I have a huge amount of respect for his knowledge of the region, born out of his personal experience and that of his family. Our assessment is that the best way to bring about meaningful peace is to work through the UN and the work of Martin Griffiths. We support his work by speaking directly to the various parties involved—with

both the Government of Yemen and the Houthis directly—to encourage them to bring about a meaningful political resolution to the situation. I genuinely hope that in years to come other people who sit on these Benches will not have repeatedly to see deaths and conflict in Yemen, as my hon. Friend has done. The UK will continue to work tirelessly to bring about a sustainable, peaceful resolution to this long-standing and difficult issue.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) [V]: This year will mark the seventh anniversary of the start of the war in Yemen, which has led to the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. UNICEF has described Yemen as “a living hell”. Last week, the US pledged to stop support for offensive Saudi operations in the country; does the Minister agree that it is now time for the UK to follow suit and commit to go that extra mile so that we can stop this horrific war?

James Cleverly: The thing that will stop the war is if the Houthis respect and reciprocate the Saudi-led coalition’s unilateral ceasefire that we saw last year. Unfortunately, we see through things such as the attack on the Yemeni Government at Aden airport, the drone attacks on Yemen and the other attacks raised by right hon. and hon. Members in this House that at the moment the Houthis are not reciprocating the overtures towards peace. We strongly encourage them to do so. We will work with the international community to support meaningful peace efforts and we will do what we can to alleviate the humanitarian situation caused by the conflict. That is our commitment to the people of Yemen, and that commitment is enduring.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: Yemen has been described as one of the worst places in the world to be a woman, and has for 13 consecutive years been ranked last in the World Economic Forum global gender gap index. With the situation continuing to deteriorate for both men and women, and with famine, human rights abuses and the use of sexual violence commonplace, what assurance can my right hon. Friend give me that the UK Government are doing all they can to work with all the parties involved to bring this dreadful civil war to an end, support victims of sexual violence, and allow the country to rebuild and recover in peace?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for the point that she has raised. When I made a virtual visit to Yemen, I was able to speak to Yemeni midwives and medical professionals. Their reports of the situation, particularly for women, were horrific. On a personal level, I found it very difficult to deal with, which is part of the reason why I and the UK Government are so committed to being a leading player in the pursuit of peace in Yemen. The conflict brings a particular horror to the lives of women that we want to address and to alleviate, but the best way of doing so is to bring about a meaningful and lasting peace. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), I will do what I can to ensure that the voices of women are at the heart of those peace negotiations and beyond.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I welcome this urgent question, because the humanitarian situation is just dire. I heard what the Minister said about the rigorous nature of British arms licences, but I

am afraid that it just sounds like whataboutery while innocent people are being killed by British-made arms. The Biden Administration have made absolutely the right call on this, so can the Minister explain to the House how our selling arms to Saudi Arabia will assist the UN special envoy for Yemen in his diplomatic efforts in trying to secure a negotiated political solution to this dreadful conflict?

James Cleverly: The ability of a nation state to defend itself is widely recognised as legitimate. The UK’s work, both bilaterally with the Government of Yemen and also through Martin Griffiths and the United Nations, is a completely separate issue. We are working very hard, and we will continue to do so, to alleviate the humanitarian situation until a sustainable peace is brought about. We will work just as hard to support Martin Griffiths and the United Nations and the regional players to bring that peace about.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) [V]: The United Nations said last week that it had indefinitely delayed the salvage operation off the coast of Yemen to avert an ecological disaster from the oil tanker FSO Safer, which holds roughly 48 million gallons of oil, citing a failure by the Houthis to guarantee the salvage team’s safety in writing. Has the Minister any further information on the efforts to stabilise and empty the oil tanker, and has he any indication that the new Biden Administration will prioritise this in their agenda in Yemen?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have liaised directly with the Houthis on this issue. The ecological disaster that would inevitably happen were the oil from the Safer tanker to be released into the sea is unimaginable, and we must do everything we can to prevent that from happening. Ultimately, it is up to the Houthis to ensure the safety of the people who would seek to secure that tanker. We have encouraged and we will encourage them to deliver on that promise so that we can avert what would be the worst ecological disaster probably in our lifetime—it is significantly larger than the Exxon Valdez spilling—costing an estimated £20 billion to repair.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: Yemen is the world’s gravest humanitarian emergency, with 80% of the Yemeni population reliant on humanitarian assistance and protection. If President Biden’s decision to end support for Saudi Arabia’s offensive operations in Yemen was part of his pledge to restore US moral leadership, how would the Minister characterise the UK’s continuing support for and arming of Saudi Arabia—moral indifference, perhaps?

James Cleverly: The UK has played a leading role in pursuing peace in Yemen. I have spoken to the representatives of the Government of Yemen and representatives of the Houthis, as well as to Martin Griffiths, in pursuit of that. The UK absolutely stands by its leading position in attempting to bring about a meaningful and sustainable peace in Yemen.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response to this timely urgent question. What role can the UK play to ensure that all partners in the region are working actively to end the war in Yemen?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. She is right to highlight the diplomatic work that is necessary in this. The UK plays a very active role: as a humanitarian donor in our own right; in encouraging other countries around the world and the region to support the humanitarian effort; and in encouraging active engagement both within Yemen and beyond Yemeni borders to bring about a coalition of the willing to drive forward the peace agenda. We will continue to act as humanitarian supporters, and as the convener and encourager of the diplomatic efforts to bring about peace.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: This is a complex conflict, on which any sensible Government would not take sides. There is clearly evil on all sides, and the Houthis are some of the worst of all of them. But the UK has repeatedly sided with Saudi Arabia, its coalition partners and even its proxy terrorist group, al-Qaeda in Yemen. The Government have been found guilty by British courts of illegally approving arms sales, and even broke UK court orders to prevent further arms sales last year and had to apologise to the courts. Surely now is the right time to stop the rhetoric and mistruths that we have the strongest arms control in the world—we do not—and to follow the US lead, stop British complicity, stop the arms licences being approved, and revoke those that continue to be extant. Will the Minister just do the right thing?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman's comments equate the activities of regional players as equal—I am sorry, but it is almost beyond credible. His deployment of the word “evil” betrays his prejudices, rather than any flaw in UK Government policy. We will continue to pursue peace in the region and to support humanitarian efforts until that peace is brought about.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is clear that the reason the Houthis will not meaningfully engage in the quest for peace is that they continue to get militarily, financial and political support from an Iranian regime, so may I ask the Minister what steps the UK is taking to pressure the Iranian regime to end this reckless and destabilising intervention?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is right; Iranian involvement is without a doubt prolonging the conflict, and therefore, by extension, prolonging the suffering of the people of Yemen. We support the work of Martin Griffiths and the United Nations in attempting to bring about a resolution to this issue by speaking to all the parties involved, and we will work with our E3 partners and the

new Administration in the White House to put pressure on Iran to stop supporting the violent activities of the Houthis and to help us bring about peace in Yemen.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: Despite the UK Government's claims that they provide training to the Saudi-led coalition to avoid civilian casualties and prevent Saudi Arabia from breaching international humanitarian law, there is no sign that that has reduced the deadly toll of the air raids. How can the Government justify not only profiting from the crisis in Yemen through arms deals, but spending £2.4 million of taxpayers' money since 2016 via secretive funds to bolster the Saudi forces as well?

James Cleverly: The UK is proud of the role that we have taken in trying to uphold international humanitarian law, working with countries around the region to try to improve and support their institutions. That is part of our ongoing agenda of being a force for good in the world, and we are proud of that role.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Other Members have raised the issue of the nefarious activities of Iran, acting in a proxy fashion in Yemen. The reality is that the people of Yemen are suffering as a result. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely essential for the United Kingdom to retain good relations with Saudi Arabia, to ensure balance in the region and to eliminate the humanitarian problems that are occurring in Yemen as a result of Iran's activities?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; Saudi Arabia is one of the larger contributors to humanitarian support for the people of Yemen, and maintaining good bilateral relations is an important part of that. More broadly, it is also the case that Saudi Arabia is a strong bilateral partner on a whole range of issues, including security issues, which keep British people and British interests, as well as Saudis, safe. We will continue to work with it, with the Government of Yemen and with other countries in the region to try to bring about a sustainable political solution and peace for the people of Yemen.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Shellfish Exports

4.34 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on the EU ban on UK shellfish exports.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have a long-standing trade in live bivalve molluscs to the EU from UK waters. This has benefited both our own shellfish industry and EU restaurants and retailers, which rely on these premium products from the UK.

Recently, concerns have emerged for our trade in live bivalve molluscs to the EU coming from UK class B production waters that have not been through purification or have not cleared testing. The European Commission has changed its position in recent weeks. It advised us in writing in September 2019 that the trade could continue. We shared the Commission's view and worked with the industry on that basis, and that included explaining that for one small part of the industry—wild harvested molluscs from class B waters—there would need to be a pause while we awaited new export health certificates to become available in April, but that, in line with the guidance from the EU, trade in the molluscs from farms could continue uninterrupted.

We continue to believe that our interpretation of the law and the EU's original interpretation is correct, that the trade should be able to continue for all relevant molluscs from April, and that there is no reason for a gap at all for molluscs from aquaculture. However, last week the Commission gave us sight of instructions that it sent to all member states on 3 February, stating that any imports into the EU from the UK of live bivalve molluscs for purification from class B waters, such as the sea around Wales and the south-west of England, are not permitted. Exports from class A waters, such as we find around parts of Scotland, may continue.

Bringing an end to this traditional and valuable trade is unacceptable, and I recognise that it is a devastating blow to the businesses that are reliant on the trade. While we do not agree at all with the Commission's interpretation of the law, we have had to advise traders that their consignments may very well not be accepted at EU ports for now. I am seeking urgent resolution to this problem and have written to Commissioner Kyriakides today. I have emphasised our high shellfish health status and our systems of control. I have also said that if it would assist the trade, we could provide reasonable additional assurances to demonstrate shellfish health, but that this must also recognise the existing high standards and history of trade between us. It is in the EU's interests to restore this trade. Many businesses in the EU had invested in depuration equipment and are configured around managing the export of molluscs from class B waters.

We have met the industry several times, and it is of course extremely concerned. We are working well with the Shellfish Association of Great Britain, which is taking up the issue in meetings with European counterparts. The molluscs affected include mussels, oysters, clams and cockles. In general, the scallop trade is less affected. Scallop exports may instead undergo pre-export testing,

as was the case before exit. However, we know some businesses have not traditionally been working in that way, and we are discussing with them how we may help. The issue does not affect molluscs landed in Northern Ireland. It does, however, affect movements from GB to Northern Ireland.

I know that this issue will be of great concern to many exporters around the country. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will continue the technical discussions with the European Commission, and I will update the House with any developments in due course.

Stephanie Peacock: Whoever is to blame, the fact is that shellfish farmers and fishermen are not able to export their most valuable product to their most important market. The rule banning imports from third-party countries of untreated shellfish from class B waters has been in place for decades. The Secretary of State claimed in front of the House of Lords EU Environment Sub-Committee last week that the EU had changed its position on how the rules would affect the UK. He had originally told the industry that the ban would be lifted in April, but we now hear it will not. On that basis, will he publish and put in the Library all the correspondence between his Department and the EU that demonstrates why he believed a change would occur? Can he explain to the House today what mechanism he expected the EU to use to make that change?

The letter that the Secretary of State has published today is welcome, but it does not answer those questions. It refers to contact in September 2019, when the UK's future trading agreement still was not clear. Many fleets are unable to sell their catches and exporters unable to ship and trade. What assessment has his Department made of how many businesses and employees are affected by the situation? What provision has his Department made to use some of the £23 million compensation fund that the Government recently announced to support the businesses who are unable to trade and how long will that support last? A multimillion pound industry has ground to a halt overnight. Jobs and communities are at risk. Unless this situation is resolved, the UK shellfish industry will not survive.

George Eustice: The hon. Lady refers to the evidence I gave to the House of Lords, and indeed that is entirely in line with what I have just set out. It is the case that in September 2019 the European Commission told us that for wild caught molluscs there would be a need for a new health certificate and, when that was discussed more recently, indicated that that could not come on stream until April. The Commission said that the existing trade in farmed molluscs could continue under existing export health certificates, so it has indeed changed its position. The hon. Lady asks whether I would be prepared to put that correspondence in the Library; I am happy to do so, including the letter I have written to the Commission today and that earlier letter from 2019.

The hon. Lady asks what we wanted to have changed. The answer is that we do not really want anything to be changed. We simply want the European Union to abide by its existing laws. The export of molluscs is governed by the animal health regime, and falls under directive 2006/88/EC and regulation 1251/2008. The directive and regulation are clear that the export of bivalved live molluscs is indeed lawful.

[George Eustice]

The Commission now seems to be pointing to separate public health regulations, namely regulation 853/2004 and regulation 2019/628, and suggests that they are the reason for a prohibition on sale. Again, that is incorrect, because legislation is clear through article 12 of the Commission implementing regulation 2019/628, which makes it clear that it does not apply where the molluscs are exported to a depuration centre. That is because when they are sent to a depuration centre, they are not yet food for sale. Therefore, the reason given by the European Commission for this change in position is not consistent with the EU's existing law. That is why we will continue to raise these issues with the Commission because under both the aquatic animal health regime and the public health regulations that the EU has cited, there is no legal justification for a bar on this trade.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): This is all very disappointing and unfair. Following what the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) has just said, I have many small independent fishermen and wholesalers whose very livelihoods depend on the export of live molluscs to the European Union. I know that my right hon. Friend is working very hard on the issue, but will he redouble his efforts? We just want the law to be upheld. The EU changed its mind on vaccines; perhaps it will change its mind on shellfish.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We believe that the EU has simply made an error in interpretation of the law in all the regulations it has cited. We are working closely with it to try to resolve this at a technical level. We do not think that the ban it has put in place is at all justified and, indeed, it represents a complete about turn on everything the EU has told us to date. We want the EU market to have access to the fantastic shellfish we produce in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: The past five weeks have been an absolute nightmare for food-exporting businesses. Fishing businesses face bankruptcy, dairies cannot shift their cheeses, and meat was sitting rotting in lorries, stuck in customs. Small businesses ended mail order deliveries to Northern Ireland and European truckers are refusing UK loads bound for Europe for fear that they will end up stuck in a lorry park in Kent. Forty years of building good customer bases in Europe have been swept away in one month by this Government's incompetence. The Government blamed the companies for not getting the paperwork right, said it was teething problems or blamed the French, the Dutch or any other big boy who might have done it and run away. Will the Government accept that the fault and the blame lie with them, because they made a bollocks of Brexit? Will they go back to the EU to seek a grace period and new negotiations on market access, even if that means accepting some regulatory alignment?

George Eustice: We will not accept regulatory alignment. This country voted to become an independent, self-governing country again, and to make its own laws again. We were elected as a Government on a clear manifesto commitment to deliver what people voted for in the referendum, and that is what we have done.

Of course, there have been teething problems in these early stages, as people familiarise themselves with new paperwork—not just businesses, but border control post inspectors in France and in the Netherlands, who are also on quite a steep learning curve. They are getting better, and we are working with them to iron out difficulties: for instance, the French at one point said that everything needed to be in blue ink, but they now accept that that is not correct and is not what is required in law. We are working to iron out those difficulties, working with authorities in France, the Netherlands and Ireland to try to improve these processes, and of course we would be willing to have a discussion with the European Commission about how we might modernise some of the forms they have to make them more user-friendly.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: I did not realise that “bollocks” was parliamentary language, Madam Deputy Speaker, but obviously that is for you to decide.

My right hon. Friend is very familiar with the Filey fishing community, and lobster and crab are important markets for them. Food exporters of all types are currently finding it more difficult in instances to export to the EU than to non-EU countries and, as he said in his opening remarks, this seems to be a consistency problem related to a common understanding of the rules. Will he do whatever he can to build an agreement that deals with food and plant exports and resolves these issues as soon as possible?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I have focused my comments so far on bivalve molluscs, where the European Union is now proposing an outright ban, which is a change from its former position. We are aware that there have also been some teething issues in other sections of the shellfish industry, notably crabs and lobsters, particularly when they are exported live. There have been improvements: a lot of consignments are now going through the short straits, clearing border control posts, often in no more than 45 minutes, and reaching their destination on time. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that the paperwork associated with that could be improved. That would require the EU to engage constructively in such a discussion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: On the matter of unparliamentary language, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) is quite right to question the matter. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) uttered a phrase that I would not have allowed had she directed it specifically at any individual Member of this House. I did not interrupt her for the way in which she used it in her question, but I remind all hon. Members that regardless of whether they are participating virtually or physically, they ought to be very careful never to use any language that could be considered offensive. We are honourable Members in this place.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: Families in Flookburgh in my constituency have fished on the sands for centuries. In recent generations, they have built a market that means the majority of their catch is sold in France. The Government's failure to secure export rights for Flookburgh fishermen is a negligent betrayal

of my communities. My constituents do not care whose fault it is, and are not impressed with the Secretary of State's buck passing while their livelihoods are destroyed. Will he be clear about what he will do to compensate my constituents and restore their access to live shellfish markets, as they had been promised?

George Eustice: The UK Government, the hon. Gentleman's constituents and other bivalve mollusc producers around the country were all promised by the European Commission that this trade could continue. We are all greatly disappointed by the about-turn by the European Union, which made the change just last week. I have written to the Commissioner setting out why that approach is wrong in law. We will be progressing those technical discussions, so that this trade can resume, since there is no justification—neither animal health nor plant health—for such a ban to be put in place.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend share my utter frustration that the European Union has completely changed its position on the rules governing the export of unpurified shellfish with virtually no notice, putting UK exporters in an extremely difficult position and hardly acting in the EU's promised spirit of fairness and co-operation?

George Eustice: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's frustration at the way the EU has conducted itself in this matter. It changed its position just last week, having assured us all along that it simply sought a new export health certificate for wild-caught molluscs. That is why we want to work with the EU to try to get this situation resolved. There is no justification for it whatsoever.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: May I seek clarity from the Secretary of State in relation to the measures being taken to support the Northern Ireland fleet in making the shipment of shellfish landed in GB and returned to Northern Ireland unfettered? May I also take this opportunity to urge him to ensure that opportunities are maximised for our Northern Ireland fleet by delivering a full Brexit dividend in the allocation of extra quota won from the EU?

George Eustice: As I said in my opening comments, the ban that the EU proposed does not affect bivalve molluscs that are landed into Northern Ireland or that are farmed in Northern Ireland waters. It is a restriction on GB trade, although under the Northern Ireland protocol, it could affect the trade in these molluscs from GB to Northern Ireland. As the hon. Lady points out, we are working on other issues with the Northern Ireland industry, particularly around the allocation of new quota as we depart from relative stability.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con) [V]: With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to offer my sincere condolences to the family of the Cornish fisherman who died while fishing off the coast of the Isles of Scilly at the weekend and remember the fishermen onboard who witnessed this horror.

The Government and the Secretary of State are right to do everything to unblock this. Shellfish is normally purified or processed in the EU before it is distributed to supermarkets, restaurants and bars. Surely a further course of action available to the Government is to

urgently fund the setting up of the necessary processing plants in the UK and identify what other infrastructure investment is needed to satisfy and increase our export market. Will the Secretary of State support those investment priorities, including here in Newlyn?

George Eustice: First, I join my hon. Friend in offering our condolences to the family of the fisherman who was tragically killed in an accident off the Isles of Scilly over the weekend. It is a reminder that fishing is a dangerous occupation, and our thoughts are with his family at this very difficult time.

My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which we will consider: if we are unable to unblock the current situation and get access to the EU for our undepurated shellfish, one of the options available to us is to support the industry in procuring the depuration equipment, so that it can be done here. We will be exploring that and other options.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Despite the EU's well documented position on third country exports, the Government breezily assured our shellfish industry that the ban would be lifted. We now know that that is not the case. Agriculture and fishing are devolved; negotiating trade deals is not. It is this Government's responsibility that the Welsh shellfish industry is now unable to export to Europe, and further proof—if any were needed—that Wales needs a seat at the table when it comes to negotiating. Will the Government now guarantee to cover the costs of all necessary export facilities for Welsh businesses such as Bangor Mussel Producers in Gwynedd, which are presently unable to trade with their export market?

George Eustice: As I pointed out earlier, it is not the case that we sought assurances or thought we had them and that the EU has not made a change to accommodate this trade. Nor is it the case that the EU had a ban on the trade from third countries for bivalve molluscs. Indeed, its own health certificate—in the notes to guide it—makes it very clear it is within scope, because it states:

“This certificate is to be used for the entry into the Union of consignments of live aquatic animals intended for all other aquaculture establishments including purification centres”.

So the status quo law the EU has does allow this trade to continue. That is the guidance that the EU gave us all along. It has changed its position. In the short term, our objective is to get the EU to abide by its own laws and legal processes here. Obviously, if it refuses to do so, or it decides to change its law to make things more difficult, we will consider what steps are necessary at that point to support industry.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Under the terms of the UK-EU trade deal, two committees are to be set up: a trade-specialised committee on sanitary and phytosanitary measures; and a specialised committee on fisheries. If those are not being set up, which they should be given the urgency of those issues, surely it is right to move towards an arbitration panel to figure out what can be done. The fishermen of Brixham, Salcombe and Dartmouth are incredibly worried about that point and, if they go under, they expect compensation from the EU for changing its mind over this issue.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under the trade and co-operation agreement, there is provision for a specialised committee dealing with SPS issues. There are some early discussions on what that would look like—it would probably be a senior level technical group, probably led by our chief veterinary officer. At the moment, the issue is that the EU, because it has not even got around to ratifying the TCA, is not yet in a place to have formal discussions on how we would form those groups. That of course does not prevent us from doing what we are doing, which is working very closely with the EU at a technical level to iron out the difficulties.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Prime Minister and Conservative Ministers made grand promises about how they would take back control of our fishing waters and how the fishing industry would prosper. The Leader of the House stood there recently, smiling and saying that

“they are now British fish, and they are better and happier fish for it.”—[*Official Report*, 14 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 510.]

The reality, however, is that our shellfish industry is on the verge of collapse and that, thanks to this Government, costly new red tape and bureaucracy are holding back British businesses and our economic recovery. Does the Secretary of State accept that no business, consumer or community should have to pay the price for this Government’s incompetence?

George Eustice: The reality of the trade and co-operation agreement is that its fisheries section delivered a 25% uplift in fishing opportunities, a rebalancing of the sharing arrangements and an abandonment of relative stability as the quid pro quo for granting the EU continued access to our waters for five and a half years. We are free to review it after that. We also have the freedom to set our own regulations in this area. But we recognise that there have been teething problems. That is why the Government announced a new £23 million fisheries disruption fund to support those businesses that struggled with the paperwork in the initial weeks.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Fishermen who land scallops into Scarborough and Whitby have been told by their wholesalers that there is no market for their fish, so they are currently tied up, despite approaching peak season, which ends at the end of April. Is the situation with regards to the European Commission—this flies in the face of the advice it gave in September 2019—an example of its vindictiveness, or its incompetence? Will the Secretary of State write to the chair of the European Parliament Fisheries Committee, whose job it is to hold the Commission to account?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes an important and a good suggestion, so I will indeed write to the chair of the fisheries committee to ensure that they are apprised of the discussions that we are also having with the European Commission. I am happy to do that.

My right hon. Friend invites me to comment on why the EU might have done this. I am afraid I am not going to be drawn on that, since I do not know. We very much hope that on reflection the European Union will look at this again and realise that the judgment it has made on the legal position is wrong and that it can adjust it at this late stage.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: What compensation do the Government intend to provide to the shellfish industry and other fishing industries, and boats like the Kirkella, which I have mentioned many times and currently remains tied up in Hull unable to fish?

George Eustice: We have announced a £23 million fisheries disruption fund specifically to help those exporters who attempted to send consignments of shellfish, or indeed any other fish, during the month of January and encountered difficulties and delays that led to a verifiable loss. On the issue of access to Norwegian waters to catch cod, which, as the hon. Lady highlights, is what the Kirkella vessel undertakes, it is not unusual, in the absence of a bilateral agreement, for access to one another’s waters to be suspended during the month of January. The normal situation is that once an agreement is in place, that access resumes, and I am sure that the Kirkella would be able to catch anything it might be allocated under that agreement.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: Will the Secretary of State work with fish and general food retailers to promote and sell more of our great fish and other food products to domestic consumers? Will that in mind, will he urgently make grants available to expand cleansing facilities for shellfish, because we will need them for the domestic market?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend. It is important that we build domestic demand. Indeed, many fish processors say that demand in the European Union is flat anyway because of the coronavirus and the lockdown, while UK retail demand remains quite buoyant for some species, although sadly not for all—in particular, the shellfish sector is quite reliant on export trade. He is right that we should do more to promote fish, and we are working on a project with Seafish that the Government will co-fund to help build demand in exactly the way he outlines.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: Scotland Food and Drink has said:

“There’s still a huge amount of uncertainty. It feels like we’re scrabbling around in the dark”.

Does the Secretary of State think that suggesting that businesses “give it a go” is alleviating uncertainty for them or perpetuating their feeling of being lost in darkness?

George Eustice: We have been working closely with the industry over the past month to iron out some of the difficulties that have been encountered, helping businesses to understand where they have made some small errors on the paperwork at the beginning, helping to understand from businesses the problems that they are encountering on the French side of border control posts, and helping to understand any errors that fish certifying officers might have made. We are meeting twice a week in a stakeholder group, working very closely with industry to resolve all the problems being encountered.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to send my condolences to the family of my constituent who suffered a fatal accident aboard a Newlyn fishing vessel on Saturday. It is almost a decade since Neil was killed, and I know how they feel.

I know that my right hon. Friend has tried his best, but the time has now come to show the EU that we will not surrender to its games over these shellfish exports. I call on him to start the necessary and frequent boardings on EU vessels in our exclusive economic zone to ensure that they comply with UK laws. If we disrupt their fishing activity, so be it, but we must show the fishing industry support and also provide details of the promised financial support without which our industry will not survive.

George Eustice: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I appreciate that this was a constituent of hers and that it was therefore close to home. All parts of the House also recognise the personal tragedy she suffered with the loss of her husband, Neil.

On my hon. Friend's wider point about the approach we are taking to the European Union, in many, many areas we have taken a pragmatic, sensible, phased approach in the initial months, but there is no obligation on us to continue that. Indeed, as she points out, we want to see some reciprocation from the EU on the application of common sense and reasonableness. We reserve our position in all those other areas. Of course, it goes without saying that any EU vessels accessing UK waters will need to abide by UK law.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: Our superb west country shellfish sector faces ruin because of the Government's botched Brexit deal. The Secretary of State has said repeatedly that he does not want to water down UK food standards now that we have left the EU, so why not do what fellow non-EU fishing nation Norway does and agree to European food standards? That would solve these problems in one fell swoop.

George Eustice: I do not think it would solve this issue in one fell swoop, since the regulations that require the depuration of molluscs coming from class B waters are already in EU law. This is really a change that the EU is making to its law. It is not even that the EU would accept it if we had the same approach; indeed, standards in our own waters are higher than in most EU waters. I therefore do not accept that offering to align with the EU would be of any assistance at all in this instance. What we need is for the EU to abide by its own laws.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): On vaccines, on Northern Ireland and now on fishing, is it not the case that the EU says one thing and does the other? Will the Government supercharge their investment in the UK fish processing industry so that coastal communities like mine in Redcar and Cleveland can be supported?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend speaks for many Members of the House representing coastal communities. Yes, indeed, as we leave the European Union there is an opportunity to build back those coastal communities and invest in aquaculture, port facilities and fish processing facilities. We have launched a new £100 million fund to support such investment.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Did the Secretary of State know, when the Prime Minister dumped his half-empty EU deal on us on Christmas eve, that it might mean export bans for fishermen from south Wales fishing in the Welsh sea for cockles, mussels

and oysters? If he did, why did he not make arrangements for those products to be sold for British consumers, and in particular those in food need? Will he make such arrangements so that those fishermen can face a sustainable livelihood and not possible bankruptcy?

George Eustice: We did not know that there would be such a ban since, at that point, the European Commission was telling us that the trade could continue with the exception of wild-caught molluscs, for which it said there would be a short delay while an export health certificate was designed. This is a complete change in position by the European Union that occurred just last week.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: Businesses such as Menai Oysters and Mussels in my constituency are struggling to export their molluscs because our Welsh sea waters are grade B and they will not be accepted into EU ports. What can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State say to reassure local businesses on Ynys Môn that this matter will be resolved?

George Eustice: We are doing everything possible to get the European Union to revisit the decision it appears to have taken and revert to its original interpretation of the law, which we believe to be right. We believe the approach it has taken is not consistent with EU law and is completely unjustified under either animal health or public health reasons. That is why we are working very hard to get the position changed.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: The UK currently has a very basic trading regime with the EU with respect to food, akin to World Trade Organisation rules. Surely these problems with shellfish and other food exports point to the need for a UK-EU veterinary agreement, which could be negotiated through the sanitary and phytosanitary standards specialised committee. Does the Secretary of State recognise that such an agreement would go a long way to defusing many of the current tensions around the Northern Ireland protocol?

George Eustice: I very much agree with the point that the hon. Gentleman raises. Of course, during the negotiations, we made arguments to the European Union around equivalence—the fact that we could recognise each other's equivalence and have more proportionate regimes. At that point, the EU was simply unwilling to entertain such a discussion, but it has veterinary agreements with countries such as New Zealand, with lower levels of inspection and simpler procedures to enable trade to continue. Of course, we very much hope that, now that the trade and co-operation agreement is in place, the EU will see fit to be much more pragmatic and proportionate in the measures it puts in place.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: At the weekend, I got to enjoy some amazing St Austell bay mussels, which I get to watch being harvested by the sea regularly through my window. However, that exceptional produce, along with Cornish scallops and Cornish oysters, currently cannot be enjoyed by people in France or across Europe because of the change in policy by the European Commission. The Secretary of State will know what a devastating impact that is having on the Cornish fishing industry and how urgently action is required.

[Steve Double]

What discussions has he had with the European Commission about its change in policy, and what hope can he give us of progress being made in the coming days?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend does indeed have some fantastic mussels grown at St Austell; I visited one of the mussel farms there myself. We have written to Commissioner Kyriakides today, but my officials and the chief veterinary officer have been in regular dialogue with officials in the Commission over the last couple of weeks on this matter and, as I said, a change in position manifested itself just last week. We are in regular dialogue, and in my letter to the commissioner I requested an urgent discussion on this matter.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: Deepdock, a mussel exporting specialist, says that it now requires 41 pieces of paper to ship 10 bags of mussels to the EU where only one was required before. Is this just, as the Secretary of State likes to say, a teething issue, or is it yet another sign that the Tories' Brexit deal has completely failed the UK's fishing industry and communities?

George Eustice: It is the case that people seeking to export all fish or products of animal origin will now require an export health certificate. It is also the case that the design of the forms that the EU prescribes in the schedule to its animal health regulation is sometimes a little clunky and not particularly user-friendly. We have had many suggestions from industry about how the form could be improved, particularly from businesses that are experienced in exporting around the world to other developed countries, many of which do this far better than the European Union. We will obviously seek to learn the lessons from that and try to encourage the European Union to change the nature of its forms.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) [V]: This arbitrary action by the European Commission is causing real concern in fishing communities that have already suffered losses from export disruption, and I urge the Secretary of State to confirm details of the compensation scheme. While I strongly support his efforts to have this ban lifted, will he also put in place contingency arrangements to support fishing firms in King's Lynn and elsewhere, with grants for purification facilities?

George Eustice: As well as seeking to unblock this problem with the Commission and resume the trade, which is obviously our first and most important objective, we are considering other options and other interventions to help the industry to adapt should the EU permanently change its position.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: Does the Secretary of State have any idea of the devastating financial impact that the ban is going to have on historic cockling communities such as Penclawdd in Gower? What conversations has he been having with the Welsh Government to ensure that the fisheries disruption fund reaches Penclawdd?

George Eustice: As I said in my opening remarks, we realise that this situation is devastating for many sections of the mollusc industry. We recognise that a

large proportion of bivalve molluscs—in some cases up to 80%—are exported, which is why we are working so hard to get the Commission to revisit its decision. We have indeed had conversations about the fisheries disruption fund. It is a UK-wide scheme and will be open to anybody, including those from Wales, who attempted to export and ran into difficulties.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his letter to the EU Commission that addressed these issues, but what is being done to ensure that generations of fishermen, such as those in Ilfracombe in my North Devon constituency, can return their fleets to the waters and do not moor up forever? Will my right hon. Friend assure desperate fishermen who have had no income all year that they can rapidly access the announced £23 million and the £100 million fund, to give them hope for the future?

George Eustice: We will shortly announce further details on and open the fisheries disruption fund for those exporters who encountered difficulties in January. I assure my hon. Friend that we recognise the impact of the European Union's change of heart on the bivalve-mollusc industry, which is why we are working to unblock the problem. This particular step by the European Union does not affect the wider shellfish industry, including not only most scallop producers in the catching sector but those doing crabs and lobsters, but we recognise that some of those producers nevertheless encountered difficulties in January, and the fisheries disruption fund is there to support them.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: I associate myself with the comments of colleagues and send my condolences to the family of the fisherman who was lost this weekend.

I thank my right hon. Friend for his work to resolve this matter. I reiterate that it is vital that the cash assistance reaches not only the affected shellfish exporters but the smallest boats on the Fal estuary, which are currently tied up and facing serious difficulties. What is my right hon. Friend's assessment of the opinion of some in the industry that its French market was, in fact, intact and profitable, despite restaurants in France having been closed in November and December, but is now non-existent, which adds to the current issues?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend and neighbouring MP has an important heritage oyster fishery in the Fal. I have been on board one of the vessels and seen its work at first hand. The export market will of course be important for some oyster fisheries, including the farmed oyster sector. As I have said, we are working very hard to try to get the position resolved. There will be a good future for our fishing industry once we can resolve these particular issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): To allow the Chamber to be prepared for the next item of business, I shall now briefly suspend proceedings for a few minutes.

5.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

Armed Forces Bill

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 13 October 2020, on the work of the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 881; Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 1 December 2020 and Third Report of the Defence Committee, Pre-appointment hearing for the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 989; Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 12 and 26 January 2021, on Armed Forces and veterans mental health, HC 1133.]

Second Reading

5.22 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a privilege to open this debate today on our Armed Forces Bill, not least because it carries with it such historical significance. Decades after the disaster of the English civil war, the Bill of Rights of 1688 required Parliament to pass an Act every five years to maintain a standing army. That landmark document states that

“the raising or keeping a standing army within the United Kingdom...in time of peace, unless it be with the consent of Parliament, is against the law”.

Centuries on, that pivotal constitutional function still stands, and by reviewing what has evolved into the Armed Forces Act 2006 every five years, this Bill is the mechanism for ensuring that members of our armed forces obey lawful orders. It underpins military command, discipline and justice. Without it, our military would be unable to operate as a professional body beyond the end of 2021. In other words, this legislation is essential for our forces to act effectively, and a vital bulwark of our democracy.

The legislation we are discussing today is as much about our future as about our present and our past. This is a moment of renewal, as will become clear when I move on to discuss some of the Bill’s key measures. It will have far-reaching benefits for defence and for our broader service community, and it is fitting that we are reviving our pledge to our people at this time. Over the past 12 months they have been shoulder to shoulder in the thick of the struggle against covid, performing Herculean tasks in support of our excellent NHS doctors and nurses.

Perhaps no one sums up the enduring spirit of our armed forces through the ages better than the late great Captain Sir Tom Moore. Always humble, never entitled, ever using his unique experiences to help others, he was a special man, a true patriot and the perfect veteran. When I spoke to Captain Tom, I always thanked him not only for his generation’s service, which was the perfect example for mine to follow, but for the example he gave to us all, young and old, during this pandemic. Captain Tom was one of a disproportionate number of veterans who have stood up and served again during this time, and as the UK Government’s Veterans Minister, I pay tribute to them today. This Bill is designed to deliver for them.

The Bill has three main elements, and I will deal with each in turn. First, renewal. I start with clause 1. As previously mentioned, this legislation renews the Armed Forces Act 2006. The 2006 Act covers matters such as: the powers of commanding officers to punish disciplinary

or low-level criminal misconduct; the powers of the court martial system; and the powers of the service police. This Bill provides for continuation of the 2006 Act for a year from the date on which it receives Royal Assent. It provides for its further renewal for up to a year at a time until the end of 2026, ensuring that Parliament has a regular opportunity to debate our nation’s armed forces.

Secondly, the Bill makes important changes to the service justice system. This Government are committed to achieving justice in all allegations of criminal offending by or against service personnel anywhere in the world, just as we are equally committed to supporting the victims and witnesses of the most serious crimes.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I apologise for intervening so early, but I wanted to do so while the Minister was mentioning justice. In this Bill, he deals with justice to our armed services and forces, but we are still waiting for protection against vexatious allegations in cases from Northern Ireland where people have already been tried and found innocent. I served there back at that same time, and many people I know live in fear that they are going to be called for something that they thought was over, done and gone. When is that legislation going to come in front of the House?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I think it is appropriate that I deal with this matter now, although it may come up a number of times during the debate. Let me be absolutely clear: this Prime Minister, for the first time in this country’s history, has committed to ending the vexatious nature of repeat investigations of our veterans who served in Northern Ireland; this Northern Ireland Secretary has given the same commitments; and we are closer now than we have ever been to delivering on that promise. Those veterans are not left behind. I pay tribute to them for their service. Legislation will be coming in due course from the Northern Ireland Office. The Government are working and are committed to this issue like never before. I just urge a little more patience. Colleagues will know my commitment to the issue, and I am determined to see it through.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I certainly endorse everything that the Minister has said about his own commitment and the commitment of the Government to this issue. May I just make an appeal that, when he does bring forward the legislation for Northern Ireland veterans, it focuses not only on the question of prosecutions, but on the question of investigations, the vast majority of which never lead to prosecutions but are still terribly oppressive? That is what is missing from the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill; it is good on prosecutions, but has not yet done enough about repeated reinvestigation.

Johnny Mercer: My right hon. Friend is very knowledgeable and learned in this space. The issue is a lot more complicated than it is made out to be by a lot of people who contribute to this debate. There is no evidence, essentially, of vexatious prosecutions per se. It is the investigations that are the trouble. There are elements of this Bill that address how we investigate. There are elements not in this Bill that are being brought into the Department, such as a serious crime unit, to ensure that these things can never happen again.

[Johnny Mercer]

Let me be clear that if we were to invent a system that essentially said, “We will not investigate”, that would be the equivalent of an amnesty, and this Government are not committed to going down that route either. This is a difficult area and it is a delicate balance, but the strategic objective has been set by the Prime Minister; it is one that I and many Members in the House have campaigned on for years, and we will deliver on it. It is a tough ask and a tough battle, but we will win it. I urge patience while we get to the end of this battle.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Minister is not the problem; the problem is the Northern Ireland Office, as everyone knows. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) chairs the veterans support group in this place; he has been followed by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), a previous Chairman of the Defence Committee and now Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee; and I am a member of the veterans support group. The Prime Minister promised 18 months ago that we would have this legislation before the next general election. Well, we have had the general election and we have had a year, so with the greatest of respect, will the Minister take back to the Northern Ireland Office the fact that our patience is now exhausted? We do not want words and we do not want to be patronised; we want a Bill. Where is it?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and it is a fair point. However, I would just say that we have had 18 months since that election, but this challenge has existed for 40 years—for 40 years—and our predecessors have not dealt with it. It is unrealistic to expect the Northern Ireland Office and the Prime Minister to have delivered on this by now, but they have made that commitment. I would slightly push back on this idea that the Northern Ireland Secretary is the roadblock, as my right hon. Friend has put to me before. That is not my experience, and I am engaged in this every day and I think on this matter every day. That is not fact; what is fact is that this is extremely difficult, but this Government will get it over the line. I am going to make progress now.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way. I will make progress now.

The service justice system remains a fair and effective system, but no system, as we know, should remain static. The service justice system review underlined that we must do more to strengthen it so that our people and their families have confidence that they will receive fair treatment. That is why clauses 2 to 7, along with clause 11, implement important recommendations of the service justice system review. In the interests of time, I will focus today on only the most salient measures.

Clause 7 deals with the notion of concurrent jurisdiction. For offences committed by service personnel in the UK, justice can be delivered through the civilian criminal justice system or the service justice system. The service justice system review of 2020 found the system to be fair, robust and ECHR-compliant, but it also proposed

that some of the most serious offences should not be prosecuted at court martial when they are committed by service personnel in the UK, except where the consent of the Attorney General is given. To be clear, the review was not saying that the service justice system should stop dealing with certain categories of cases that occur in the United Kingdom; it was saying that, when such cases come up, controls should be introduced if they are to be tried in the service justice system. Meanwhile, jurisdiction would remain to deal with such cases overseas.

The Government have considered this recommendation fully and carefully, but we have concluded that the concurrency of jurisdictions must remain. We are confident that the service justice system is capable of dealing with all offences, whatever their seriousness and wherever they occur, though there are important improvements that can and should be made to ensure the system is as resilient, robust and transparent as it possibly can be. However, we do agree that the current non-statutory protocols and guidance about jurisdiction must be clearer, so clause 7 of the Bill places a duty on the heads of the service and civilian prosecutors in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to agree protocols regarding the exercise of concurrent jurisdiction. We believe that such decisions on jurisdiction are best left to the independent service justice and UK civilian prosecutors, using guidance agreed between them. The Bill ensures that civilian prosecutors will have the final say should a disagreement on jurisdiction between the prosecutors remain unresolved. I want to be clear: this is not about seeking to direct more cases into the service justice system and away from the civilian criminal justice system, or vice versa; it is about guaranteeing that both systems can handle all offending and are equally equipped to deliver justice for victims.

Moving on from clause 7, clause 11 is the first step in creating an independent body to oversee complaints against the service police. To support our world-class armed forces, we need a highly skilled and capable service police, and we are always looking for improvements. Once again, the service justice system review has provided several important recommendations. These include the creation of a defence serious crime capability, something we are pursuing separately since it does not require legislation, but it is the report’s proposal for an independent service police complaints system, modelled on the system in place for civilian police in England and Wales, that we will take further today.

The rules governing oversight of the civilian constabulary are set out in part 2 of the Police Reform Act 2002, which is overseen by the director general of the Independent Office for Police Conduct. We are, in essence, replicating that system, by establishing an independent service police complaints commissioner. They will have the power to investigate serious and sensitive matters involving the service police, including those relating to conduct, serious injury and death. They will also set the standards by which the service police should handle complaints. As in the case of civilian police, provision will be made to handle both whistleblowing and super-complaints—those issues raised by designated organisations on behalf of the public about harmful patterns or trends in policing.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. May I thank Justice Lyons for his contribution in putting together the service justice review, which happened on my watch,

as my hon. Friend's predecessor? I see that the Defence Secretary is in his place. Will he use the opportunity to clarify why certain types of offences—the most serious offences—could not, as per the recommendation, be moved across to the civilian courts which, it was argued, had better experience to deal with these matters?

Johnny Mercer: As I have said, the review was not saying that the service justice system should stop dealing with certain categories of cases. All it was saying was that, when cases came up, controls should be introduced if they are tried in the service justice system. The control that was recommended by the review was the Attorney General's consent. Instead, we want something that is more transparent for both victims and those accused, that is more resilient and more robust, and that is the protocol that is agreed between civilian prosecutors and service prosecutors, which we think will lead to better outcomes for all users of the service justice system.

Clause 8 goes to the heart of the Bill. As the House is aware, the armed forces covenant was introduced a decade ago. During that time, we have seen an irreversible, strategic shift towards looking after our people. Veterans have found work, reservists have got the time off needed to deploy, and military spouses have received further help in their careers. If we analyse last year's annual report, we will see how the scope and effectiveness of the armed forces covenant has continued to advance: 79,000 service children in the United Kingdom now benefit from £24.5 million of additional pupil funding; 22,200 service personnel have been helped on to the housing ladder by the Forces Help to Buy scheme; and 800 GP practices in England are now accredited as veteran-friendly with more joining their ranks every day.

Despite the pandemic, we have provided cash boosts for family accommodation, introduced free breakfast and after-school clubs for military children, brought in the veterans railcard and given millions to service charities. We have come far in recent times. As someone who beat a path to the door of this Parliament to force this place to honour the nation's responsibilities to veterans, I can genuinely say that I can feel the sands shifting under my feet, but we have further to go. Today is an historic day, as we legislate to put the armed forces covenant—that promise between the nation and those who serve—into law. What is still evident is that some members of our armed forces community are still suffering disadvantage in accessing public services. Often the provision that they get is something of a postcode lottery. When disadvantage occurs, it is often because there is little understanding of the unique nature of service in the armed forces.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for giving way. I welcome what he says, and we on the Labour Benches indeed support the covenant. On the issue of the postcode lottery, which is really important for my constituents in Barnsley, may I push him further and ask whether he will be introducing measurable national standards in the covenant so that there is not that postcode lottery?

Johnny Mercer: We bring out a report every year that attempts to pull together everybody's different experiences of the covenant. We are clear that we will not prescribe specific outcomes. We want local authorities to adhere to the principles of the armed forces covenant and, because

of the way that local authorities deliver their services, to have a due regard in law to consider the covenant but not to prescribe outcomes. That is reflected in the covenant report, which gives us a good firm idea of how the covenant is going down in communities such as Barnsley.

In this clause, we tackle those problems head-on. We are placing a duty to have due regard to the covenant principles on public bodies responsible for the delivery of key functions in housing, education and healthcare. We have chosen those three areas because they are the bedrock of a stable and secure life. Unsurprisingly, they are also raised by members of the armed forces community as areas of greatest concern.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Johnny Mercer: Not at this time.

The legislation does not mandate specific delivery outcomes or advantageous treatment of the armed forces community, not least because it is important that relevant public bodies retain the flexibility required to tailor decisions on service delivery to local circumstances. But the Bill will legally oblige relevant public bodies to consider the principles of the covenant when carrying out specified functions in these three areas. To support its delivery, we are also making sure that public bodies are supported by statutory guidance explaining the principles of the covenant as well as, for example, how and why members of the armed forces may experience disadvantage as a result of their service. Some will say that we are going too far, others that we have not gone far enough, but my colleagues and I carefully weighed up a number of options before devising this response.

Critically, this is just the first step. This legislation will provide the Government with the power to widen the scope of the duty to apply to additional public bodies and include other functions should it be felt beneficial in future; in other words, we are turning the covenant into a minimum requirement—a tangible tool that our service personnel and veterans can use to hold their service providers to account, a tool that has the capacity to deliver today as well as evolve and adapt as society changes.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time, and I think the whole House agrees with him on the need to enforce the armed forces covenant. Critical in any environment, whether the private sector or local authorities, is the role of the armed forces champion, a single person that anybody can go to, and it must be clear who they are. Will the Minister consider putting into the legislation that every local authority must have a designated armed forces champion?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. We carefully considered including such a measure, but local authorities were not supportive because they deliver the principles of the armed forces covenant through a variety of mechanisms and in different ways. They specifically mentioned to the Department and to me as the Minister that they did not want us to specify that sort of outcome, which is why we have put in the "due regard" to pay duty to the principles of the covenant and to bear them in mind when delivering public services. But, as I have said, this is legislation that we will review going forward to ensure that it is working and that it genuinely feels that it works for those who need it.

This reform is also about our broader aspiration.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Johnny Mercer: Not at this time.

By cementing the covenant in the minds of the public, we are not lowering the ceiling but are raising the floor of our collective expectations. For example, my own constituency of Plymouth, Moor View has undertaken many good initiatives to support the local service community. I want others to view their efforts not as exceptional, but rather as a new normal, just as I want my constituents to see their successes merely as a springboard to better and bigger things.

In conclusion, I began by saying that an Armed Forces Bill is always an historic moment, but, by augmenting service justice, by improving our service police and by finally enshrining the covenant into law a decade on, we are cementing its standing further still. Our armed forces people are our nation's first and last line of defence. We depend on them, but they also depend on us, and that is why it is incumbent not just on those of us in Government but on everyone in this House to work in partnership with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations to ensure that this nation does right by those who serve, so that decades from now our future personnel will look back on this period and say, "This was the moment"—the moment when our nation finally awoke and delivered on its promise to the incredible men and women who serve our country without question or quibble and defend this proud nation and act on the will of this House; the moment when incremental strategic and irreversible change was delivered in law for our service personnel and veterans and their families. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, it will be obvious to anyone who has examined the call list that a very large number of Members wish to participate this afternoon, so there will be an immediate time limit on Back-Bench speeches of four minutes.

5.44 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I join the Minister in his tribute and thanks to the men and women of our armed forces—those deployed to standing commitments, from Cyprus to the Falklands; those serving as part of our NATO defences in Estonia or the UN peacekeeping in Mali; and of course those who are part of the largest ever peacetime deployment in this country, helping this country through the covid crisis. British forces are respected worldwide for their professionalism and for the values that we most admire: integrity, loyalty, discipline and service.

This Armed Forces Bill renews the legal basis for our armed forces and system of military law, and in turn also renews the nation's commitment to our forces personnel through the covenant; and, with almost 70 speakers from all parts of the House, it is quite clear this afternoon that the House is determined, together, to do exactly that.

Labour supports this legislation. We share that aim, and we welcome the order that will follow this debate to extend the present Armed Forces Act from the end of May until the end of December, so that Parliament has the time to give the proper scrutiny to improving this Bill. As it stands, this Bill is a big missed opportunity—the opportunity to make good in full on the commitments

in the armed forces covenant, so that Britain becomes the best country in the world to serve and to be a veteran; the opportunity to fix long-run problems for forces personnel, their families and veterans, which have become so clear over the last decade; and the opportunity to set a framework for the armed forces that is fit for the challenges and complex threats that Britain must face.

Let me make this point about the Armed Forces Bill, in particular to Government Members who are used to toeing the line on legislation. This Bill is different. This Bill is bipartisan and goes next to a Select Committee, not a Public Bill Committee. The Bill can be improved from all sides as it goes through Parliament. The Bill rests on the groundbreaking Armed Forces Act 2006, which consolidated half a century of service law. To stress the point, on Second Reading of that Bill, in 2005-06, a Government Back Bencher made a strong argument for a service complaints commissioner, which at first was knocked back by the Secretary of State, John Reid. However, by the time the Bill became an Act, the proposal from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) had been incorporated fully into the legislation. He will no doubt have fresh proposals for this Bill to put to this Secretary of State.

On clause 8, we stand fully behind the armed forces covenant and the aim to give it full legal force. In fact, in 2009 Labour in government consulted on introducing legally enforceable rights for the forces, their families and veterans, and our 2010 manifesto proposed to enshrine those rights in the armed forces charter. I am therefore pleased that the Secretary of State could say on publication of the Bill at the end of last month:

"For the first time ever we are putting into law the Armed Forces Covenant."

The Secretary of State might just want to let David Cameron know that. In fact, he might be surprised to learn it, because he boasted in 2015 that he had already done so, saying:

"We are the first Government to put the military covenant properly into law".—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 961.]

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry that the Minister did not want to take interventions. He said that the armed forces covenant is now 10 years old, but it is actually a lot older. It started in 2008 with the Command Paper under the last Labour Government, and the document he referred to, which came out in 2009, referred not only to putting the covenant into law but giving it teeth. The proposal in this Bill does not have teeth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a bit strange that the weakened version that we have now has none of the proposals in the 2009 Green Paper? Let us also remember that this is the same Government who, in 2011, opposed the motion tabled by me and the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) to put the covenant into law.

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is right, of course. I want to stress, to the extent that I can, the cross-party, long-term and long-run support for many of these provisions. He is right that the covenant has its roots in the previous Labour Government—we called it a charter then, rather than a covenant—but over the past two decades, I believe we have made great strides in providing better services, support and opportunities for service personnel and veterans.

That is to the credit of Ministers who have made it their personal mission, of hon. Members on both sides who have championed the cause, of councils and local agencies that have delivered services to our veterans, and of service charities such as the Royal British Legion, Cobseo, the Confederation of Service Charities, the RAF Families Federation, SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity and Help for Heroes, which have hugely improved Government policy, advanced public understanding and developed direct support for forces and veterans. Those charities welcome the Bill, as I do, but they are disappointed by the limitations of the legislation, as I am.

I must say to hon. Members that, if they read one background briefing for this Bill, they should make it the background briefing that the Royal British Legion has sent to us today. It rightly says that a decade's experience of the covenant confirms that,

“the range of policy issues that have a significant impact on the Armed Forces community is wide and ever-changing: including health, housing, employment, pensions, compensation, social care, education, criminal justice and immigration”.

The Bill is too narrow. It covers only aspects of health, housing and education. The Bill creates a two-tier covenant. It applies only to local councils and local agencies, not to national Governments. The Government are letting themselves off the hook entirely when, as the Legion says, many of the areas in which forces personnel and veterans have problems are the responsibility of national Governments or are based on national guidance to delivery agencies.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the clauses relating to service justice and terms of service were ultimately requested by the armed forces. They should therefore be non-contentious, although I agree that perhaps clause 8 could be more prescriptive. However, to bring the armed forces covenant into statute, to do it equally and to make it deliverable across all local authorities, across all devolved nations and also Northern Ireland, where particular circumstances reign, will be no easy feat. My view therefore is that, far from being overly prescriptive in primary legislation, it may be better to be less prescriptive. Does he agree that we should commend the Bill for what it is, not attack it for what it cannot necessarily be?

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest in this. I think there is potential, as he indicates, for cross-party support for doing more than is currently in the Bill on the implementation of the covenant. The problem is not that it is prescriptive, but that it is prescriptively narrow at present, directed only at local councils and local agencies and not the responsibilities or services of national Government, and that it is too narrow, in that it mentions three areas when the lived experience of armed forces and veterans quite clearly raises problems on a wide range of other fronts. That is the lesson of the experience of the past decade and more—that is the challenge we must meet. This is a once-in-five-years piece of legislation and I want to ensure that we on the Opposition side play a part in helping Parliament to meet that challenge.

Mr Kevan Jones: I agree with my right hon. Friend, and I suggest that the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) read the Green Paper of 2009, which actually set out some real teeth there, including setting out a clear charter of what was in the covenant;

the ombudsman's role, so that people could have redress; armed forces champions, as already mentioned by the Chair of the Select Committee; and a five-yearly review to coincide with the Armed Forces Act, so that the disadvantage could be looked at. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill is letting Government Departments and the MOD off the hook?

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is right. He mentions teeth, and I will come to that in a moment. Members on both sides of the House and the Select Committee can help the Minister with his personal mission to do best by forces personnel and veterans. We can make this stronger and better than the missed opportunity that the provision in clause 8 represents. It is too narrow. It creates a two-tier covenant, and it is too weak. It offers no definition of what “have due regard to” the covenant means, and it offers no enforcement for members of the armed forces community who feel they have been let down.

That makes the statutory guidance that the Minister promised at oral questions last week essential before the Bill's Select Committee scrutiny stage. When only one in 10 judicial reviews succeed and the cost of unsuccessful judicial reviews is upwards of £80,000, proposals for easy, accessible redress beyond a judicial review are also essential before the Select Committee stage. I trust that all Members on the Select Committee will want to pursue those shortcomings with the Minister. Let us not allow this golden opportunity to reinforce the covenant remain a missed opportunity, as it is in the Bill.

I turn to the service justice system and clauses 1 to 7. In the five years since the last Armed Forces Act, the Government have extensively reviewed the service justice system, with his honour Shaun Lyons reporting early last year, backed by a service policing review carried out by Professor Sir Jon Murphy. Many of the recommendations from those reviews are in the Bill. Lyons rightly said:

“Independent oversight is a critical factor in bringing transparency and building confidence in policing.”

We welcome the new Service Police Complaints Commissioner, modelled on the civilian police's Independent Office for Police Conduct. We will want to ensure in the Select Committee that the Government get important details right on matters such as time limits for bringing complaints, protections for whistleblowers, scope to consider super-complaints and respective remits for the commissioner alongside the Service Complaints Ombudsman. We also welcome the expansion of the courts martial boards, with new rules on reaching qualified majority verdicts.

However, there are two big gaps. First, Ministers are missing the opportunity to improve confidence and results in cases of murder, manslaughter and rape committed by service personnel in the UK. As the Minister has conceded, Lyons recommended that those cases should be dealt with by the civilian justice system. He pointed out that the military courts secure convictions in only one in 10 cases of rape, while Crown Prosecution Service figures show that the civilian rate is around 50%. Such a move would restore the position that Parliament intended when the principle of concurrent jurisdiction was first introduced in the Armed Forces Act 2006. The Secretary of State has so far just said no but has offered no rationale for rejecting that recommendation, and the Minister this afternoon has again offered no justification for rejecting that recommendation.

Johnny Mercer *rose*—

John Healey: If the Minister wants to do so now, I will happily give way.

Johnny Mercer: First, we cannot reject a recommendation that did not exist. That was not the recommendation of the Lyons review, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows. Secondly, I have given a justification a number of times: this decision was made because we want to see more integrity and resilience in the system and agree a protocol between prosecuting jurisdictions to ensure that the system works better for everyone. What was advised was Attorney General's consent. We have gone for better than that, and this will achieve better outcomes for our people.

John Healey: That is not an explanation of why; that is an explanation of what, and the protocol is about the what, not the why. The Government are missing the opportunity to improve the results and the confidence in how these very serious cases are dealt with. If the Minister thinks that this was not a recommendation in the Lyons report, I suggest that he re-reads it.

Secondly, and importantly, the Bill has little to say about fixing the biggest flaw in the service justice system—investigations—and it has nothing to say about investigations of overseas allegations, despite the Minister telling me on Third Reading of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill in November:

“The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne raises time and again the issue of the investigations, but he knows that they are for the forthcoming armed forces Bill and will be addressed there.”—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 258.]

They are not. He also knows that 99% of the allegations against British troops from Iraq and Afghanistan did not make it to prosecution and would not have been affected by the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill. The Government have already had three reviews in the past five years and have more than 80 recommendations on investigation, so I urge them to work with us and with a wide range of peers in the Lords on the changes needed to that Bill.

The Minister quite rightly said that this legislation is as much about our future as our past. This is indeed five-year legislation that will take our armed forces beyond the Government's integrated review, when it is finally published, beyond its four-year funding plan and beyond the next general election. For it to function as the future framework for our armed forces to keep this country secure, the Bill must fix the flaws that have become so clear since the last Act in 2016.

On maintaining the strength of our armed forces, there is serious concern that Britain's full-time armed forces remain 10,000 below the total strength Ministers said was needed in the 2015 strategic defence review, and an MOD report revealed over the weekend that all but one of 33 infantry battalions are seriously short of battle-ready personnel. The Minister responded on social media to that report, saying that it is not secret but a “routine update”. I want to see Parliament use the Armed Forces Bill to mandate Ministers to report to Parliament each year on the fighting strength of our armed forces.

On maintaining the pay of our armed forces, the decade of decline since 2010 has seen military pay fall behind and with it, by the way, morale and retention.

For instance, last year an Army private was getting almost £2,000 a year less than they would have done if the pay had kept pace with inflation. I want to see Parliament use this Armed Forces Bill as the basis for a debate about making the recommendations of the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body binding on Ministers.

On justice in our armed forces, more than 6,000 personnel serve in Britain's armed forces from overseas, mainly from the Commonwealth. Their service to our country earns them the right to live in our country, yet the Government charges huge fees to apply for British citizenship, so someone leaving the forces now with a partner and two children has a bill of almost £10,000. It is unjust; it is un-British. I want to see Parliament use the Armed Forces Bill to get Ministers to scrap these unfair fees.

Finally, on the role of reservists in our armed forces, covid has made it clear that our military are essential to our national resilience, not just our national security, and that reservists will contribute more in future to our defence capabilities. While the Government's moves to make reservist training more flexible are sensible and welcome, I want to see Parliament use the Armed Forces Bill to deal with other problems they face, especially with employers.

In conclusion, the Minister has said to the House that he is open to proposals to improve the Bill. We will take him at his word. We will at times test his word, but we will work with the Minister if he will work with us. We will work cross-party and with a range of interests beyond Parliament to build consensus so that this Bill, when it becomes an Act, really does make the most of this opportunity to strengthen the nation's commitment to our forces, their families and veterans.

6.4 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this important debate. May I join the Minister in paying tribute to our armed forces and what they are doing? They watch our backs, they keep us safe at night and, as we have seen with the pandemic, they step forward when the country needs them the most. Perhaps that, if anything, is justification as to why armed forces numbers should not be cut.

The Minister also paid tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore, quite rightly, too. Every so often, a kind, selfless character emerges who does something quite simple yet extraordinary, setting an example to us all. He left the world a better place and he was a soldier to the end. He will certainly be missed by the entire nation.

As the Minister has explained, Armed Forces Bills come around every five years, like buses, and we have put some bells and whistles on this one. I want to speak to two aspects of that, which he has mentioned: the first is to do with the armed forces covenant, and the second is the justice review itself.

The armed forces covenant is absolutely well intended, in order to make sure that our armed forces are looked after correctly. In practical terms, this means that regular personnel and their families receive the necessary support when they are moving from one part of the country to the other, whether that be education, housing or welfare. For reserve forces, it means the ability to take time off work given to them by their employers; for veterans, of course, it also means the support that we talk about on

a regular basis, not least in the area of mental health. The bronze, silver and gold accolades, awarded to private companies large and small and public organisations to thank them for what they are doing and encouraging them to do more, are working well indeed. Over 4,000 companies across the nation, and every single local authority, have signed this covenant.

I therefore ask how we will actually enforce this. I appreciate that the Government have pledged that the covenant will become part of the law of the land, but there is no reference in this Bill to any enforcement mechanism for ensuring public bodies are held to account if a member of the armed forces community feels they have not been treated correctly. I made the point slightly earlier that this primary legislation is aimed at local authorities, yet the Minister is saying that we cannot create the obligation to have an armed forces champion. I would like him to show me any elected councillor in the nation who would not support such an amendment, were it to be added to the Bill in Committee. I absolutely believe that every single local authority that has signed up to the covenant will support an obligation to have an armed forces champion, making it much easier to identify who is the single point of contact in order to get that support for veterans, reservists and regular members of the armed forces, and indeed their families as well.

Turning to the issue of service justice, I have already made my points about the court martial and the serious offences, and we will endeavour to pursue those in Committee. I will end by saying that the things we will be concerned with are the things that are missing: the vexatious claims aspect has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). I know the Minister is engaged with that issue, but we need that to be realised in this legislation.

When it comes to supporting this Bill, given that its function is to confirm that we can have a standing army for another five years, there is little prospect of Britain's standing army having to stand down because the Bill does not pass. That is absolutely the case; however, a test for the Committee is how we can advance the Bill, improve it and build on it to make sure we do the best for our armed forces, and make sure that whether a person is a reservist, a regular soldier, part of the family or a veteran, we are there to help them.

6.8 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: This Bill renews our commitment to our armed forces for another five years. As we signal our consent, we should reflect on the hard-won democratic freedoms that enable us to do so, and should recognise that many in the world do not have such liberties. I add my thanks to the members of the armed forces who are currently contributing to our fight against covid, and pay tribute to their service. In Scotland, our healthcare workers will receive a £500 thank you payment; it would be fitting to do likewise for members of the armed forces, and I hope the Minister will join the Scottish National party in calling for that payment.

Unlike the last Bill on the armed forces that we debated, there is nothing controversial in this Bill, and while we will be supporting its progress, that does not mean we are entirely satisfied with what has been presented. While our armed forces comprise some of our most

dedicated and professional public servants, their lack of representation means they have little recourse or opportunity to raise issues of concern. The commitment to the armed forces covenant in the Bill falls far short of what it needs to be and ought to be. According to the Royal British Legion, the Bill can and should go further in strengthening the covenant in law.

The Bill is an opportunity to give power to the covenant, but too many areas fall outwith the scope of the Bill, such as visas for Commonwealth personnel. With the ongoing case of eight Fijian soldiers, it is both unfair and unjust that many of our veterans remain without legal status in the UK. The Bill does not hold the Home Office to account or, indeed, include any provisions to rectify that situation.

On housing, anyone who read last week's National Audit Office report on improving single living accommodation cannot fail to be shocked by the litany of deliberate neglect. Will the Minister confirm whether forces' housing is covered by the Bill? How can we expect local councils to provide veterans and their families with high-quality housing if the MOD cannot do the same for service personnel and their families? When will the Government lead by example?

Many of the veterans and families who contact me do so because of a lack of support from the DWP, but pension issues, including widow's pensions, are out of scope of the Bill. Rectifying the situation that means payments awarded for injury or death as a result of service are treated as normal income for DWP calculations is out of scope of the Bill. In fact, the most pressing and difficult issues for veterans all seem to be out of scope.

The risk is that the Bill, according to the Legion, will create a "two-tier Covenant", under which some matters may be pursued but others are covered only in an annual report. For local authorities, the Bill is supported by a promise of additional funding, which will be key when providing resources. Involved parties only having a duty "to give regard" to personnel and veterans means that there will be a lack of enforcement. The Bill does not put the armed forces covenant properly into law, nor does it guarantee no disadvantage in access to services. It has taken 10 years to get this far; surely we can do better.

The SNP supports a far more comprehensive way of representing the interests of the armed forces. We look to the militaries of Germany, Norway, the USA, Belgium, Australia, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Ireland, which all benefit from armed forces representative bodies. Such a body should be considered to ensure that our personnel can participate in services that cater for their needs. I have heard lazy arguments from the Government Benches that we could not possibly countenance such a body, as it would undermine the chain of command or could encourage strike action. However, we already have such a body in the Police Federation, which does not allow strikes and does not impact on the chain of command, but it gives voice to those it represents.

Such a federation for the armed forces could negotiate terms and conditions, including establishing a clear career progression structure, the expectation of options for flexible career paths, and guarantees on salary, conditions and pensions. It could be an advocate for personnel to have access to housing that is of a decent standard and

[Carol Monaghan]

is appropriate for their personal circumstance. Such an organisation would substantively fulfil the objectives of the covenant. Despite the lazy arguments, I believe the real reason for Government resistance is that it would give our forces and veterans a real voice.

The Scottish Government have taken their own initiatives in a number of areas. On housing, they offer funding from the affordable housing programme to deliver additional homes for disabled ex-service personnel. They have worked with stakeholders to develop a veterans homelessness prevention pathway. On recruitment and employability, the Scottish Government have sought to help personnel by encouraging skills development and putting military experience to use in the civilian world. They have offered service leavers fixed-term appointments in the Scottish Government. On education, Skills Development Scotland has established a pilot to retrain Scottish veterans and to address skills gaps in the nation's cyber-security workforce. On health, the Scottish Government have committed to ensuring that all personnel and veterans can access the best possible care, and they have provided funding to Combat Stress and Legion Scotland for befriending and mental health first aid training.

There is always more we can do, but the UK Government should aim to mirror such examples of good practice. Although the Minister would not commit to armed forces champions in local authorities in England, it is notable that in Scotland every local authority already has a veterans champion.

Finally, getting back to the Bill, our issues lie in two areas: its lack of teeth and its lack of scope. There is no one in this place who does not want to improve our offerings to the armed forces, but without the ability to enforce, this Bill will sadly fall short. That said, we will support the Bill this evening, and we look forward to engaging with it as it progresses through Committee. I hope that this time the Minister will be open to accepting amendments.

6.15 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): By way of a declaration of interests of sorts, my dad is a military historian, so when I was knee-high to a grasshopper, I was talking to veterans and learning about groups of medals. My brother served in the RAF for 18 years, finishing last year. His passing-out ceremony into the ranks, then into a commission years later, continue to be some of the proudest moments of my life. Family stuff aside, thankfully I do not need to be told to be patriotic and support our armed forces, unlike some on the Opposition Benches.

The thing is that our armed forces veterans are everywhere. They are quietly getting on with their day and not shouting about the years of putting themselves in harm's way to protect us. Across Stroud, the valleys and vale, they are serving as councillors and school governors, working with the British Legion and charities and volunteering in our communities. From covid testing to vaccinations, flooding to border controls, our serving armed forces are deployed across the country to help us in addition to their normal day jobs.

I spoke to an Army veteran earlier. He impressed on me how important this Bill is to the armed forces communities. He asked me to support the Minister, not

least given that on the 10th anniversary of our armed forces covenant, we are creating a legal obligation for public bodies. It is a promise by the nation to those who serve or have served, and it is part of a well-deserved thank you, but he reminded me that we cannot rest.

The focus on armed forces personnel is not always thorough and is not always joined up. Even dedicated services do not always recognise the particular experiences of a forces veteran. Tribunals, veterans' support and other bodies do not always function as hoped, and sometimes there are chronic delays, making matters even worse. The Minister is kindly helping me with a wonderful constituent veteran, who gave his entire adult life to the Army family, only to find that he has since spent years battling to be heard on a range of issues. That is why this Bill is so important.

If our public bodies are to ensure that the principle of special provision for service personnel in connection with housing, education and healthcare is to be effective, there must be oversight. I hear what the Minister says about local authorities, and I am pleased to say that Stroud District Council has adopted the covenant and voted to put a councillor in charge of the work. I am however informed that there is no budget behind the role. Given its importance, I would like to see that happen.

As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for strengthening couple relationships and a former family law solicitor, I praise my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and Professor Janet Walker for the superb work that they have done with the Ministry of Defence on the report, "Living in our Shoes". It is not rocket science to work out that couples and families who spend their lives apart due to one person being on tour abroad or move from base to base with children in different schools will struggle more than most and will need help to stop family breakdown. I urge everyone to look at the recommendations of that report.

Finally, a word for our reservists. I received a letter recently from a colonel speaking up for the Gloucestershire Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. He was extremely concerned about the suspension of training, and I share his concern that there are times when reservists should receive more attention. They cannot be turned on and off like a tap, and if they are treated as a non-serious part of the national defence effort, many volunteers will take their energy and commitment elsewhere.

I know the Government care an awful lot about reservists. This Bill amends the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to replace the full-time service commitment and seeks to put them on par with their regular counterparts. I would like to hear more from the Minister about our crucial reservist forces and how training and other aspects of their roles will be treated going forward. Most of all, I think we are getting closer to the Americans with our love for the veterans.

6.19 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate as the proud aunt of a serving Royal Marine Commando. My nephew Joseph is one of thousands of north-east men and women who for generations have made our region one of the top recruitment areas for the forces. We certainly owe them a great debt of gratitude.

The north-east's strong connection to the armed forces is brought home by a number of the excellent armed forces charities based in our region. There are several armed forces charities in North Tyneside alone, and I am honoured to be a parliamentary patron for Forward Assist, an award-winning charity that supports military veterans adjusting to civilian life. It recognised that the needs of women veterans are more often than not hidden, and it established "salute her", the only UK gender-specific support service to offer tri-service trauma-informed mental health therapy and interventions for survivors of in-service sexual abuse. Walking With The Wounded has its regional hub in North Shields and, only last summer, Operation Veteran opened its premises in the town centre, with a coffee shop for the public and, above that, a veterans' centre offering support services and activities for veterans and their families.

The success of those charities in North Tyneside is in no small way due to the local authority's commitment to the armed forces covenant. The council has an armed forces champion, Councillor Gary Bell, who served in the Royal Air Force and ensures that the covenant's aims are considered in all council policies. In 2018, North Tyneside was the first local authority to fund an armed forces officer to strengthen support for the armed forces community across the borough, with a focus on advising and signposting serving and ex-serving personnel to services such as housing, benefits and health. The council's Labour cabinet and our elected Mayor, Norma Redfearn, also approved a scheme to guarantee service personnel, veterans and reservists an interview for vacant posts if they met the requirements. In 2019, the authority was recognised for its outstanding support for the armed forces community when it was awarded the prestigious MOD employer recognition scheme gold award.

Local authorities must do all they can to honour the covenant but, as Labour has pointed out, one of the Bill's weaknesses is that it places a legal responsibility on councils to deliver services such as housing, healthcare and education, but that is not matched by any extra funding from Government. Despite the good work going on in North Tyneside, some very real problems still exist, according to our armed forces champion. Veterans find it hard to access their benefit entitlements and often give up at the first hurdle; there are long waiting lists for access to mental health treatment; and there are not enough decent houses to meet need.

Our armed forces have shown their worth in peace as well as in war: just look at the role they have played during the pandemic. As Councillor Gary Bell said to me, let us get the Bill right and provide those who serve with a promise in law that the state will look after them as a debt of honour. I echo Labour's demand that the Government must go further and deliver the armed forces covenant in full.

6.23 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Let me begin, as a former Armed Forces Minister, by expressing my support for the Bill and what it is trying to achieve, and for the Minister who is carrying it through. Clause 8 strengthens the legislative basis of the armed forces covenant, including its two key principles of no disadvantage for the wider armed forces family and of special treatment, where appropriate, especially for those who have given the most. Those principles were articulated

the Armed Forces Act 2011, but clause 8 gives them much stronger form, especially in encouraging public sector bodies such as local councils, education institutions and the NHS to adhere to them.

Clause 20 affects the ability to claim war pensions of those from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Although that is important, it does little to address the burning injustice of the shameful treatment of those veterans of active service in Northern Ireland who bravely upheld the law against terrorists—both so-called loyalist and republican—for decades as part of Operation Banner. Without their courage and sacrifice, there undoubtedly would never have been a Good Friday agreement in the first place, and we should never forget them.

The Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, have repeatedly promised to introduce legislation to protect those Northern Ireland veterans from vexatious and politically motivated allegations, but still, even now, not even draft legislation has been published. When he stood for the leadership of the Conservative party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) published an open letter in *The Sun* newspaper, on 11 July 2019, that included a "veterans pledge" containing three key commitments.

The first was to

"create an Office of Veterans Affairs within the Cabinet Office".

That has been done. The second was to

"enshrine the Military Covenant into law",

which this Bill does. The third—I quote my right hon. Friend's pledge directly—was:

"New legislation to end repeated and vexatious investigations into historical allegations against our servicemen and women—including in Northern Ireland—to be passed"—

passed—

"before the next General Election."

That is completely unambiguous—it could not be clearer—and the Prime Minister very publicly signed the letter himself. However, over 18 months and a general election later, where is the Bill?

My friends and I in the Veterans' Support Group do not doubt the Prime Minister's sincerity on this; we simply want him to keep his promise. We want action now, not words. That is because some of these men, many of whom are now in their 70s or even their 80s, are being reinvestigated for allegations in relation to which they were previously exonerated, in some cases almost 50 years ago. Some of these men have died, and others are dying, with the sword of Damocles still hanging over them and their families. Unlike some others, our service veterans have no letters of comfort, while the Northern Ireland Office, whose Bill this is supposed to be, continues endlessly to drag its feet for fear of upsetting Sinn Féin. It makes Handforth parish council look efficient.

Tonight, a former leader of the Conservative party, the Chairman of the Defence Committee, the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and two former Armed Forces Ministers to boot, have all made the same call: bring forward the Bill. If everything we have heard this evening about honouring the covenant is true—if we mean it—the Prime Minister urgently needs to knock heads together in Whitehall to get this critical legislation on to the statute book. All we ask is that the Prime Minister fulfils his public solemn promise and thus defends those who defended us.

6.28 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: Just as when I first took part in Armed Forces Bill debates, in 2016, I am afraid there is a feeling of a missed opportunity. While we will be back here tomorrow to talk about the integrated review, it always strikes me as odd that these changes either to the armed forces covenant or to the service justice system, while welcome and worthy, squander the opportunity that a Bill of this scope has to redefine what the armed forces mean for all of us in the 21st century, in the same way as the integrated review seeks to.

I am afraid we are at something of an inflection point with civil-military relations in the history of this political state. The confluence of two contemporary currents—namely, the politicisation of our armed forces by the Government of the day, and the need for armed forces to redefine their role in society—is, for my part, pushing us towards the creation of a discrete military class removed from the society it has vowed to protect, unrepresentative and poorly understood.

How can we better define what the armed forces are for and what they represent in the 21st century? I have spoken many times in the House about my military family, but it is undoubtedly the case that, with a shrinking armed forces and a move away from the overseas operations that defined the cold war, there is a diminishing number of people across these islands with first-hand knowledge of what military life means.

Let us turn to covid. The pandemic is undoubtedly a threat to the economic and health security of all who live in this political state. Those of us who read the MOD's threat assessments and global trend papers know that the military have known that all along, so it is bit of a surprise to see such confusion, particularly among many of those sitting—virtually, at least—on the Government Benches, about what the armed forces' role should be. Over the past year, I have felt myself to be something of a lonely voice in turning the question around: why does there always need to be a military solution to a wide-ranging public health emergency? On several occasions, Government Members have called for the military to take charge of the logistical challenge in some way or another, saying they are happy about the vital role that the military have been playing in support of the civilian uniformed services.

I recognise and am grateful, as we all are, for the service of many on the Government Benches, such as my friend the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), but I cannot help but conclude that the lived experience of those whom I represent and those in my family are increasingly at odds with the vision of service put forward by the Government. I began this speech by talking about fears of the creation of a military class because I see such differences between the way the armed forces are talked about in the House and the experiences of the predominantly working-class people who make up the ranks. These are people for whom the rather abstract way we talk about military justice makes it an impediment to their availing themselves of it, should that be required—people who often find it difficult to make their way through the alphabet soup of the military charity sector to access the rights to which they are entitled and that they should theoretically be given when the Bill is passed.

For many, muddling through is very much part of the charm and the bonds of forces life, but my almost four years with Defence Committees have shown me that an opaque and inconsistent military justice system, and an opaque and inconsistent application of the armed forces covenant, is the logical end point of a system that is in dire need of root-and-branch reform. Ever since the first Armed Forces Bill that I saw in 2016, there has been the assumption that such reform refers to the need to adapt the civilian sphere to the needs of the military—something that continues to baffle me. Why is it that we do not seek to address this imbalance the other way as well, by allowing the members of our armed forces as many rights that they had as civilians as possible?

As I often say, members of our armed forces should have the ability to form an armed forces representative body; the right to a contract that sets out not only their responsibilities as members of the armed forces but the obligations and responsibilities of their employer, the Government, to them; and the guarantee—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to move on now.

6.32 pm

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore.

Our armed forces are, without doubt, one of this country's foremost and most prestigious institutions. They are held in the highest regard throughout the world as a benchmark of military excellence to which other nations aspire. We should never forget the men and women of the armed forces who serve and have served us so well, wherever that is, at home or abroad. Yet again, during the coronavirus outbreak, our armed forces showed that they were able to offer support and professionalism in times of national need.

We owe so much to our armed forces. Their bravery, discipline and professionalism, and unflinching and steadfast loyalty to duty, are all too often tested in the most challenging and varied environments and circumstances. It is critical to ensure that our veterans' healthcare needs are met, so I am delighted that the number of GP practices accredited as veteran friendly has recently more than tripled to over 800. I am also aware that the MOD has recently launched HeadFIT, an important tool to support mental health fitness among the armed forces and to promote the good management of mental health. Speaking about mental health is important, but making sure that support is there for those who need it is critical.

Ensuring that our armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged by their service when accessing key public services is the very least we can do. That is why I welcome the fact that the Bill embeds the armed forces covenant into law. That was a 2019 manifesto commitment that I was delighted to make to my constituents. It introduces a legal duty for the relevant UK public bodies to ensure that our UK armed forces community is fairly treated. From housing to healthcare and from childcare to education and training, our armed forces families face unique challenges, and we must rise up to support them in the way that they support our nation. The Bill is a big step on the way to ensuring that the debt we owe our armed forces is honoured, and I am delighted to support it today.

6.35 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: The story of the selfless actions and incredible bravery of Corporal Sukanaivalu, who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, is but one example of the kind of sacrifices that were made and continue to be made by Commonwealth servicemen and women in our armed forces. It is therefore deeply regrettable that, despite that sacrifice, they are facing shameful treatment when gaining visas and regularising their immigration status. During their service, Commonwealth personnel are exempt from immigration controls, but within 28 days of their discharge they must either apply for some form of leave to remain or return to their country of origin. After serving four years, they are entitled to apply for indefinite leave to remain but must pay the associated costs. As the shadow Secretary of State said, that means that a service leaver with a partner and two children would get a bill just shy of £10,000 to settle in the country that they have risked their life for, right at the moment they are transitioning to civilian life. Without leave to remain, they cannot legally live and work in the UK, claim benefits or access free NHS treatment.

This issue has gained media attention recently following the unsuccessful efforts of eight Fijian British Army veterans to bring legal action against the Government. One of the claimants, Taitusi Ratucaucau, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, was given a bill in the region of £30,000 following an emergency operation after he was deemed ineligible for free NHS care. These veterans may have lost their legal argument, but it is the Government who are now losing the moral one. These men fought for our country and are now living here in limbo, fearing destitution and deportation.

To their credit, the Government have acknowledged that there is a problem and have taken some steps to ameliorate the harm that is being done. The Home Secretary promised me that she was working to correct the situation, and the Veterans Minister has stated his intention to launch a public consultation to introduce a path to citizenship. These measures have my support, but it is time for the Government to stop tinkering and get on with making amends.

To be truly effective, any reforms must address three key areas. First, under current rules, service personnel can apply for indefinite leave to remain after four years, and naturalisation after five. These should be the benchmarks for any fee waiver scheme that is introduced. Secondly, the proposals must also incorporate dependants. Thirdly, the Government must bring forward a plan to help veterans and their families who have already been caught up in this mess. As a show of good faith, the eight veterans involved in that legal action should be granted emergency leave.

Ministers have committed to making the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran. It is a lofty ambition, but one around which I hope we can all unite. However, if the Government want to ensure that their vision is realised, they must as a matter of urgency deliver justice for all our Commonwealth service personnel. We must never forget that we owe these men and women a huge debt. Telling them to pack their bags is not the manner in which to repay them.

6.39 pm

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con) [V]: As a veteran and an advocate for our armed forces, I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate and to recognise this Conservative Government's commitment to make the British military the best in the world and to make Britain the best place to be a veteran. I congratulate the Minister on the significant progress that has been made to improve the lived experiences of veterans and their families. I know that his determination to improve their support is matched by the progress he has made on the armed forces covenant.

This Bill enshrines in law the principles of the armed forces covenant. Local authorities will now need to demonstrate due regard to veterans to ensure that the principles of the covenant are upheld. It places a legal duty on councils to meet veterans' needs, which can now be done in a locally responsive way. Some councils, including Wrexham County Borough Council, have appointed an armed forces champion and are proactive in identifying support services. However, some councils are not so focused, and a requirement in the Bill for councils to appoint a champion would be welcomed.

The scope of the Bill includes housing, health and education. For a veteran living under a devolved Administration, the ownership of these services lies with that Administration—in Wales, with the Welsh Labour Government. However, the Bill does not place a legal duty on the Welsh Government to make them accountable for what they do or do not deliver. The devolved Administrations should be involved, have ownership and be subject to scrutiny on how they support veterans, in line with the legal duty being placed on Welsh local authorities.

There are over 1,800 armed forces charities serving approximately 6.3 million personnel, veterans and families across the UK. A UK-wide charity called Blesma has supported limbless and blinded veterans since world war one. It is quietly doing excellent work. It has highlighted the trouble with veterans receiving timely service when they move between the charitable sector and NHS Wales, specifically around the issue of pain management. Some Welsh veterans find themselves with no other option than to travel from Wales to King Edward VII's Hospital in London in order to receive adequate pain treatment. Surely this is not acceptable.

The Defence Committee currently has a sub-Committee looking at the experiences of women in the military and female veterans. Evidence sessions are running until Easter, and the Secretary of State for Defence has been supportive in allowing us to engage with serving personnel.

I would like to see more women recruited in our armed forces. Many women have a positive military career and recommend it to others, as do I. However, preliminary findings suggest that six out of 10 women who experience in-service harassment, bullying or intimidation, usually of a sexual nature, do not report their complaint because they have no faith in the service complaints system. They feel that it proves counter-productive to their careers and, in some cases, affects the rest of their civilian lives. This needs to change. The service justice system review—the Lyons review—has made a number of recommendations to improve this area, and I am pleased that they have been integrated within the Bill. However, there is still debate on the

[Sarah Atherton]

issues of murder, manslaughter and rape, and I take note of clause 7 on concurrent jurisdictions. I know that Ministers are working hard to address certain issues. I look forward to hearing that kit such as body armour will soon be designed to fit women and that the veteran ID cards are on their way, working on the back of the very successful veterans' railcard.

I support this Bill, which, with the pending integrated review and corresponding defence White Paper, will set out a positive blueprint for our military and veterans, and defence sector, going forward.

6.43 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Government have said that this Bill will help to prevent service personnel and veterans from being disadvantaged when accessing services such as healthcare, education and housing, but again the rhetoric does not match the reality, because clause 8 simply devolves the covenant's responsibilities to local authorities and other public bodies away from the Government, it provides them with zero financial support to do so and simply states that they have a "duty" to give "due regard" to the covenant. I have been in this place long enough to know that every time "duty" and "due regard" are used as a substitute for "must", the result is no real change at all. When services are strapped for cash, they adhere to what they have to do, not what they have to give due regard to. It will again fall to charities and local communities to support their serving personnel and veterans.

There are currently over 2,000 charities specifically aimed at supporting veterans and serving armed forces personnel. This alone is testament to the Government's failures, because those charities are filling a very big gap left by the state. It is they, not the Government, who are providing for our armed forces and veterans, and thank God they are, because without them, the alternative does not bear thinking about.

The Government's record has been abysmal. Just this year, the Royal British Legion highlighted how let down disabled forces felt by the Department for Work and Pensions. In my constituency pre-pandemic, veterans' breakfast mornings were held by local charity Veterans Response on a regular basis. I remember the anger that I felt after repeated conversations with proud veterans, who told me that without this breakfast and local food banks, they would be going hungry. Some spoke about having to rely on charity for basic white goods, clothes and shoes. Veterans are yet another group of people who are not protected from the cruelty of the welfare state under this Government.

Let me turn to the mental health of our forces and veterans. The Defence Committee recently heard from Combat Stress and Help for Heroes that they have not really seen any tangible effect of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, nor an impact from any potential change in resources.

My constituent John Taylor is a nuclear veteran. Like other veterans, he has been repeatedly let down. Mr Taylor, who is now 83 years old, was sent to Maralinga in 1957 as part of Operation Antler, where he was involved in the testing of atomic bombs with no protection

whatever. Along with others, he has long campaigned for proper recognition and compensation to acknowledge the effects that these atomic tests have had on his health and that of other families. Of those 20,000 nuclear veterans, less than 1,000 are believed to be alive now. Time for justice is running out for all of them.

The north-east, including South Shields, has an incredibly proud tradition of being a high recruitment area for our forces. Many families, including my own, are linked to someone who is serving or who has served. We in South Shields always have and always will take care of our forces and our veterans. We will always treat them with the utmost respect and honour that they deserve. I sincerely wish that this Government would do the same.

6.46 pm

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): It is right to point out that what I am about to share is personally very hard for myself and my family, but it is also right for me to share this experience as we discuss this Bill.

As I have said before, I was only 17 when I was shot in training, during a live firing section attack. As the bullet entered my foot, it shattered and blew out the corner of my foot, taking several metatarsals and muscle with it. I was left with a clump of bone fragments and shrapnel—nothing like a working foot. Over the coming month, I had many major operations to try to fix my foot and lower leg. My foot could not be rebuilt, but it did not have to be amputated. My foot was saved, but I had no use of it and was told that my military career was over. In the Army's infinite wisdom, after my foot had been saved they decided to send me to a military hospital to amputate it. It was not an option that I liked. My dad, who died when I was only young, had been in the SAS, so my mum contacted the SAS Regimental Association, which basically said to my regiment, "Give him to us and we'll rehabilitate him."

James Sunderland: I am aware of my hon. Friend's heart-wrenching story; his father would have been very proud of him today. May I quickly ask whether the armed forces covenant would have helped him at that early stage of life?

Stuart Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In the next two minutes, the House will be able to hear what I went through and how the armed forces covenant would have helped me.

The SAS said to my regiment, "Give him to us. We'll rehabilitate him." I spent 10 months being rehabilitated by the SAS. I then returned to my unit, the Royal Green Jackets, and went straight on to the streets of the troubles in Northern Ireland. My foot was still part-paralysed, full of shrapnel and did not function, but I could walk, run and carry out the duties of an infantry soldier—very painfully, but I could do it.

What was getting worse was my head; as my physical aspects were recovering, my mental health was really impacted. In the evenings, I used to relive the time that I got shot and would wake up screaming, covered in sweat. It was hard, but I realised that alcohol subdued the pain and I could escape it for a short period of time. Violence was also a way of releasing the anger that I had inside me. I was on a slippery slope. I enjoyed and often excelled on different operational tours. I was fearless, because I did not care if I died. By that time,

I did not enjoy life and I found ways to get through each day. When back in camp, I was always in trouble because I was always drinking and fighting. Despite all this going on and everybody telling me I had a problem, nobody gave me any support or help.

I needed to change. I was now married with a child, so I left the Army, and continued to work in security and defence in different conflict zones around the world. My foot got worse, and the shrapnel started working its way out, so I went to the MOD and said, “Can you help me?” It told me, “You are not our problem any more.” In the end, I raised the money myself to pay for private treatment to have an operation, or I would have had to walk with a walking stick for the rest of my life. If the Army took this approach to my foot, there was no way it was interested in my mental health. I did not even know where to look. I could not show love to my wife or my children. It was not only my foot that did not feel anything; for everything, I was in a darkest pit, more than most people can imagine.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking incredibly movingly about his experience in the Army and as a veteran. Does he not agree that there must be care for those in service, but also as veterans, for as long as it is necessary to help those who have served their country?

Stuart Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend. I really appreciate everything that is being done, but we have to keep doing more and more, and that is why I am really championing this.

From that pit, my marriage broke down. We separated, and life for me was hell on earth. How did I ever get to this stage? This battle went on in my mind, and for 15 years I fought that battle. I would spend the evening drinking a litre of vodka, in a garage with the light off, trying to get rid of the pain. This was night after night, and in the end I realised, of the country I had fought for, that I had been abandoned by that country and by the people who sent me to those conflicts. I knew how to fight and I was good at it, but I was tired. There was nothing left in me. I went at that stage to take my life, but I could not do it, because I did not want my children to grow up, as I did, without a father. I had to face the reality that I had to live, and I hated the idea of it.

It was in this pit of despair, after many years of fighting that battle, that I found faith in God, and for the first time I had some hope. My wife and I started again, renewed our vows and sought help. For many years, we walked through a recovery of and reconciliation with what was a horrible life. I learned to love my wife, I love my children, and every day I made progress. I thank everybody who stood alongside me during this process. My life could have ended many times. Now I live life to the full, and I really appreciate it.

I want to use that experience to help the people who are going through what I did. When I delivered something similar in my maiden speech, somebody stopped committing suicide in the middle of the night because they had seen what I had said on Facebook, and we need to reach these people. I would never want anybody to go through what we did. We have truly been on a journey from death to life, but it is from this experience that I know this Bill will make changes to people’s lives. Some will say it does not go far enough and some will say it goes

too far, but it is a massive positive step, and I also welcome the campaign the Minister has had to bring this Bill to the House.

6.52 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), with that powerful and very personal contribution to the debate.

This Bill is an opportunity to ensure basic rights, support and care for every member of the armed forces, veterans and their families. I want to address access to mental health services and, in particular, the treatment of addiction in the armed forces and veteran community, where rates are higher than in the general UK population. That should be of no surprise, because the unique demands of life in the military too often include experiences of serious trauma, violence and loss; because the Army, in particular, recruits from deprived working-class communities, where incidences of alcohol and substance misuse are higher; and because, as the charities that work with service families and veterans attest, the culture, on which no judgment is needed, is one where harmful drinking rates are considered normal, vulnerability is considered a weakness and seeking help is seen as failing to meet the demands of service. All of this has to change if we are to see an end to the shameful number of veterans ending up in mental health crisis—homeless, in prison or committing suicide—and it can change. The number using MOD treatment services is alarmingly low, and the majority of veterans enrolled in treatment programmes left service many years earlier, which prompts the question: what more can be done to improve early intervention?

Tom Harrison House in Anfield in my constituency is a residential veteran-specific addiction treatment centre, and I have got to know veterans there and heard their stories and about their struggles to get the support and understanding they need. I have not met one who was referred by, or got the support they required, from the MOD or armed forces. If we truly want to honour these men and women, we can and should use this Bill to guarantee them the mental health services they deserve.

There remains stigma and intolerance towards addiction. For too long, substance misuse has been regarded as a moral affliction—a testament to someone’s character rather than a legitimate health issue. We have to defeat that stigma in order to make progress in society and in the forces. With addiction, the substance of choice is irrelevant: it is a route to escape, the way to cope, or the way to manage mental ill health and past trauma.

Last week, in a written answer, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans stated:

“Drug and alcohol abuse is incompatible with the standards we expect of those who Serve in the Armed Forces.”

I am afraid that such opinions are outdated, ignorant and a roadblock to effective treatment. Regardless of someone’s training or dedication to their duty, mental health disorders and addiction do not discriminate.

This Bill presents a chance to end the zero-tolerance approach, as other professions have rightly done, stop the perverse situation where the act of seeking help could itself lead to dismissal, deliver addiction treatment programmes for those serving in our armed forces, and fund the military-specific addiction treatment services veterans need and deserve.

6.56 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: The Select Committee on the 2011 Bill considered whether the armed forces covenant should be codified and contractualised and, after taking lots of evidence, decided that would be unwise. This Bill continues in that vein but places further duties on public sector deliverers that will be of practical help to the service community, including people I have the honour and privilege to represent.

Like the 2011 Act, the Bill does not create rights, but does reaffirm society's responsibilities. Others have said that the covenant is a contract with country not county, but local councils, schools, NHS trusts and housing associations control things that servicepeople might be disadvantaged in securing by virtue of their service. May I probe the Minister on where this new obligation to have regard to the covenant stands legally—who arbitrates on whether local bodies have discharged the duty placed upon them, and what penalties may ensue if they are judged to have fallen short?

There is increasing public scrutiny of the separateness and differentness of the armed forces. Defence reasonably points out that its distance is necessary, important and enduring by virtue of the extraordinary things its people do. Nevertheless, Defence is not the total institution of even 10 years ago; the trend is for confluence with society at large, and this Bill reflects that.

Justice is done differently in the military. Government are right to have tested that difference with a series of independent reviews, and they have reflected most of the recommendations in clauses 2 to 7 and 11. Servicepeople should not be dealt with any more or less harshly than civilians in relation to the criminal law, either as victims or perpetrators; otherwise the central "no disadvantage" plank of the covenant is merely rhetorical. That is why in the debate on the 2011 Act I said the powers of service police should not be extended unless there is demonstrable service need, and Sir Jon Murphy's recent review appears to share my caution.

The same goes for setting up service structures that are separate from the civilian mainstream. Lyons recommended a new Service Police Complaints Commissioner, which is in the Bill, but it needs to be tested against the obvious alternative: handing the job to the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

There will likely be detailed discussion in Committee and in the other place of the main Lyons recommendation that the MOD has, up to now, declined: that the most serious offences—murder, rape and manslaughter—should go to the civilian courts. We learn that a rape victim's assailant tried at court martial is significantly less likely to be convicted than if the case had been heard in a civilian court. At the very least, that sits uncomfortably with "no disadvantage". Service-necessary difference has to work hard to justify such a divergence of process, outcome and confidence in criminal justice from the civilian mainstream. I know that Ministers have worked really hard on this and considered it extremely carefully. It seems to me that the position adopted in the Bill was finely balanced. We learn that it is already under threat of judicial review.

I welcome the defence serious crime unit proposed in the Bill, which may well help to approximate service justice to the civilian mainstream in very serious cases.

Nevertheless, one wonders where trials for serious crime will end up, if not in 2021 then in 2026 or 2030. Finally, as an active reservist and an ex-regular, may I say how helpful the Bill's extension of the regulars' part-time service opportunity to reservists will be to both individuals and defence?

7 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: Today's debate provides us with a welcome opportunity to pay tribute to our nation's armed forces and their families for the immense sacrifices they make. I would like to echo the sentiments of previous speakers in expressing my wholehearted appreciation for everything that Britain's soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen do to keep our country safe both at home and abroad.

During the pandemic—undoubtedly our darkest hour since the second world war—our armed forces have once again stepped up to protect our communities and keep us safe from covid-19. Service personnel have played a leading role in supporting our health service to deliver mass testing and vaccine deployment. This is the largest peacetime resilience operation in history, and without it, we would undoubtedly be in a much darker place today.

In return, we owe it to our service communities that their hard work and tireless self-sacrifice do not go unrecognised. That means going beyond lofty rhetoric and taking meaningful action to ensure that our armed forces and their families are treated with the dignity and respect they rightly deserve. The Bill provides the Government with the chance to do just that. It represents a historic opportunity to step up support for our armed forces, veterans and their families and to correct some of the profound injustices that they continue to face.

While I applaud everything that local authorities and third sector organisations are doing to support service personnel and veterans, too many are simply not getting the support they need in the critical fields of housing, employment and mental health. Just last week, the National Audit Office found that the Ministry of Defence is failing in its duty to provide service personnel with high-quality subsidised accommodation. Nearly 80,000 people are living in single person accommodation, with less than half satisfied with the quality of their housing—a significant decline on recent years. Whatever happened to homes for heroes?

That is why I am so emphatic in my support for the armed forces covenant. The covenant reflects the immense depth of gratitude that is owed by us all to our armed forces, and it is a matter of deep regret that the Bill fails to implement its promises in full. In fact, on a number of points, the Bill simply does not go far enough. While it would oblige councils and other public bodies to deliver on the principles of the covenant, it fails to address the all-important issue of underfunding. It also does nothing to establish binding national standards that would end once and for all the postcode lottery faced by many veterans and service personnel. I therefore urge the Defence Secretary to go further and ensure that the Bill makes good on the principles of the armed forces covenant and on our country's commitments to serving members of the armed forces, veterans and their families.

7.3 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Printed at the beginning of every annual report on the armed forces covenant made by the Secretary of State for Defence is the following statement:

“The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families.”

Clause 8 places a duty on organisations throughout the UK to give what is termed “due regard” to the main principles of the armed forces covenant. The bodies affected include local authorities, health authorities, education authorities and housing authorities in particular. These principles—the unique obligations and sacrifices by the armed forces, the desirability of removing disadvantages arising from membership or former membership of the armed forces, and the special provision for servicepeople that may be justified by the effects of membership or former membership of the armed forces—already lie on the Secretary of State himself. It is interesting to see, in the short time available, what the reports that he makes every year on the armed forces covenant have said about issues such as the war-damaged, the war-widowed and the war-targeted for repeated reinvestigation.

On the question of the war widows, the issue of the 200 to 260 war widows who lost their war widow’s pension on cohabitation or remarriage has been raised many times by me. In these reports, the Government show again and again that they are well seized of the injustice and, indeed, impropriety of having been unable to restore those pensions to those widows. It is good that the reports show that the Government are persisting in this, and they should persist.

Less attention is given in the reports to the problems arising for so many veterans from having been injured by blast on active service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Something called traumatic brain injury, and in particular the blast variant, has been mentioned only once in the annual reports, yet it has been shown time and again that more attention needs to be paid to it, because the resulting symptoms can sometimes be mistaken for post-traumatic stress disorder and, as a result, gravely incorrect treatment can be given. More attention needs to be paid to that.

On the question of prosecutions, it is fascinating to see successive comments in the Secretary of State’s annual reports, starting with one in 2018 that noted, quite rightly, that

“There is a growing strength of feeling within Parliament and elsewhere that our Service Personnel and Veterans should be afforded greater legal protection from prosecutions related to historical operations than they currently receive.”

Time and again, the Secretary of State makes it perfectly clear that he totally agrees with that. The only point that needs to be expressed, and which cannot be emphasised too strongly to Ministers, who I know are determined to protect our servicemen, is that they must not only protect them from prosecution; they must protect them from vexatious reinvestigation.

7.8 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) [V]: It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who is always worth listening to on these matters.

In referring to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, may I start by thanking the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust for the experience that they have given me on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, where I have seen the resilience, adaptability, dedication and expertise of our servicemen and women? I am really grateful for what has been a fantastic opportunity.

Our armed forces’ primary role is the protection of the realm and of our allies. The threats we face are constantly evolving, and now is not the time to be putting distance between ourselves and countries that share our democratic values. I also pay tribute to the services for their military assistance to civilian authorities. This week in the north-west, we saw military crews supporting the North West Ambulance Service when it was overstretched. I am grateful for that.

In Chester, we have a long history of association with the services, as a military headquarters, as home to the nearby RAF Sealand, as a garrison city and as a sponsor city for HMS Albion. Now we are also home to the University of Chester’s Westminster centre for veteran affairs, led by Professor Alan Finnegan, himself a former colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Professor Finnegan reminds me of the demands that we place on our servicemen and women and how this specifically affects their pensions and the pensions of their families. During a military career, a veteran and his or her family face regular moves, including having to live overseas. In addition, service personnel spend long periods away from their home due to operational tours and training exercises. The longer the soldier serves, the greater the number of moves and the greater the level of separation. As a result, the spouse’s education and employment profile is negatively impacted on and their ability to build a career and a pension is reduced. For the service person, the longer they serve, the better their pension, but when the veteran dies, the spouse is entitled to only 50% of that figure. Service personnel are approximately 90% men, and males tend to die in the UK around four years younger than women, so women generally outlive their partner and have to try to survive on half of the pension. For a veteran on end-of-life care, the knowledge and distress that his death may lead to financial hardship for his wife or partner is clear.

The Prime Minister has said that he wants this to be the best place in the world in which to be a veteran, it should also be, as Professor Finnegan reminds me, the best place in the world in which to be a veteran’s spouse. Providing these elderly women with their husband’s full pension would go a long way to achieving that.

Finally, I would like to talk about the Army in Chester. We are a proud garrison city, but the Government’s plans to close our last remaining barracks—the Dale barracks—are still in place, even if they have been delayed. I am clear that this is based solely on the mistaken view of the land value of the barracks. In other words, it is seen as somewhere easy to sell and make money quickly. The quality of the accommodation is good at the Dale.

[*Christian Matheson*]

It is popular with the servicemen and their families. When we are discussing the importance of retaining our experienced soldiers and the importance of providing them and their families with decent quarters, it seems absurd to sell off one of the best sites. The plan is to move every military site in the north-west to a new super barracks north of Preston. The plan is flawed. As I say, Chester is popular with servicemen and with their families, which is important when considering attrition rates. It also reduces the social and operational footprint of the Army in the region. Chester can serve operationally across the southern part of the north-west, the north Midlands and north-east Wales. I simply float the example that the bomb disposal team based at Chester is required for emergency call-outs. If the explosive ordnance disposal team based at Weeton in Preston had to get down the M6 on a Friday afternoon, I would have to wish them all the luck in trying to do that.

I am calling on the Government to abandon plans to close the Dale barracks, which make no sense other than perhaps the short-term financial gain. I am proud to represent a garrison city with a large ex-services contingent. May that long continue.

7.12 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is absolutely right that military personnel should get special recognition for housing, education and medical treatment. I particularly like clauses 4 to 6 of the Bill, with the powers to rectify mistakes. As an ex-commanding officer, I sometimes had to send people to district court martials when I did not want to. I would have liked to have had some influence on what happened subsequently and this Bill will help that.

In particular, I want to talk about the Service Police Complaints Commission—this is the point of my speech really. I think that is a great idea, and let me give an example of why I feel that way. Just after I left the Army, I was involved in the case of an officer grievously wronged by the service police. His name was Major Milos Stankovic of the Parachute Regiment. He was of Serbian-British background. Members might think that, with a name like that, he would be more Serbian, but, actually, his father fought against Tito in the war and his mother manned an ambulance at El Alamein. He was a liaison officer for me, then Brigadier Andrew Cumming, then General Rose, and then General Smith. For about four years, he was in Bosnia. For his service there and his gallantry, he was awarded an MBE. Then in 1997, when he was a student at the Army staff college, he was arrested by the Ministry of Defence police on what I consider to be a trumped up charge, implying that he had been spying for the Bosnian Serbs. He was isolated and not allowed to talk to any of his friends, and I was interviewed by the MOD police in my office, which was in Mayfair at the time. They tried to bribe me by saying something he had put in his diary against me. I said, “That is totally unacceptable”, and I threw them out of my office.

Stankovic was in limbo for three years. At the end of three years without any support, he resigned his commission. His career had been trashed by the MOD police. There was nobody in the system who could help him. Then the Crown Prosecution Service announced

that there was absolutely no case to answer. He was innocent, but he had lost his career and the chance of advancing in the military. There was no rectification whatsoever and, indeed, to this day they have not returned his war diary, which they used to try to turn me and, I understand, other senior officers such as General Rose against him.

If the Service Police Complaints Commissioner had existed when Milos Stankovic needed help, perhaps he might not have suffered the torment that he went through for three years. I fully support this Bill.

7.16 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab) [V]: It is an honour to follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and to hear his story of Milos Stankovic. It is also an honour to speak in this debate on a Bill that we welcome, but that we believe has limitations and could do more.

In Croydon, our armed forces play a huge part across the community, and I want to begin by thanking them. I pay tribute particularly to the role of reservists, who we all want to see play an even greater role in future. There are five reserve units in Croydon, embedded in our community and playing vital roles to keep us safe, including during these covid times.

The Royal Yeomanry are currently deployed to Operation Cabrit in Estonia and Poland, and we send them our best wishes and our thanks. We have the Corps of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and the Parachute Regiment, with its strong links between Arnhem and Croydon. The Royal Logistics Corps in my constituency has been very active during covid, moving personal protective equipment and ensuring people are safe. The Royal Corps of Signals unit in Croydon actually set up its own manufacturing to produce NHS-grade visors, which it donated to local care homes and the St John Ambulance.

Crucially, every one of our reserve locations has a cadet unit—young people who will thrive on the benefits of being part of the cadets. We only have to look at the evidence from the University of Northampton, which quantified the social value of cadets services: reducing truancy, improving health and qualifications, embedded in our community, vital for our safety and training our young people.

I will touch on the importance of supporting our veterans, who we still so often let down, through the covenant. I know the success of the covenant is a bit of a lottery and the reality does not always match the rhetoric. It is clear that, although everyone has signed up to the covenant, because there are no sanctions, the implementation of it varies. Where local authorities have strong armed forces champions, the covenant has worked best.

Croydon is lucky to have a fantastic armed forces champion in Councillor Toni Letts, an active role model. In Croydon, where the council signed the covenant in 2011, a number of our community groups also ensure that they play their part. We have a variety of local charity partners, such as the Royal British Legion, the Croydon BME forum and Croydon Commitment, which support our serving personnel veterans and their families.

Croydon Council has been recognised for its excellent work, particularly its housing allocation policy, in the Royal British Legion’s “Best Practice Guide to Community Covenants”. It has gone beyond the central Government

guidance on the covenant in a number of ways, including giving serving or former members of the reserve forces the same rights as serving or former members of the armed forces, having nominated housing officers to handle inquiries from the armed forces community and allowing some discretion in ensuring eligibility on the housing register.

I am sure the Government want every part of the country to be as committed to the covenant as Croydon is. That is why we suggest that the Bill should set measurable national standards that would end the postcode lottery, why we want to see the statutory guidance now and why we agree with the service charities that are rightly concerned that the scope of the Bill is too narrow, containing nothing specific on issues such as employment. The scope of the legislation must be wide enough to ensure that all areas of potential disadvantage are addressed, and we know that the wider welfare and healthcare systems let our veterans down too often. All MPs in the House will have spoken to food banks that have provided food for veterans. Wider reform is necessary. The nation's safety, and the safety and wellbeing of those we ask to risk harm on our behalf, should always be the Government's first concern.

7.20 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) [V]: We live in an uncertain world, and given this uncertainty, it is vital that we have a strong military. That is why it was so critical that in November, the Prime Minister announced the biggest programme of investment in British defence since the cold war. So much has changed since the end of that cold war, not least the fact that the threat from our adversaries is no longer confined to the traditional battlefield, but now exists throughout our digital network too.

Just as the threat has evolved, so too must our capabilities for protecting our citizens. That is why the creation of a national cyber-force and a new space command are no longer optional, and why evolving our capability has also led to the growing importance of our reservists to our national defence. I am pleased that this Bill allows for flexible working for our more than 35,000 reserve personnel, allowing reservists—such as those who are trained at the Prince William of Gloucester barracks in Grantham, in my constituency—the opportunity to serve on a full-time or a part-time basis. Making up one sixth of our armed forces personnel, reservists bring specialist outside knowledge, expertise and experience that enriches our military capability. Whether regular or reservist, we should praise everyone who serves our country in uniform.

However, of course, praise is not enough. We must ensure that no veteran or any of their family faces unfair obstacles or discrimination as they enter civilian life after service. That is why the armed forces covenant has been so important over the past 10 years, and I look back with pride on the fact that my home county of Lincolnshire has played a prominent part in its success so far. All of our local authorities are signatories, and South Kesteven District Council has gone even further by appointing a dedicated armed forces champion in Councillor Dean Ward, who is himself a veteran. We also have a wide range of other local organisations that have signed the covenant, such as Grantham College, RecruitME, and Stamford Endowed Schools.

I am confident that with this Bill and this Government, our nation is in safe hands as we seek to protect our country, enhance our capabilities, and honour those who have served this United Kingdom.

7.23 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's important Armed Forces Bill debate. Currently, over 5,000 members of our armed forces are on the frontline battling the coronavirus pandemic, in what has been described as the biggest homeland operation in peacetime. The vaccination roll-out, lateral flow testing site support, and community testing are just some of the 70 different tasks undertaken across the UK by service personnel in response to this deadly virus. My Slough constituents and I are extremely grateful for our armed forces' work during this time. Their commitment to protecting our nation continues to be proven through their invaluable service, further proving the need for the Government to fully commit to the armed forces covenant. This Bill presents a real opportunity—a chance to practise what the Ministry of Defence preaches, and ensure legislation reflects our armed forces covenant.

I support this Bill, but I encourage the Government to widen its scope to ensure that it makes a real difference for our armed forces, veterans and their families. As we know, generally, the covenant covers a pledge that service personnel will not be at any disadvantage compared with civilians with equal circumstances, and that there will be special consideration in specific circumstances—sadly, often due to injury or bereavement—as is right. I am proud to have had family members in the armed forces, and to have had the privilege of being involved in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, meeting inspirational people along the way and learning about their essential roles. Having also served as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and headed up the national Sikh war memorial campaign, I fully appreciate the immense dedication of and sacrifices made by our brave servicemen and women. With service to our nation must come lifelong recognition of those things, but as things stand the promises made to them are not being delivered and it is clear that the Government must do more.

Last year, the Government said that they were “concerned that the current legislation is not enough in itself to ensure the future of the Covenant and the support it offers our Armed Forces Community.”

Yet as the Bill comes to the House today, it is clear that those concerns have not been fully addressed. It also appears as though the Government, as with many other matters, want to outsource their covenant commitments but without giving adequate resources, leaving the service community with a postcode lottery of potential support based on local authority budgets that have already been squeezed by Tory austerity and this pandemic. There are too many barriers to accessing the services people need and these must be addressed rather than allowed to proliferate.

Whether in housing, healthcare or education, there is a serious risk that setting a legal standard below the current voluntary level could mean a race to the bottom. Even the assurances that the flawed investigations process introduced in the overseas operations Bill would be remedied by this Bill have yet to be seen. These are real lives, and real consequences. I am extremely disappointed

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhési*]

that Ministers have not taken the opportunity to go further in improving the support for service protection and access to justice for our service community.

7.27 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Two and a quarter years ago, I attended the armed forces covenant debate in this House and spoke about service family accommodation. There were many warm words said then about the standard of our armed forces, the bravery that they show on a daily basis and the need for us as lawmakers to value them. However, there was very little of legal substance.

I am pleased that we now have the opportunity to speak on a Bill that will finally give the armed forces covenant a firm base in law, but like my colleagues I have deep concerns about the weight of the legislation. As others have said, the phrase “to give due regard” to the principles of the covenant is too vague and does not provide any real legal recourse to the families living in service family accommodation. We need measurable, national standards set at a higher level than the existing voluntary commitments.

In my speech two years ago, I highlighted the deep structural problems caused by the decision in 1996 to sell off 55,000 service family homes on a 999-year lease to Annington Homes. That not only left a black hole in the MOD finances but caused a huge selling off of housing stock to the private sector as well as to desperate local authorities who were under pressure to acquire low-cost social housing to tackle their ever-increasing waiting lists.

Those issues prevail, but today I want to highlight the human impact of the low standards that are common in our accommodation, particularly in respect of cheap outsourcing to Amey, formerly Carillion Amey. In preparation for the debate, my office contacted and spoke with many service families. It is beyond vital that we hear those voices. Our service families have made huge sacrifices in their commitment to our country. Military children are vulnerable to inequalities in health, education, and wellbeing because they move so regularly. The family unit is vulnerable to stresses that most of us are not. Most of us do not have to worry about one parent being absent for weeks or months or sacrifice our own career because of the transient nature of our partner’s. The least that we can provide for these families is dependable adequate housing that is subject to few faults. When problems do occur, we owe it to them to ensure they are dealt with promptly and properly.

We spoke with Rushmoor Borough Councillor Nadia Martin, herself living in an SFA. She has been working for years to highlight these issues and has herself experienced huge problems with Amey, including a poor-quality repair causing injury to her child. She produced a report from a survey she undertook with military families living in SFAs. I am grateful to her for sharing that with me. Sixty-six per cent. of respondents said that the SFA was not in full working order upon march in; 69% said that faults had to be reported at least every quarter; 60% of the contractors do not always turn up; and an astonishing 68% have to call Amey back to redo the same job. That reflects not only the national picture—three in 10 said that they were satisfied with the work done—but countless stories, a couple of which I will relate in the time remaining.

Cathryn, whose husband has been in the Royal Navy for 12 years said:

“It’s very frustrating. I’ve been told a number of times ‘well its cheap housing. should be grateful that you have somewhere to live it’s not meant to be a luxury.’ We don’t expect to live in a castle or in a life of luxury. However I would love to come home from frontline work myself and be able to enjoy relaxing in my bathroom or having a shower without wondering if my boiler works today! I’d love to have the security of coming home and...not have an indoor water feature...every time it rains! We should be entitled to the same as everyone else”.

Another SFA resident, Emma, was scathing:

“We are treated like the lowest of the low, like absolute idiots, made to wait an unreasonable time for fixes, told to live in housing I wouldn’t put my dog in let alone my family. In short there is a nationwide problem with”

service families accommodation.

If I had more time, I could read out many more stories, but I am happy to share those testimonies with the Minister. These families are losing faith in the Government, and in all of us in this House, to help them and improve their situation. They see neighbouring houses sold off to the private sector and their communities lost. They feel as though they are being forced out of SFAs and into the private sector, with all the noted problems that brings. They are seeing their already complicated lives made harder. Is it not time for us to end the scandal of poor service families accommodation and to build, repair and maintain decent service families housing?

7.31 pm

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to be called in this debate on the Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill.

I must declare my interests as a member of the Royal British Legion; my father was a second world war navigator in the RAF; and my most prized possession is my grandfather’s annotated Bible from his time in a prisoner of war camp in the first world war. The debt of gratitude we owe our armed forces is something I never forget.

I will focus my remarks on two aspects of the Bill: clause 8, “Armed forces covenant”; and clause 9, “Reserve forces: flexibility of commitments”. As the previous leader of a council, I always thought that we should pay more than just lip service to the armed forces covenant. We had a named councillor who was our champion. We introduced priority help for housing, and financial incentives for leisure activities. I am pleased that clause 8 strengthens the covenant by imposing a legal duty on authorities, removing the disadvantages arising from either serving or former personnel. That is particularly necessary in the matter of not just housing but education.

We have all heard stories of how the education of the children of serving personnel has been disrupted. Even when families have chosen to stay put, it is not always clear that the school has made every effort to receive the pupil premium that is allocated for children of serving personnel. The silos of the different government authorities are affected. Those authorities have a tendency not to look outside their own boundaries and proactively see how to ensure that the service provided for serving and former personnel is as wide-reaching as possible. I therefore welcome that clause.

On clause 9, like many other MPs, I have had constituents contact me to say that they would like to do more as part of the volunteer force to support the full-time services.

This clause amends the Reserve Forces Act 1996, replacing the full-time service commitment with a new continuous service commitment that can be part-time. That will enable members of the reserve forces to undertake further work in a period of full-time or new part-time service, putting them on a par with their regular counterparts. The clause is an excellent and pragmatic way of enhancing the strength of the regular forces, in particular with specialists, who can do more as part-time volunteer forces.

To finish, I am always struck by the depth of loyalty felt by our volunteer reserve forces. Some have finished as permanent members of the armed services and some have joined as new volunteers. Indeed, we are blessed that so many of our colleagues in both Houses are reservists. That new clause will enable those reservists to do even more for our forces. I have no hesitation in confirming that I will vote for this Bill later and, as my father always says, “We never know when we might need them again.”

7.34 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) [V]: It is an enormous privilege not only to contribute to the debate but to follow the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). As a member of the Defence Committee and, indeed, as the only Northern Ireland parliamentarian contributing to the debate, I think it is important to reflect on Northern Ireland’s role and contribution to our armed forces. Although we make up just less than 3% of the population of the United Kingdom, we contribute far greater not only to our regular forces but to the reserve forces across the United Kingdom, yet at times we have to remind colleagues in Parliament that implementation of the armed forces covenant has not been as smooth in Northern Ireland, where frustrating barriers and, at times, inappropriate political ideology have blocked the full implementation of the covenant. It is in that vein that I wish to contribute to the debate on the covenant provisions in the Armed Forces Bill.

I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence for the fortitude they have shown in recognising that we can do more for veterans who live in Northern Ireland. We should always remember that those veterans who live in Northern Ireland often live in what was their theatre of war. That brings with it added challenges and added complexities. We know—it has been referred to—that our former Health Minister and now Deputy First Minister once wrote to a colleague of mine to say that the armed forces covenant does not apply here. She was wrong, and we have the opportunity here in the Bill to bring forward a statutory duty to have due regard on public bodies throughout the United Kingdom.

I tabled a private Member’s Bill on this issue back in February 2019, and the Democratic Unionist party secured from the Government a commitment in the “New Decade, New Approach” document that we needed such a statutory duty. I am therefore delighted that tonight the Government are bringing forward this commitment and that it is UK-wide, appropriately specifying the bodies involved with the delivery operationally of health, education and housing in the Province of Northern Ireland.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Minister will have the opportunity to reflect on contributions to the debate. I ask him to respond to questions raised by the Royal British Legion on why we have confined the provisions of the Bill to health, education and housing.

Is this not an opportunity to include other aspects such as pensions, employment, social care and immigration issues for those serving from Commonwealth countries? The Secretary of State retains a power in the Bill to introduce further aspects. Should there be a more comprehensive trigger mechanism for introducing such aspects to the Bill and the covenant commitments?

There is no requirement in the Armed Forces Bill for Ministers, whether in Whitehall or devolved institutions, to have due regard. I am keen to hear from the Minister why, when such a due regard clause is present in the Environment Bill, as highlighted by the House of Commons Library, it was not considered appropriate here. Finally, will we see the statutory guidance published before the conclusion of the parliamentary process? That would greatly aid our understanding of the operational impact.

Let us not forget that the Bill is a great stride forward for veterans in this country. I commend the Government for bringing it forward, and I will support them through its passage.

7.38 pm

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: I am very proud to declare my interest in that my partner is currently on overseas deployment with the army, and his mother is the chief executive of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. The Conservative party is the party of the armed forces and the Union, and it is with immense pride that I represent a community of both active and retired service personnel. Brecon and Radnorshire is home to the Infantry Battle School, the Sennybridge training area and, of course, the barracks in Brecon, which is the home of the army in Wales.

Since my election, I have been banging on the door of the Ministry of Defence to get the Secretary of State to change his mind on the decision to close the barracks in 2027. While I have not quite won that battle yet, I am so grateful that the Ministry of Defence last week confirmed that the headquarters of the Army will remain in Brecon, even if the closure goes ahead. That is a huge step forward, and a resounding acknowledgement of the vital work that is carried out in the barracks. I extend my heartfelt thanks to every member of the armed forces based there and all those supporting the coronavirus response.

Ten years ago, we made a promise to those who have served, through the armed forces covenant, that military personnel should never face disadvantage as a result of their military career. It is not enough to recognise serving personnel with medals and good service accommodation; we need to recognise the lifelong sacrifice that serving your country asks of you. This Bill is another step forward in that direction, but I want to highlight one area where I feel that veterans in Wales are being short-changed.

Wales is the only nation in the UK not to have a veterans commissioner—somebody who has the sole focus of supporting our veteran community. Vital public services in Wales are controlled by the Welsh Government and, without a veterans commissioner, the voice of former military personnel in Wales is not being heard. Rather than being used for a photo opportunity to boost the Labour party’s public image, veterans in my constituency want to see a comprehensive approach to veterans’ affairs, focusing on welfare, mental and physical health, education and employment.

[Fay Jones]

This afternoon, I spoke to the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, which is based in my constituency. I know the Minister is working with it as it seeks to close the gap, both in our history and in our recognition of those veterans' service, but I encourage him to consider attending the celebration event it is holding later this year ahead of the 70th anniversary of Operation Hurricane. There are only 2,500 nuclear veterans still with us, and despite it being a little known part of our history, their immense service should be recognised.

Finally, I close with an important point: we must never forget that we would not have a military without military families. Navy wives, soldiers' husbands and RAF children have all paid a price they themselves never incurred—something I have come to learn very keenly in the past six months. The armed forces covenant should wrap its arms around every military family and ensure that gaps in coverage are ironed out at every level. I commend the Minister for his dedication in bringing this Bill to the House, and I hope he will join me in ensuring that veterans in Wales get the same level of support from the Welsh Government that he is willing to offer their comrades in England.

7.42 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Armed Forces Bill fulfils the legal responsibility on the MOD to update the Armed Forces Act every five years, but it of course does much more. First, it honours the recommendations of the Lyons review, several of which I argued for as a serving officer. It delivers what the armed forces want, and it shows that the MOD is supportive of them. It delivers, too, on a commitment made in the 2019 manifesto to bring the armed forces covenant into statute and fulfil a long-standing promise to our service community. The Bill also shows that in this post-Brexit era, the British Government are able to pass laws that may have been more difficult under the EU. Our service justice system has long been in the sights of the EU courts, and the MOD has done well to preserve it for the good and benefit of our armed forces.

No doubt the legislation will get attacked for what it is not, but from experience the Bill is a good one. The technical term for it is “no-brainer”, and I will be supporting the Government today. At its simplest level, the legislation provides the framework for the excellent work conducted for many years by councils and health and education providers across the UK, and I pay my own tribute to the many councils and armed forces champions who have done so much. Why not legislate, too, to establish armed forces champions in law? Having reinforced the covenant myself for so many years, not least among our brilliant champions in Surrey and Berkshire, I can say that with complete confidence.

Moving on to the clauses, the Armed Forces Act operates on the basis of beyond reasonable doubt, so it is entirely correct that under clauses 4 to 7, commanding officers in courts martial are provided with a means of rectifying errors of judgment. To be worthy of their pre-eminence, the ability to admonish or even overturn outcomes, notably when new evidence comes to light, is welcome.

Bob Stewart: I thank my good friend for giving way. He was a commanding officer, as I was, and will have sent people to courts martial when he did not really want to.

The Bill brings in the ability for commanding officers to give their men and women additional support when they have to send them to a court martial, and will mean they can involve themselves more in the court martial by saying, for example, “Please can this man or woman come back to my unit rather than be discharged from the service, because they are a good person?”.

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend for his intervention and agree completely. It is really important that commanding officers have some input into the service-law process, not only by providing mitigation and character references but by influencing court outcomes. The ability for soldiers to continue to serve, on the recommendation of the commanding officer, is really important.

Clause 8, which brings the armed forces covenant into statute, is long overdue. I welcome the clarification that provisions for housing, health and education will be mandated in law. Further guidance on exactly what councils will be asked to do will be welcome. I would also welcome confirmation of when the Secretary of State might present his annual report on the covenant at the Dispatch Box.

On clause 9, I welcome the increased flexibility that will be available to our reserve forces through the provisions on the new continuous service engagement. Part-time work rightly augments full-time work.

On clauses 10 and 11, I agree that the MOD wishes to speed up the complaints process, but I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to remain cognisant of just how busy most senior officers are. I welcome the creation of the new Service Police Complaints Commissioner, for all the reasons we heard earlier from my good and hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), as long as a mechanism is built in to ensure that clearly vexatious complaints are filtered out early. That needs to happen for all service complaints: the chain of command must have the ability to filter them amount if they are clearly vexatious.

Lastly, I really welcome the enhanced powers given to commanding officers and courts martial in clauses 13 to 17. Not only is it right that the service justice system can now preside over offences that previously could be heard only in a civil court, but as a former commanding officer I am positively salivating at the prospect of deprivation orders. The proceeds of or means of executing crime can now be confiscated from errant soldiers—what a brilliant way, perhaps, to offset the costs of the regimental Christmas party.

The Bill reflects what our armed forces have asked for. It brings them up to date with what they need and I will vote for it.

7.47 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the members of our armed forces for the work that they do.

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans said in the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill Committee that the Government would bring forward legislation in this Bill that would make it illegal to discriminate against servicemen and women and veterans; this Bill does nothing of the sort. It says that a limited number of public bodies, outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), must have “due regard” to “the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages”.

The way some people talk, we would think the covenant was invented 10 years ago. It was not: it originated in the 2008 Command Paper published by Bob Ainsworth when he was Minister of State for Defence. We then implemented measures on no disadvantage, and the welfare pathway, with pilots in Hampshire, Wigan and Kent, implemented things like the armed forces champions. I am pleased that the coalition Government took on board those things, which have then gone forward. We produced a Green Paper in 2009 to get those parts of the covenant into law, and it was sad that the Government opposed that in respect of the 2011 Bill. The proposals in this Bill are limited and we need to make sure we strengthen them in Committee.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned an important omission from the Bill: Northern Ireland veterans, about whom I feel very strongly, like the right hon. Gentleman. This is the Bill in which to put that injustice right, but it is not there. Promises have been made and they need to be kept. The Bill should have done that. No doubt veterans will be pleased that their great, great-grandfathers who committed buggery 200 years ago will be given a pardon, but then they will ask the question, “Well why aren’t we being looked at in this Bill?” I therefore urge the Government to bring forward a proposal in the Bill for that.

The other area is the whole issue of investigations, which came up in the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill. Reinvestigations are clearly an issue in relation to Northern Ireland, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said. On 20 October, the Minister told the Public Bill Committee:

“We will see more stuff on investigations in the Armed Forces Bill.”—[*Official Report, Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Public Bill Committee*, 20 October 2020; c. 220.]

However, there is nothing in this Bill about investigations and it needs to be there.

The other issue we need address is pay, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) raised, because the armed forces cannot go on strike and rely on the Armed Forces Pay Review Body to fight on their behalf. I was proud that the last Labour Government implemented that every year—this Government have not done that—but I would like to see that in the Bill.

There are many things in this Bill, around housing and other issues, that need to be improved. We need a co-operative approach, but I very much doubt that will happen, given the Minister’s attitude and approach to the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill. I have served on, I think, every Armed Forces Bill for the last 20 years, and I am sure he will be delighted to know that I will also be on this Bill Committee, pressing on the points in the Bill that need to be improved. However, if he takes the same attitude as he did to the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Public Bill Committee, we will not get very far. I urge the Secretary of State to take on board what my right hon. Friend for Wentworth and Dearne said: there are things in the Bill that can be improved to actually make sure that life for both servicemen and women, and veterans is improved.

7.51 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for all his work in introducing this Armed Forces Bill, and also thank him and my right

hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for their work over many years on the armed forces covenant.

The Minister will not remember, but he and I made our maiden speeches in the same debate. His contribution was powerful, talking about his time in Afghanistan and how he was in this place to change things for veterans and the armed forces. It was impactful at the time, and I am pleased that he has had the opportunity to follow his dreams and put that into reality. This is a start, but I know there is much more to do, and I hope we will continue to improve the offer for those in the armed forces and those who have left.

During my time away from this House, I took on a public appointment role as chair of the south-east region for the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee, which was set up 100 years ago, in 1921. Its original aim was to help armed forces widows with their pension claims. It has branched out into helping veterans and their families in a number of areas, including informally monitoring the armed forces covenant. I was able to see that at first hand and how the covenant works on the ground.

I cover four councils: Hampshire County Council, and Winchester, East Hampshire and Havant Councils, all of which have armed forces champions and good procedures in place to support armed forces personnel and their families. We are lucky. Not every council is the same, so this Bill is much welcomed. However, I hope we can find the right way of monitoring how each council adopts and puts in place the education, housing and health requirements for their local armed forces personnel. We need to be clear on what it entitles them to and to hold each council to account when they fail to support our brave servicemen and women. The Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee is already in place and is UK-wide. It is in a perfect position to have an important role in monitoring the armed forces covenant. I hope that the MOD will put its role on a statutory basis, as the eyes and the ears on the ground for this purpose.

My other point is that complaints have been taking far too long to settle, to the extent that many people do not think it is worth complaining. The armed forces must not be frightened of complaints. An open and transparent organisation is a much happier one. Complaints must be taken seriously and dealt with quickly. Again, my time at the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee has shown that this is not always the case, and it is causing mental health issues, which affect not only the person concerned, but their families too. That is why I welcome the service justice system clauses, but urge that once the complainant has put in their complaint to appeal, the service should respond equally quickly. It would be good if the same six-week limit also applied to the response time from whichever authority has received the complaint. I hope that the Minister has considered that.

I look forward to the passage of this Bill and I will be supporting it.

7.54 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: It is probably prudent for me to remind the Chamber that one of my children is a serving officer in the armed forces.

[*Jamie Stone*]

Like the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), through the armed forces parliamentary scheme I have learned a great deal about the education of armed forces personnel. I also recognise the excellent contribution that our service personnel are making to fighting the pandemic and want to express my personal thanks to the Secretary of State for several exchanges we have had in recent times about armed forces personnel coming to help Scotland, which has been lagging behind in the vaccination roll-out; I am grateful to him for that.

The armed forces covenant is about making sure that no service personnel past or present are disadvantaged in society compared with those in other walks of life or other citizens. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and several other Members asked why the duty is being extended only to local government and not a little further into some of the devolved institutions or, indeed, some of the ministerial functions of Her Majesty's Government.

The Highland Council, of which I was formerly a member, has a joint armed forces champions system. It is shared between Councillor Major Carolyn Caddick, who is also honorary colonel of the 1st Battalion Highlanders Army Cadet Force, and Councillor Major Roddy Balfour, who once upon a time was my company commander. I should imagine the House would probably be quite interested in what he might have to say about the service record of Private Stone some years ago—and I suspect he might also quite enjoy telling the House about that. I have an agreement with them that I will take back to them what is proposed tonight and as the Bill progresses through Parliament in order to see how we might improve it. As armed forces champions, Councillors Caddick and Balfour know probably better than anyone where the gaps are, and I hope to relay that information back to the House and am grateful to them for agreeing to do this.

I want to make two short points before concluding. First, it has been raised with me that we are the only country in Europe, NATO and indeed among permanent membership of the UN Security Council that has this 16-year-old system, and that perhaps we should be looking at a slightly different system in future, perhaps an armed forces education offer for 16 to 17-year-olds with an option to enlist at 18.

Finally, I absolutely associate myself with the remarks made about our excellent services personnel from the Commonwealth. It is wretched that after four years they can apply and that, as has been pointed out, a family of four will have to pay almost £10,000. That is deeply unfair and we owe it to them to put it right.

7.57 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con) [V]: It gives me great pleasure to take part in this debate, and I want to pay particular tribute to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans who, along with the Secretary of State, has steered this Bill with a marvellous passion; he is a true advocate of whom all Members, especially on this side of the House, can be very proud. I also refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone); he alluded to the armed forces parliamentary scheme, on which I have served for two years, and I pay particular tribute to Lieutenant Colonel Longbottom MBE who I think can be personally singled out for helping to improve the quality of this debate, along with the scheme more broadly.

This is truly an historic moment; these debates have taken place every five years since 1689, after the Bill of Rights made it necessary for us to have them and a Bill every five years in order to have armed forces. I take particular pleasure in participating in the debate this year, from Montgomeryshire, with the armed forces deployed across our country supporting the effort against the pandemic.

I welcome many measures in the Bill, but I want to highlight a few of them, including the service justice system, introduced in 2006, with updates and reviews since 2017. I very much welcome the independent Service Police Complaints Commissioner established by the Bill, to ensure that there is an independent route for redress. I also welcome the clearer guidance for prosecutors on the way that service personnel are handled in the United Kingdom.

As a Government Member, I very much welcome the armed forces covenant being enshrined in law. That was in our manifesto, and we welcome it wholeheartedly. I welcome particularly the focus on healthcare, housing and education. As somebody who served on a local authority, I pay tribute to the 6,000 organisations that have signed up to the covenant since 2011. I look forward to the Secretary of State's update on the covenant and, particularly, how the Bill will help to advance it. We have seen the strong provisions on wraparound childcare and the pilots on service family accommodation. Through the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have, like other Members, talked to members of our armed forces about how these provisions help.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) commented on the need for the devolved Administrations to step up, particularly in Wales. I echo the call for a veterans commissioner. Many of the levers in the Bill would be improved in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A veterans commissioner would give the power to push veterans' causes, and I would like to work with Russell George, my Member of the Senedd for Montgomeryshire, to ensure that that happens.

I pay tribute to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire. As she said, we have recently been told that the headquarters of the Army will remain in Brecon, in Powys—in the heart of Wales. I very much welcome that, and I will continue to champion, alongside her, that role in Brecon and Powys. I look forward to expressing my support for the Bill through the Deputy Chief Whip.

8.1 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I speak today on behalf of everyone across my constituency who has served in, supported or contributed to the fantastic work of our armed forces both here at home and abroad. I pay particular tribute to the incredible work of our armed forces in supporting frontline efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic here in Wales and across the UK. From working with our fantastic ambulance

crews to supporting the delivery of the vaccine, I know that our armed forces are playing a unique and crucial role in the fight against this virus.

Last Friday, we celebrated the 80th birthday of the Air Training Corps. As a very proud former air cadet, I would like to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the fantastic work of our cadet forces in my local authority of Rhondda Cynon Taf and that of our armed forces champion, Councillor Maureen Webber. Our city council was one of the first local authorities in Wales to sign up to the armed forces covenant, and it was also the first Welsh local authority to receive the Ministry of Defence's prestigious gold award in recognition of the council's approach to supporting the armed forces community locally.

Only a year ago, I attended an event in my very first weeks as a Member of the House that sought to commemorate the remarkable work of the Welsh regiments. While I am sad not to be able to speak to those serving in the Welsh Guards, the Royal Welsh and the 1st the Queen's Dragoon Guards in person, I recognise now more than ever the vital role that they provide to the armed forces and to the Union.

With that in mind, I welcome the Bill, as it represents a real and meaningful opportunity to improve the lives of our armed forces, veterans and their families. But the Government's focus remains too narrow, and the Bill, as currently drafted, is a missed opportunity to deliver real and meaningful improvements for our service communities. I welcome the provision in the Bill to allow flexible working for Army reservists, allowing them the opportunity to serve on a part-time basis if they so choose. That is an all-important step to enable people with a wide range of responsibilities and from a wider range of backgrounds than ever before to consider joining the reserves.

However, there are still important questions that must be answered. First, why have the Government stopped short of adopting the recommendation in the Lyons review that civilian courts should have jurisdiction in matters of murder, rape and serious sexual offences committed in the UK? Surely if justice is to be done in such serious cases, independence is crucial.

I have a number of comments to make on clause 8. The armed forces covenant represents a binding moral commitment between the Government and service communities, guaranteeing them and their families the respect and fair treatment that their service has earned. The Bill would place a legal responsibility on services such as local authorities to deliver on the covenant in areas of housing, healthcare and education, but in setting this legal standard—below existing voluntary commitments in some areas—the Minister and his Government risk creating a race to the bottom on services for our forces and their communities. This Government talk a good game about support, but are again failing to deliver the real change that service personnel and their families are crying out for.

All three principal Welsh regiments have a long and distinguished history, and retain a significant footprint across Wales, but in recent years we have sadly seen a significant decline in the number of Ministry of Defence personnel in Wales. Now, with key Welsh regiments located across the UK, our Welsh soldiers with families and partners in Wales find the cost of commuting

prohibitive. We need to do all we can to encourage new recruits to join, rather than creating barriers to prevent new starters. As ever, this Government are light on details. They have promised statutory guidance to support local authorities and other bodies in meeting these responsibilities, but I have real concerns that the Government are trying to outsource their responsibility without providing the clarity and funding to local authorities to deliver these all-important services.

Beyond housing, healthcare and education, the scope of the Bill is simply too narrow. I urge the Minister to take action now to provide meaningful change to armed forces personnel, veterans and their families here in Pontypridd and across the UK by widening the scope of the Bill and providing the necessary funding to put these words directly into action.

8.6 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, just a week after my family welcomed to the world my new great-niece Lyla Mae, who was born on a British military base in Cyprus.

Our armed forces, and especially our veterans, do not always get the recognition and support that they deserve. I welcome the Government reaffirming their commitment to the armed forces covenant. The armed forces and veterans community in Hartlepool forms a strong support network, and many want to see all parties in this House working together constructively to get the best from this Bill for our forces and to ensure that the covenant is delivered in full. However, as was evidenced in the review of the service justice system by Shaun Lyons, there are gaps in the system that have left some of our servicemen and women, and some of our veterans, high and dry.

Many Members will be familiar with the case of my constituent Mr Richard Lee, who is a veteran of the King's Royal Hussars. His daughter, Katrice, went missing from the NAAFI in Paderborn, Germany in 1981. The search for Katrice is ongoing, and Richard and his family have lived with the impact of her disappearance for almost 40 years. A review of the investigation carried out by the Royal Military Police established that failures and mistakes were made in the initial investigation. Richard and his family have sought answers from the RMP to explain these failures, but no clear answers have been brought forward. At a meeting that I attended with Richard in January, the RMP told us that with no new leads, the investigation—known as Operation Bute—would essentially be mothballed.

Although Richard and I were grateful for the intervention of the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), during his time at the Ministry of Defence, we are little further forward from where we were a few years ago. I therefore welcome the establishment of an independent complaints commissioner for the service police to deliver for those who have been let down or failed by the service police. This is essential. My constituent should not have had to wait 30 years for even the simplest of apologies.

In my view, Shaun Lyons's report and recommendations should be endorsed by this House and implemented in full. That includes the handling of serious criminal proceedings in civilian criminal courts, which are, according to the review, better placed to deal with serious criminal acts. I, along with many other Members, would very much like to hear why this recommendation

[Mike Hill]

from Shaun Lyons's report was omitted from the Bill when other recommendations have been accepted and endorsed. A serious crime is still a serious crime, whether it is committed in or out of uniform, and our justice system should reflect that, as other NATO and Commonwealth allied armed forces have done already. The Government must provide a credible explanation for this omission and ensure that parity and fairness for victims and defendants are at the heart of the armed forces justice system, as well as the civilian system.

8.9 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: It is an honour to speak in this important armed forces debate. One of the most significant changes that the Bill makes is to enshrine the armed forces covenant in law. The covenant was put in place 10 years ago to protect and support those who serve us as members of the armed forces. It is our very promise as a nation to ensure that those who serve or have served, and their families, are treated fairly.

Our armed forces defend and protect us, and we often think of them in the context of conflict overseas. However, in the past few months, we have seen at first hand the value of our servicemen and women, as they have built our field hospitals, carried out covid-19 testing and been part of the team vaccinating those at greatest risk. Only last week, a further 96 military personnel were detached to help with the vaccine roll-out here in Wales. Members of RAF Valley in my constituency of Ynys Môn have been assisting with testing across the UK.

Since its inception, over 6,000 businesses have signed up to the covenant, including Isle of Anglesey County Council and Môn Maintenance Services here in Holyhead, but once the Bill becomes legislation, the principles of the covenant will become a legal requirement. That will ensure equal treatment for our serving armed forces and for those who have left the services.

Our local poppy appeal co-ordinator, Piers Beeland, reminded me recently, "Don't forget the veterans. We may be suffering genuine PTSD, long covid or live in substandard accommodation. Most of us were prepared not just to serve but to put our lives at risk to save others." On behalf of all current and former servicemen and women, and particularly those in my constituency of Ynys Môn, I thank the Government for their work to create a country in which they can expect fair and equal treatment.

8.11 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab) [V]: May I add my thanks to all our armed forces personnel for everything they do and for the sacrifices they make to keep the rest of us safe? Today, I want to touch on what we can do to keep them safe outside their jobs and when they leave service.

A King's College London study five years ago confirmed that there were in excess of 70,000 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, mid-pandemic, that number will likely be higher, and there just are not the resources to get adequate help for all those individuals. The sad statistics show the blunt reality of what our service personnel face. More Falklands veterans have committed

suicide since the conflict than those who lost their lives during it. Mental health issues can affect service personnel and veterans just as much as physical injuries, leading to unemployment, homelessness, social deprivation and addiction.

Gambling addiction is on the increase in the armed forces. One of the biggest challenges that those in the military face is getting that addiction recognised, as it is often seen as a weakness. To date, it is an offence to borrow money in the forces, but we know from the volume of case studies that every single week, disordered gamblers borrow money and will steal to fund their addiction. For those leaving service, it is evident that there is a worrying lack of support. Many find the transition back to civilian life very difficult, and mental health support falls far short, resulting in veterans being up to four times more likely than any other cohort to experience gambling-related harm.

With over 10,000 veterans thought to be suffering from or at risk of gambling-related harm, more really needs to be done to address the causes. Gambling becomes a coping mechanism, blocking out the anxiety, the anger and the loneliness. With an industry ready to prey on these vulnerable individuals, we need far better regulation to provide protection, if not through this Bill, then through other forms of legislation.

In addition to this Bill, I ask the Defence Secretary to please work with his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport as they undertake the long-awaited gambling review. That review is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure that gambling legislation in this country is both robust and future-proof. We have to get this right. The review needs to look not just at the industry but at its customers, and particularly at the cohorts, such as our armed forces and veterans, who are most vulnerable to harm.

Our armed forces serve to protect all of us and, in turn, it is our duty to protect them from associated public and mental health issues, of which addiction is one of the most isolating. We owe a real, huge debt of gratitude to every serving member of our armed forces and to all veterans, but thanks and accolades are not enough. There is so much more we need to be doing to help these heroes, many of whom suffer in silence after witnessing things the rest of us cannot even imagine. In truth, the scope of this Bill is too limited. Social care, pensions, compensation, employment and benefits are all excluded and, while it focuses on healthcare, mental health is, sadly, lacking. The answer to what we are doing with this Bill is, sadly, very little.

8.15 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) [V]: The defence of the realm is the first duty of Government, and this Bill provides the legal basis for the armed forces. In three years advising the then Defence Secretary, I had the privilege to meet many servicemen and women, at home and around the world, helping to keep Britain safe, and it is in recognition of their unique sacrifices and obligations that we have the armed forces covenant. This pledge from the nation commits to remove disadvantages arising from being a serving or former member of the armed forces, and to consider whether special provision is justified for those who have given the most.

I warmly welcome the new duty on public bodies to have due regard to the covenant's principles when providing housing, education and healthcare. This is a very good start, and reflects the areas the Secretary of State is required to report on. However, the annual report typically covers a broader range of issues where personnel face disadvantage, including family life, criminal justice and employment, so I encourage the Government to broaden the scope in due course. I hope the Minister will reassure the Royal British Legion and others that the case for adding further areas is under active review.

While I support public bodies being subject to this duty, the Bill would be improved by including Government Departments, which determine policy, allocate resource or provide national guidance to other delivery bodies. I know how committed Ministers are to the armed forces covenant, and a legal duty would help ensure that it is properly adhered to. Clearly, it also needs to be enforceable, and judicial review is expensive and slow, so it would be helpful to clarify that the local government and social care ombudsman and other bodies will have responsibilities for enforcement.

During my time at the Ministry of Defence, I helped instigate the service justice review in 2017. I did so because I was concerned about the transparency, fairness and efficiency of the system and the impact on service personnel who have been let down. The Government have rightly accepted many of Shaun Lyons's proposals to improve the system. However, I am concerned that they have not accepted his first recommendation that court martial jurisdiction should no longer include murder, manslaughter and rape when offences are committed in the UK, except with the consent of the Attorney General. That is the approach that other countries have adopted, including Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People and Veterans for the discussion we have had on this issue, and I do think it would be helpful to send a clear message from the House that, as a general principle, civilian authority should take precedence for investigating and prosecuting those offences in the UK. This is about giving victims confidence to come forward, and also about public confidence. Another important step to improve confidence are the changes to bring the court martial system into line with the Crown court by introducing qualified majority voting where there are six lay members.

Finally, I was pleased to work on measures to enable part-time working for our armed forces. This Bill will allow reservists to benefit from the same flexible working provisions that regulars have to undertake full-time or part-time service. Churchill called reservists "twice the citizen", and this is very much a welcome move. Our armed forces represent the best of us, and I am pleased to support the Bill, which will strengthen our commitment to their service.

8.19 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: I want to tell the story of my constituent Maurillia Simpson, who has served in the Royal Logistic Corps for 13 years. Maurillia grew up in Trinidad. Becoming a British soldier was a dream of hers from the age of seven after she saw Her Majesty the Queen on a state visit.

During her third tour in Iraq, Maurillia was a corporal and a section leader on the frontline. Her position was hit by a mortar, everything went black and silent, and she did not know if she was dead or alive, buried under deep rubble. During the hours in that darkness, a song her mother used to sing to her as a child came to her, and she started to sing it as a form of comfort and as a way of trying to tell her family that she loved them.

It took 20 hours to get Maurillia out from under that rubble and into hospital. She survived, but it was not the end of her troubles. In 2010, while preparing for a tour in Afghanistan, Maurillia was in a traffic accident that ruptured her left leg, and it had to be completely rebuilt. She was left with a disability and still needs surgery to improve her mobility and reduce the pain.

In 2013, despite being on a waiting list for surgery and having no other home to go to, Maurillia was invalidated out of the Army, ending her 13 years of service against her will. She was told she would be looked after; told to wait. She is a soldier; she followed instructions. She waited alone, not knowing who to turn to—and it got worse. After a year spent sleeping on her cousin's sofa or in her car, Maurillia had a visit, out of the blue, from a sergeant major, not to offer the support she clearly needed but to demote her. There were two weeks to appeal but she was just about to go finally into hospital for surgery and she did not understand the system. Losing her rank had a huge impact on Maurillia: on her mental health and on her financial security. If the covenant means anything, it should mean a guarantee that no one is abandoned like she was.

The duties in this Bill for health, education, housing and local government could help to ensure that more support is available, but the reality of the story, it seems to me, is that the MOD failed Maurillia, even though the covenant has been in force since 2012. How many more veterans has the Ministry failed in this way? How can we improve the Bill to ensure that no one else is failed? At the moment, the covenant offer sometimes allows an outsourcing of responsibility from the MOD to our underfunded councils and our public services. But the Ministry passes the buck without passing the bucks, and that has to change, because the covenant must become a true guarantee of support for veterans. We owe that to Maurillia; we owe it to so many others.

8.22 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: Hull and the East Riding have always been popular recruitment areas for the armed forces, so the whole of the UK owes our local veterans and armed forces community a huge debt. Labour's Hull City Council takes this debt and these obligations very seriously. Hull Labour understands the need to increase local knowledge and awareness of how the armed forces community's requirements may differ from those of civilians, how service can affect access to public services, and the benefits of creating greater consideration of their specific needs in the provision of those services.

Because of this, Labour's Hull City Council has already embedded much of the covenant into its systems and practices, and its efforts have been recognised with the award of gold employer standard, as it has demonstrated due regard through its initiatives. For example, reference to the covenant is linked into existing equality protected

[Emma Hardy]

characteristics, and veteran status is included in all questionnaires circulated through the council's people power surveys. Reference to valuing our armed forces community is included as a social cause in the council's commissioning process, and dedicated reference to the covenant is included in a section of the schools admission guidance.

To help to ensure awareness among council staff when dealing with veterans, Hull Labour has designated armed forces champions in the council's customer service centres. Hull City Council has made training available for all members of staff, and this training is mandatory for housing staff. To ensure oversight and accountability, the council has in place an elected armed forces champion and a senior office lead for the authority. An armed forces covenant officer is already employed to further ensure that the council adheres to its duty.

Labour's Hull City Council supports and maintains strong links with the veterans community hub, which I am proud to have situated in my own constituency of Hull West and Hessle. The hub provides specialist support for veterans, including money and employment advice. The council's relationship with the service has been recognised as an example of best practice. We are also very fortunate to have active local charities and breakfast groups such as Hull 4 Heroes and the Hull Veterans Support Centre. The council also leads the armed forces forum, which is well attended by charities and statutory services, including the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Health and Wellbeing Alliance, which, as one of its core outcomes, is improving outcomes for veterans.

Labour's Hull City Council's commitment to the veterans of Hull cannot be doubted. Despite the huge cuts to its budgets imposed by successive Conservative Administrations since 2010—now standing at £120 million a year less—it continues to put veterans' welfare front and centre. However, the impact on resources of embedding the new statutory covenant legislation cannot be ignored by the Government, who are creating that legislation and requirement. Veterans are facing increasingly complex issues, and the services they need are in high demand from all quarters of society. I know that Labour will play its full part in improving this legislation by pushing to include measurable national standards for the covenant, equality of treatment for all British armed forces veterans, regardless of country of birth, and Lyons' recommendation that civilian courts have jurisdiction in the matters of murder, rape and serious sexual offences. I look forward to seeing this Bill proceed through Parliament.

Veterans deserve the support that this legislation is intended to provide, but the fact is that there is no additional funding to allow local authorities to deliver on its expectation. Like many councils up and down the country, Hull City Council is actively engaged in providing that support our veterans need. It must now be given the means to continue to do so.

8.26 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Let me declare my own family interests, not least those going back multiple generations: my father and uncles who served with the Royal Corps of Signals and Royal Navy; cousins who bravely served in Iraq,

Afghanistan, Bosnia and more; my grandfather in the 1st Airborne Division taken prisoner of war at Arnhem; and my great-grandparents who served in the artillery and the King's Own Scottish Borderers on the Western Front.

I am hugely proud of the strong constituency connections with our armed forces in Cardiff South and Penarth, not least our Welsh family of regiments: the Welsh Guards; the Royal Welsh and the Queen's Dragoon Guards. We also have the brand new HMS Cambria training facility, MOD St Athan, which was previously RAF St Athan, and our amazing veterans organisations locally, including the Welsh Veterans Partnership, Woody's Lodge and many others.

I am proud to have witnessed at first hand our incredible forces worldwide from Afghanistan to Canada, and from Norway to Cyprus, and I thank the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust for the incredible insights that it has offered.

There have been some excellent speeches today. In particular, I want to commend my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) and for West Ham (Ms Brown), and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) for his brave and rightly challenging speech. I am pleased by the cross-party and constructive approach taken by most Members today, many of whom I have been proud to work with through the all-party group for the armed forces. It is vital that those who serve us know that they have support from all corners of this House. I therefore take some issue with a small minority today who have tried to imply otherwise. That does our serving forces and veterans no good. There should never be a monopoly on patriotism or pride in our armed forces. We all, regardless of political party, owe them so much. Critical is the example shown by the remarkable work in response to covid-19, including in Wales, where our armed forces, working with Governments of all political colours across the UK, are showing the strength of working together across this Union. Our Welsh First Minister, Mark Drakeford, spoke proudly this week of the work of our UK armed forces in supporting the vaccine efforts, our NHS, and logistics among so much else.

There have been powerful links between Wales and the armed forces over hundreds of years. One of my most recent visits before these difficult times was with the Royal Welsh on Salisbury Plain, where I was driven around in a Warrior by a fantastic Royal Welsh soldier, who also happened to be a Fijian. As we have heard today, there is a proud tradition of Commonwealth soldiers serving in our armed forces, especially the Army. There are particularly strong links with some countries such as Fiji in Wales. On many visits, I have met personnel from the Caribbean, Africa, the South Pacific, Canada, and Australia. Then, of course, there are the remarkable Gurkhas, who I was holed up with under simulated attack at the infantry training centre in Catterick. They serve alongside us and for us, as have so many for so many generations, with the same bravery, determination and professionalism as anyone else. They serve alongside us and for us, as have so many for so many generations, with the same bravery, determination and professionalism as anyone else. With recent issues in recruitment, they have become even more critical to our forces, in some cases comprising well over 10% of an individual unit.

Yet we are letting them down. I have been appalled to hear of Fijian veterans who have been left destitute, homeless and without adequate food, relying on veterans' organisations and regimental associations. What on earth is happening on discharge, and where are the support and resettlement processes? The issues around visas for settlement of family, travel for compassionate leave, other administrative issues, separated families and so many others have rightly been exposed. The Ministry of Defence needs to get a grip on the issue, undertake a root and branch reform, do the right thing by those who serve us from across the Commonwealth and ensure that we treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve for the service they have given us.

Lastly, I refer to clause 18 of the Bill, regarding historical injustices against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender service personnel of the past—people who, simply because of their sexual orientation, were prosecuted and punished. I praise Lord Cashman, Lord Lexden and all those involved, but there is still a series of historical injustices, including to lesbians who served and who were often discharged under provisions such as “services no longer required”. We need to do the right thing by all those people who were wrongly persecuted for their sexuality or gender identity, and judge them on their bravery and professionalism, not on those characteristics.

8.31 pm

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty).

We owe our armed forces personnel and veterans and their families an enormous debt of gratitude for their selfless actions to help keep our country safe. Our armed forces are exceptional people who work in unique circumstances, and they deserve our very best in terms of support. It is only this Conservative Government that will give our troops the full support they need. It was not so long ago that some on the Opposition Benches were toying with abolishing the Army; I am so very pleased that that has been abandoned and now we are all working together.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank our servicemen and women personally. I have seen first-hand their commitment and hard work during the covid pandemic. I have seen just how efficiently they assisted the delivery of the roll-out of testing for covid in Matlock in my constituency, and how important they have been in assisting with the vaccination programme. Quite literally, we owe many lives to them, and I thank them.

I thank my former unit, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (Princess Royal's Volunteer Corps), who have also been assisting ably in the covid pandemic. I would also like, in some small way this evening, to convey the heartfelt values of support for our servicemen and women and the understated, proud patriotism that has been held by so many ordinary people in the United Kingdom since the second world war—many of whom have now sadly died, some indeed having passed away in this recent pandemic.

Moving on to the armed forces covenant, I am so very pleased that this Bill delivers the manifesto commitment to our service people and veterans by, for the first time ever, creating a legal obligation for certain public bodies

to have due regard to the armed forces covenant. No matter where our armed forces and their families are in the Union, they will receive the same level of consideration for their specific needs from local public bodies in relation to housing, healthcare and education. Those issues are of prime importance to our serving and former members of the armed forces and their families.

This Bill represents a significant milestone in that journey. The duty it will place on public bodies is really important. From my work at the Bar and within the care system I have seen many tragic cases where veterans have not had their needs met in housing, education and mental health provision, and I see how that affects not only the serviceman or woman, but the wider family, including through suicide and domestic violence.

Since my election, I have raised at ministerial level the issue of suicide, and I will continue to do so. I want to continue this work, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) for his moving contribution. I have witnessed in my legal work families facing the difficulties he faced. This Bill will help such families, and I thank the Government for that.

Since my election in 2019, I have been hugely impressed by the support of the British people for service personnel. Locally, in Derbyshire Dales, I have had the pleasure of seeing the hard work undertaken by the Ashbourne Ex-Servicemen's Club, and I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to them.

8.34 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: I would like to start by paying tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore on behalf of the people of Stockport. Sir Tom sadly passed away last week, but he represented the best of Britain and gave joy to millions of us during the lowest points of the crisis. He served with distinction during the second world war, and as we debate the Bill, I would like to thank Captain Sir Tom and all the armed forces for their service, not least during this covid pandemic when their efforts have further helped to keep our country safe.

As well as keeping our citizens safe, the armed forces also help to pull our communities together. For example, in my constituency, I would also like to give a special mention to Army veteran Peter Millns of the Stockport branch of the Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Clubs. I had the wonderful opportunity to visit the club in March last year and meet the incredible people such as Peter who give their time to help run the club and provide such a worthy service. Peter is an inspirational individual. He is the driving force behind my local branch, helping to create a close-knit community for Stockport veterans. Peter is not unique, though. Liz Murray from the Stockport branch of the Royal British Legion also does so much to support our veteran community in the town. The help that the likes of Liz and Peter give to armed forces personnel past and present is vital, and it is never more important than at times like these, which are particularly challenging and can place an even greater burden on our veterans.

Voluntary organisations are amazing, but it should not be left to them to make up the shortfall in Government support. Too often, the armed forces covenant is not upheld and the promises made do not match the reality experienced by our service communities, from substandard

[Navendu Mishra]

housing to veterans' mental health and social care. Just last week, a scathing report by the National Audit Office revealed that tens of thousands of troops live in "substandard accommodation" while the Ministry of Defence refuses to pay for £1.5 billion pounds worth of repairs and half the rooms in MOD barracks would fail to meet current building regulations. That is no way to treat those who have put their lives on the line to keep our country safe.

The Armed Forces Bill places a legal responsibility on councils to deliver on the covenant in the areas of housing, healthcare and education, but without providing any extra funding to do so. That commitment is even harder to keep when the likes of my local authority, Stockport Council, have not only faced repeated cuts and austerity for more than a decade but now face a shortfall of millions after the Government failed to deliver on their promise to fully fund local authorities for the cost of covid-19 and keeping the people of Stockport safe. A fair financial settlement for our local authorities is the only way that the likes of our serving and veteran armed forces personnel can continue to receive the support they deserve.

Indeed, it is only right that our armed forces, veterans and their families do not continue to experience any disadvantage when accessing services, as we have seen most recently on the housing issue. The sad reality, though, is that too many still face barriers to accessing the support they need. That is why this Government must go further and deliver the armed forces covenant in full. To ensure that that happens, this Bill should set measurable, national standards that would once and for all end the postcode lottery on the armed forces covenant.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Anthony Mangnall, I must inform the House that the wind-ups will start at 9.40 with Stephen Morgan, followed by Ben Wallace at 9.50. The question will then be put at 10 o'clock, and I apologise in advance to those Members who may not get in.

8.37 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak on this Bill, and I would like to start by congratulating the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). He has been assiduous in helping my constituents—veterans and those who are currently serving—with mental health issues and with housing issues, and I thank him for everything that he has done. Today should be a moment for us all to reflect on the hard work that he has put in to the Bill, and into the armed forces covenant to get it where it is. He should rightly be proud.

I am proud to have in my constituency the Britannia Royal Naval College, and I cannot talk enough about it. Last year, I was proud to attend the passing-out parade as ratings and officers were, for the first time ever, able to graduate as they went off into the Royal Navy. I thought then, as I think now, about the future that they will have in the armed forces and what they will have when they retire, become veterans and serve in other occupations, and about what we must do to support those who so bravely put their lives on the line to protect our borders and to push our interests overseas.

I hope that today is an opportunity for us to reflect on the fact that we are matching action with words, that we are delivering on our promise to our armed forces and that this will be the start of the many promising steps that we can deliver to those who serve our country.

This is a historic moment, as the Minister has already said, and I welcome the fact that the Bill updates the Armed Forces Act 2006 and that it provides an update to the service justice system, ensuring a fair and effective route to justice. However, I would specifically like to pay attention to the armed forces covenant, which, as I have already said, has been championed so well by the Minister. It is covered in clause 8. We are doing this not just because we have a duty to those servicemen and not just because a focus group tells us to be patriotic, but because this is the right thing for us to do. I come from a military family. My uncle served in the Welsh Guards, and my father was a Green Jacket for his entire career, so I understand what it is like to be in a military family: the requirement to move at the last minute, the onerous stresses of the job that go with it, and the impact that they can place on a family. As such, the fact that this Bill focuses and delivers on the defence transition services that help people move from the military into the private sector, provides flexibility for reservists, and recognises the need to support our veterans and servicemen through education, healthcare and employment are all steps that we should rightly be proud of.

However, we must also recognise that this is a job that will never be finished. It will always require this House, and Members from across this House, to work together to find ways in which we can improve housing and address the mental health issues that are so likely to arise from conflict and crises. These are all welcome steps, but what we must learn for now is that we must improve access to mental health care. With a rural constituency, I know how hard it often is for veterans to access mental health services, so it is particularly welcome to see that the Government's HeadFIT scheme, launched in April last year, has had such a positive impact, and that 800 GP practices are now recognised as veteran-friendly. I hope that is something we are going to see delivered again and again and improved upon, and that the Minister will come back to the House to provide an update on the progress of these steps.

This is not just about our determination to create the best armed forces in the world; it is about providing support that lasts from when a person joins the service, through their service, and during their careers afterwards. We have that duty. I welcome the steps that the Minister has taken through this Bill, and I welcome this Bill overall.

8.41 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab) [V]: I would like to start by paying tribute to our armed forces for everything their personnel have done and continue to do, including in our ongoing battle against coronavirus. I would also like to pay tribute to Labour-led South Tyneside Council in my constituency of Jarrow, where earlier this month, a motion was passed unanimously outlining the council's support for Commonwealth veterans.

I support the aims of this Bill. However, in its current form, it does not put the armed forces covenant properly into law, to ensure that the long-term failings in the military justice system are put right. As evidenced by

the Government's annual reports, 10 years of the covenant's operation have shown that the issues the armed forces community face are far-reaching, including health, housing, employment, pensions, compensation, social care, education, criminal justice and immigration. This legislation should include all those broader issues, so it is disappointing that the Bill as introduced covers only certain aspects of health, housing and education.

There is nothing in the Bill to address the long-standing issues around criminal and civil justice for our veterans. How can the Ministry of Defence provide duty of care oversight for service personnel in the service discipline system when it is responsible for investigating, charging and prosecuting them? One of my constituents, Gavin Brearley, has a complaint against the Royal Navy that goes back many years. During his last year of service with the Royal Navy, Gavin was in a hit and run that left him with long-term injuries. He received no rehabilitation and was not medically discharged. His service complaints have never received a satisfactory outcome, and his main concern is that an independent complaints procedure has never been available to him. Various service charities are concerned that the scope of the Bill is too narrow, containing nothing specific on issues such as compensation. The scope of the legislation must be wide enough to ensure that all areas of potential disadvantage for veterans such as Gavin are addressed.

Additionally, the Armed Forces Bill does not address what many regard as the injustice of the income requirement that can prevent Commonwealth veterans who have served in our armed forces from living here with their families. A change to the immigration rules for veterans and their immediate families would have been a tangible gesture of gratitude to the brave Commonwealth nations men and women who served in our armed forces. This is a huge missed opportunity in the Bill, and being granted citizenship should not come with having to pay extortionate fees. The Government must treat all veterans with the respect they deserve. Leaving them in a state of bureaucratic limbo for years is both shameful and immoral.

8.45 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Bill and especially the way in which it further incorporates the armed forces covenant into law. I am proud to have two RAF bases in my constituency: RAF Halton, which is primarily a training base; and RAF High Wycombe, which is the home of Air Command and will soon be the home of space command. I pay tribute to all service personnel at Halton and Wycombe and, indeed, those serving everywhere in the UK and worldwide. It is absolutely right that they and their families should be treated fairly and with respect, wherever they are asked to live and work.

Given my experience in the civilian criminal justice system prior to my election—specifically 12 years as a magistrate and a time on the Sentencing Council—I shall concentrate my remarks on changes to the service justice system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my interest centres on concurrence between the two systems. I take the view that if an offence is committed by a member of the armed forces in the UK, and that offence is not directly linked to military conduct or the maintenance of good order and discipline, the defendant, witnesses and victims should be afforded the same broad principles and rights of justice as if the offence had been committed by a civilian. I am pleased to see that there are several

clauses in the Bill that aim to achieve exactly that, as a result of the implementation of recommendations from the review by His Honour Judge Lyons. Notably, these include allowing more junior ranks to sit on a court martial board and permitting only one dissenting voice majority decisions at courts martial rather than the current system, which requires just a simple majority. I am also very pleased to see the introduction of a power to rectify mistakes, which reflects the system in the civilian criminal justice system.

One area that gives me cause for concern, however, is the rejection of Judge Lyons's first recommendation, which was that unless the Attorney General decides otherwise, the offences of murder, manslaughter and rape should be investigated and prosecuted in the civilian system, not investigated by the service police and prosecuted at court martial. These, after all, represent the most serious offences, and it is imperative that they should be handled in a way that will ensure confidence from all participants in the justice process, especially victims as well as the general public.

Those offences were not subject to the service justice system prior to 2006, so following the Lyons recommendation would not undermine a long-standing precedent. Indeed, Judge Lyons's report states that in many other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, offences that are so serious in nature are dealt with in the civilian system unless an exemption is granted by the Director of Public Prosecutions in the case of Australia or the Attorney-General in the case of New Zealand. The intention in the Bill is instead to require the Director of Service Prosecutions and the Director of Public Prosecutions to agree a protocol to determine whether civilian or service jurisdiction apply in cases of murder, manslaughter and rape. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister expanded on the principles that will guide this protocol.

I am absolutely sure that, like me, the Minister wishes justice to be done and to be seen to be done when serious offences are committed, on those rare occasions, by service personnel in the UK. I feel confident that the added information I seek will provide crucial reassurance that will further strengthen this excellent Bill.

8.49 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: I am rightly proud of the UK's armed forces, which are respected around the world for their professionalism and their expertise. Although my own experience is limited to being a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I am proud to say that my nephew is a serving soldier.

That professionalism has been seen once again in this past year, from battling floods across the UK and collapsing dams in Yorkshire to the health pandemic, bringing the forces' expertise in logistics and capacity to support the Government. With the evidence of the value of those forces so fresh in our minds, it seems obvious for the Government to use this moment to make a clear and meaningful statement to improve the day-to-day lives of our forces personnel, our veterans and their families. That is what Labour believes, and what I believe.

Something is clearly not working. Having met several veterans in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, I can vouch for the challenges that they face. For example,

[*Matt Western*]

soldier C came to me in 2018, in a surgery visit. His eyes betrayed his traumatic situation. I want to focus on some of the issues that came to light in that conversation with soldier C and in others. Although the covenant will provide some focus on healthcare, housing and education, it could go much further.

As charities such as the Royal British Legion have highlighted—and as we in the Labour party believe—the fact that the covenant contains little to address important issues such as employment demonstrates that the Bill is too narrow. If the Government are serious about improving the level of service for members of the armed forces community, they need to address substandard housing, veterans' mental health and social care. The promises made in the covenant often do not match the reality experienced by our service communities.

Let me start with housing. I have seen with my own eyes, and heard about at first hand, the dreadful state of accommodation on visits to MOD sites with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Of course, there is little choice for most personnel on our bases; it is not like they can head off and lodge somewhere else if it is not up to scratch.

Just last week, the National Audit Office released a report concluding that thousands of armed forces personnel are living in substandard accommodation. Some 80,000 people are occupying single living accommodation blocks—that is half the armed forces—and, of those, the National Audit Office found that more than a third, or 36%, were living in poorer-grade accommodation, while almost 2,400 were in housing considered to be of such bad quality that they were not even charged any rent.

The report said that the Ministry of Defence was failing in its commitment to provide high-quality subsidised housing, with a £1.5 billion backlog of repairs, following decades of underinvestment. The failure of the Government to provide sufficient housing for veterans—as we saw in the case of soldier C—is underlined by the Royal British Legion statistics showing that between 3% and 6% of homeless people have an armed forces background. This Government talk the talk, but do not walk the walk.

When it comes to mental health, recent King's College London and Forces in Mind Trust research found that veterans are at greater risk of mental health disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol misuse when compared with the general population. Yet a Defence Committee report reveals that less than 0.007% of the annual NHS budget is spent on mental health services specifically for veterans, despite the traumatic experiences they have suffered. Among the difficulties reported by veterans to the Royal British Legion's survey was the failure of benefits officials to understand post-traumatic stress disorder when carrying out and scoring health assessments for disability benefits. Also, of course, it is so hard for veterans to find work in civvy street.

The Bill goes some way to address the issues facing our forces through the covenant, but so much more could have been done. Let us not forget that the armed forces are there to defend the realm and to keep us secure, and that many—as we commemorate every November—have made the ultimate sacrifice. We should safeguard them and provide for them as we would wish to be provided for.

8.53 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I am delighted to have been called to speak in this debate. Approving the continuation of the armed forces is one of our solemn duties in this House. They allow us as a country to sleep soundly at night, in the knowledge that a world-class organisation stands ready to defend us and our allies 24/7. In the past 12 months, we have seen the incredible reliance we have on the armed forces here in the UK, too. Without their expertise and manpower, we would not be where we are today in the fight against covid-19 and in the roll-out of the vaccine.

This legislation does not only renew our armed forces for another five years; it goes much further. It delivers on another manifesto promise to back our veterans and our active personnel properly. We have already established the Office for Veterans' Affairs, ably led by the Minister. We introduced the railcard for veterans. We introduced legislation to end vexatious claims against our serving and former personnel. Through this legislation, we will enshrine the military covenant further into law. I thank Ministers and the Secretary of State for all their work to protect our armed forces.

The reason we need this legislation is that the support provided to veterans by local authorities is inconsistent at best. Although it might be excellent in some towns and cities, particularly those with long and deep histories of armed forces garrisons, in other areas it is lacking. The Bill will help to fix that gap by finally putting into law the obligation that authorities have to ensure that, on housing, education and healthcare, we stand by those who served our country. In doing this, let us encourage local authorities and public bodies to think about how the ecosystem of support that exists can be better integrated. Hundreds of charities and community groups do incredible work in all these areas. The Bill should be the catalyst we need to bring all that together and, rather than replacing activity, co-ordinate and enhance it, with the public, private and third sectors all working together for our former and current members of the armed forces. There are still too many instances of public bodies, local authorities and charities competing for funding, which means that they do not always work together even where that is in the best interests of veterans.

I believe that every area should have an armed forces champion, but if we cannot mandate that, let us give guidance on it and best practice, because even in those areas where that role exists, it is not always what we need it to be. It can be someone who shows the leadership needed to pull all the services together and act as a central point of contact. We should all be incredibly proud of this legislation, which demonstrates our enduring commitment to the armed forces and the whole family.

8.56 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: It is an honour to speak in the debate. Many in the House will know that I have a great deal of respect for our armed services personnel, who have put themselves in harm's way and made the ultimate sacrifice to protect all of us here the UK. We owe them so much. As the Member for Coventry North West, I am proud to have several army reserve centres in my constituency including at Westfield House on Radford Road with the Signal Regiment and the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers to name a few. I am here because I stand

behind our armed forces in totality. I recognise their ongoing efforts to make our country safe, and today I want to pay tribute to them in particular for the frontline work they have undertaken to help us during the pandemic.

The Bill is a good start, and I welcome it, but the work is far from over. To truly honour our service personnel, we must build on it. Not to do so would be a disservice to our armed forces personnel, veterans and their families. The armed forces covenant presents a binding moral commitment between the Government and the service community to ensure that men and women and their families get the respect and fair treatment they have earned through their service to our country. It is imperative that the Government deliver on the covenant in full, but the Bill as it stands is a bark without a bite. The Government cannot talk up commitments to our service personnel and not provide concrete action to match it. As it stands, we are already letting them down with substandard housing and a lack of service provision for mental health and social care. The Bill provides the perfect opportunity for us to do more.

The Government state in the Bill that public bodies should give “due regard” to the principles of the covenant, but that is too ambiguous. If the Bill is passed with such ambiguous language, there is a real threat that our service personnel will not see positive change in their day-to-day life. It will be business as usual, and we will continue to see things such as a high homelessness rate among our veterans.

The Bill places a legal responsibility on local authorities to deliver on the covenant in housing, healthcare and education without providing them with any additional funding to do so. If the Government intend to outsource responsibility for delivering on the covenant for our armed forces, I hope they will provide local authorities with the funding needed to make that a reality.

Our servicemen and women—those currently serving—and veterans deserve better, and so do their families. I want to see our armed forces, veterans and their families fully supported, but there are still too many barriers that stop them from accessing key service and support. The Government need to do more by our service personnel, and the one way they can do so is by going further in the Bill and delivering the armed forces covenant in full.

8.59 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, may I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) for his incredibly brave speech?

This Bill enables our exceptional armed forces to exist and delivers our manifesto commitment and the vision of my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People and Veterans. It is a testament to his commitment to the armed forces and veterans, using this as an opportunity to enshrine the armed forces covenant in law.

While our brave men and women are supported in their service around the globe, that has not always been the case back at home. They have often had to join the back of the queue. Thankfully, that wrong will, in part, be righted by the Bill. Sadly, in recent days I have heard from a number of veterans in Darlington who have in the past failed to receive adequate access to local services upon their discharge. They have felt forgotten, their

needs not understood. One of my constituents, who left the services in 2007, having served in Iraq and Northern Ireland, put it to me:

“The armed forces spend months and thousands of pounds turning civilians into soldiers. However, once leaving, it’s a quick handshake and off you pop.”

In preparing for tonight’s debate, I took the opportunity to discuss the Bill with my former colleague in legal practice, Michael Menzies-Baird, or Mingus to his pals. Mingus served as a soldier in Northern Ireland, defusing bombs, before retraining to become a litigation solicitor. He now gives up his free time to serve SSAFA, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association. Mingus said to me:

“Enshrining the armed forces covenant in law is solely about fairness. The armed forces are sent worldwide whenever the nation requires us to serve, to give everything, putting our lives on the line to protect the UK. I was very lucky, but many of my colleagues have either not returned, done so with disabilities or suffer with PTSD having witnessed the horrors of war. They just want to be treated fairly and to have their efforts recognised—a little helping hand, rather than being ignored, which it has felt they have been for many, many years.”

I have also met Councillor Brian Jones, Darlington’s armed forces ambassador. He warmly welcomes the obligations that will be placed on local authorities. As he said, it is to do the right thing.

The Bill is welcomed by the armed forces community in Darlington precisely because it enshrines the armed forces covenant in law, ensuring protection and fair treatment for our armed forces community and imposing a legal duty on UK public bodies and local authorities to have due regard to the principles of the covenant, ensuring that armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged because of or by their service when accessing key public services.

This Bill builds on the Government’s investment in the welfare of our armed forces and honours our manifesto pledge. I look forward to supporting the Bill this evening and continuing our commitment to those who serve as we work to protect those who have put their lives on the line to protect us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, Peter. You took less than four minutes. Everybody remaining on the call list is a Government Member. While we will keep the time limit at four minutes, if Members are able to speak for less than four minutes, they will be helping those lower down the call list. I call Andrew Bowie.

9.2 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) [V]: There is a challenge I hope to meet, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not often that the professionalism and adaptability of our men and women of the armed forces are witnessed up close by the British people. Occasionally we see our armed forces step in to support communities suffering natural disasters. For example, I remember from my youth the Green Goddesses being deployed during the 2002 fire service strike. Thankfully, however, in our country the occasions when we see armed service personnel deployed on our streets are few and far between. Far more often, the skills and determination of our soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen are seen overseas.

[Andrew Bowie]

This year has been very different. Since this awful pandemic hit Britain, we have seen the very best of the Royal Navy, the British Army and the Royal Air Force here at home. The enemy may not be the traditional kind; we are not asking our troops to face foreign combatants. Nevertheless, it is an enemy that we must defeat, and that is why it is right that the skills of our armed forces are at the forefront of this battle.

As of 5 February 2021, some 5,000 military personnel were committed to assist with 69 open requests for covid-19 military aid to civilian authorities. Around 14,000 personnel are on standby as part of the winter preparedness package. Here in Scotland, we have seen 115 military personnel, including soldiers from the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, help to set up and operate vaccination centres, including just down the road from where I am speaking, where they have worked with the amazing people at NHS Grampian to deliver a vaccination centre at the P&J Live arena in Aberdeen. From assisting in planning with the devolved Administrations to supporting our NHS on the ground and running testing centres, our armed forces are the tip of the spear of our attack on coronavirus. When we beat it, as we will, it will be in no small part due to the professionalism and dedication of our men and women in uniform.

Our armed forces have done all that while continuing to defend and protect the British interest and that of our allies in Afghanistan, the Baltics, Belize, Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, the Falklands, Iceland, Germany, Gibraltar, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, the Red sea, the Gulf, the south Atlantic and the Antarctic, and across the north Atlantic and Mediterranean, while maintaining our continuous at-sea deterrent for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, every year since 1965, with the RAF now monitoring space. That is why it is apt that the debate on this Bill is scheduled for today and in this year. The Bill's primary purpose is to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006, update and improve the service justice system and, importantly, deliver the Government's commitment to enshrine the armed forces covenant in law.

I am proud to represent Aberdeenshire: last year, my local authority, Aberdeenshire Council, was awarded the Ministry of Defence employer recognition scheme gold award. Much of the work was driven by Aberdeenshire veterans champion, Conservative councillor and deputy provost Ron McKail, himself a veteran.

On reserves, briefly, I welcome the new continuous service commitment, which will enable members of the reserve forces to volunteer to undertake a period of full-time or part-time service. That is a positive step, but in welcoming this Government support for our reserve forces I must raise the concerns of those in my constituency who currently serve in the Royal Naval Reserve, who saw the service suspended at the tail end of last year. Drill nights, training weekends and two-week training has been paused and those serving feel let down, with some in my constituency describing the decision as a real kick in the teeth. We must support our reserves properly and ensure that those serving know that they are full, valued members of our armed forces family and are not easily pushed aside, as many feel they have been at this time. I look forward to April, when the pause will end, and hope it never happens again.

The debate on the issues covered in the Bill will go on in Committee and beyond, but it is right that tonight the House seems to be coming together and that we acknowledge and understand that, as the covenant says, those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society that they serve with their lives.

9.7 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I speak on this important Bill as the daughter of a veteran, the founder of a charity that supports vulnerable veterans, and an early signatory of the armed forces covenant. I want to concentrate on the covenant element.

My late father Eric served in the Royal Artillery in world war two. When war broke out he was 17, a young man from Birmingham who had never travelled beyond the midlands. He saw active service in Iraq and Sicily before landing on Gold beach on D-day, crossing northern France and being part of the liberation of Brussels. My father was only 23 when the war ended, yet it defined him for the rest of his life.

Nowadays, we recognise the mental health challenges of those who have experienced trauma on the frontline and understand the difficulties faced by some in making the transition to civvy street. The armed forces covenant recognises that those who serve in the armed forces, whether regular or reserve, and those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared with other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Such core principles go to the very heart of our values in Stoke-on-Trent: our recognition of, gratitude for and respect for our veterans runs through our veins.

I am sure the Minister will want to join me in congratulating Stoke City football club on its outstanding achievement as the first English football club to be awarded gold in the employer recognition scheme. In 2019, the club hosted a regional employer conference to promote the covenant and encourage small businesses to sign up. Many businesses in Stoke-on-Trent have stepped up to support our veterans, and 15 have been awarded the gold, silver or bronze award in the national employer recognition scheme.

The Bill will ensure that local authorities such as Stoke-on-Trent City Council now have a statutory responsibility to underpin their voluntary covenant commitment, but a big problem remains: we simply do not know how many veterans there are in our area. As a result, many may be unintentionally disadvantaged. Of the 1,900 people currently on the housing register in Stoke-on-Trent, just eight are known to be veterans, yet SSAFA estimates that approximately 47,000 veterans live in Staffordshire. The absence of this information might mean that access to funding from veterans charities for adaptations to properties for veterans with disabilities is denied. I therefore welcome the commitment from the Minister for Defence People and Veterans to improving the data available on veterans, as well as the Government's £300-million investment in the development of an enhanced veterans portal. However, in the meantime we must encourage veterans to identify themselves to local authorities, particularly during next year's national census.

In conclusion, for my father's generation, the shared experience of a world war meant a shared understanding of service to our country. Now, a new understanding is

vital to support those who are struggling. That is why I welcome the covenant commitment in this legislation and the ongoing work to strengthen the support network for our military family.

9.10 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: In many countries, across four continents, I have had the rare privilege of living and working alongside United Kingdom servicemen and women, who serve not only Queen and country, and our hard interests, but British values and humanity. Our forces, and the men and women who compose them, are our nation's finest asset.

Ever since the Bill of Rights in 1688, Acts of Parliament have provided the necessary provisions for the armed forces to exist as a disciplined force. The Armed Forces Bill in 2021 provides a continuation of the Armed Forces Act 2006, establishing the legal basis for the armed forces to operate as a disciplined body. Not only does the Bill guarantee a legal basis for the armed forces, but it introduces vital reform to strengthen the basis of the armed forces covenant. By doing so, we can ensure that those who currently serve or have served and their families are treated with the respect and fairness they deserve.

By implementing some of the key recommendations of the service justice system review conducted by His Honour Judge Lyons, the Bill strengthens the armed forces covenant. Such provisions include providing the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales with the power to nominate a circuit judge to sit as a judge advocate, following a request by the Judge Advocate General, and creating a new regime for complaints against the service police, through the creation of the Service Police Complaints Commissioner, ensuring oversight of the service police forces. Changes to the service complaints appeals system are also included. Personnel are provided with a clear route to justice wherever they are operating, whether that is through reducing the minimum time for complainants to lodge appeals or applying to the service police complaints ombudsman.

Putting into law the armed forces covenant will ensure that all armed forces personnel and veterans are treated with the fairness and respect that they deserve by other public bodies, whether for healthcare, housing or education. Enshrining the covenant in law bolsters the initiatives that have already been introduced to support veterans. For the 4,200 veterans who live in Wakefield, this Bill will help to eliminate any disadvantages or discrimination they may face in accessing public services.

Labour's post-war track record on the armed forces is evidence that it cannot be trusted to champion our veterans, defend our national security and safeguard UK interests. This Bill proves yet again that the Conservatives prioritise the rights of our veterans and service personnel. I want to thank the Secretary of State for Defence and his entire team for all the work they have undertaken and to recognise the great efforts that they continue to take in promoting the rights of our veteran community. It is a record to be proud of and one that, through this Government's actions, demonstrates the Conservatives' entirely authentic, truly genuine affection and gratitude for all our service personnel, past, present and future.

9.14 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con) [V]: I am very glad of this opportunity to acknowledge my gratitude and respect for our armed forces for all they do for peace and democracy and British interests abroad and our security and wellbeing at home, particularly during the past year, when they have played such a vital role, often behind the scenes, in the fight against covid. I particularly honour the troops stationed at Tidworth, Bulford and the other bases in my constituency. Despite what it says on the gates of Aldershot, Salisbury plain is the true home of the British Army, and I am proud to represent it.

Listening to the debate this evening, it has been good to see the House so united, and that is right. The Minister referred to the foundation of our modern parliamentary democracy in 1688, which is also the foundation of the British Army, which only exists because this House votes for it every five years. The subjection of the armed forces to Parliament is the foundation of a free society. It is what makes the Army a force for good. If we consider recent events in Myanmar, we appreciate the value of that.

If through these Acts every five years Parliament gives the Army its life, we also owe it our duty, so I am proud to support the quinquennial Armed Forces Bill, which, uniquely among its many predecessors, brings the armed forces covenant not just into statute, but into the operations of the British state at the most local level, because the personnel of our armed forces live, like everyone else, in local communities.

Here I acknowledge the work of Wiltshire Council in recent years. The county council was one of the first councils, if not the first, to sign the armed forces covenant. That was not just because of the historic presence of the British Army on Salisbury plain, but because 4,000 soldiers and their families have come home to the UK from Germany over the past 10 years, all needing housing and healthcare, education for their children, civilian jobs for partners and communities for everyone. The military's civilian integration programme, led by the MOD and Wiltshire Council, has been a great success. I particularly welcome the work that Councillor Chris Williams, our armed forces champion in Wiltshire, has done and the wonderful new civic centre that is opening in Tidworth.

Everyone I have spoken to on both sides of the civilian-military divide has confirmed that the programme has been a great success. Perhaps the best indicator of that is that the divide between the military and the civilian is not so huge as in former days. The famous phrase "behind the wire", and the fact that soldiers lived literally fenced off from the community they were situated in, has less and less meaning in Wiltshire.

I welcome this Bill and hope it continues the excellent work I see locally, but I echo the point that my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), made about the enforcement of the covenant under the new rules. I do not believe we need extra enforcement in Wiltshire, but there may be places that do. It would be good to understand how the covenant will be enforced.

I end with a word on the justice elements of the Bill. I believe our Army is the best in the world, but as many soldiers have told me, being the best means behaving the best. No one wants soldiers to have carte blanche in

[*Danny Kruger*]

foreign conflicts, and no one wants the Army to be a law unto itself at home. I welcome the strengthening of the Army justice system. The Bill will ensure that our armed forces remain morally as well as operationally secure—secure in our constitution and subject to Parliament, but also secure in the higher jurisdiction of right and wrong—and that we can continue to have an armed forces of which we can be proud.

9.18 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: Bury is the proud home of the Lancashire Fusiliers. We are a military town, but in recent years, there has been an acceptance that our responsibilities to local armed forces personnel under the Bury armed forces covenant—signed in 2014 by our local council—have waned, and that is simply not acceptable. A review of the Bury covenant was announced in June last year and is now taking place for that very reason. I therefore welcome clause 8 and will confine my remarks to that important provision.

Clause 8 creates a duty on principles that specified persons or bodies must have regard to when exercising certain housing, education or healthcare provision. It is a welcome attempt by the Government to ensure positive support and outcomes for our veterans. We all agree that they must never be disadvantaged, but if local councils and service providers do not live up to these duties and principles, I am concerned about the action that can be taken at a local level to guarantee that veterans receive the support that clause 8 envisages.

We must also be ambitious in how we are to deliver improved and better services for our armed forces personnel. Words are not enough. We must ensure joint partnership working between veterans associations, volunteers, all those who provide support for veterans—including through breakfast clubs, veterans cafés and many other forms of support—local councils and clinical commissioning groups.

In Lancashire and Greater Manchester, where I am an MP, I have had the opportunity to see how good practice works, and how the delivery of services to multi-purpose armed forces hubs has fantastic outcomes for veterans from all backgrounds. I point briefly to two examples: the Wigan Borough Armed Forces Community HQ hub and Healthier Heroes CIC in Burnley. Both facilities provide a wide range of support services and social activities for veterans. Wigan has even started building its own housing stock for local veterans.

Having visited both facilities, I know that full-time mental health support is fundamental to the wellbeing of many veterans. We must find innovative ways of delivering these services and funding such fantastic provision. I have spoken many times to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans and I welcome the funding that he champions, including through the armed forces covenant fund, to support local authorities and groups that are ambitious to deliver the best outcomes for their local armed forces personnel.

This is a fantastic Bill that builds not only on our manifesto commitment, but on the deep affection that we all have for those who give so much for our country. I will work tirelessly with others in my constituency to deliver the armed forces hub that will benefit all veterans who have given so much to our country and who are

proud to live in Bury, Ramsbottom and Tooting. We are truly an area which values our armed forces personnel. I will work with everyone to ensure that we have the services, outcomes and facilities that they deserve.

9.22 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I have often spoken—both in and out of the Chamber—of the patriotic nature of my constituents in Dudley North. Their gratitude, and mine, was particularly evident in November last year during our fundraising drive for the poppy appeal. Our armed forces do so much, not just to keep us safe in, and from, conflict, but by delivering vital community support in peacetime. I thank them. I pay tribute to the veterans and those who are still in active service from my constituency here in Dudley North. In times of crisis, those who step forward to risk their lives to protect others are heroes, but in their heroism they often sacrifice the most suffering, bereavement and injury.

I am very pleased that the armed forces covenant is being enshrined in law. It is essential that we ensure that all armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are treated fairly. Despite the great respect and admiration that so many of us have for our armed forces, there is too often a lack of understanding of the intricacies of the unique obligations and sacrifices made by service personnel and their families. Whether it is the struggle to find housing, to access healthcare or to ensure that their children receive consistent and continuous education when they may face disruption from moving between bases, veterans need and deserve all the support that we can give them.

I am a very outcome-focused person. When I chaired an armed forces covenant committee in recent times, I could see many good intentions from local councils, health trusts, housing providers and so many more, but translating those good intentions into the practical differences they could make to that veteran sleeping under a bridge because he or she could not face what we regard as normal life is a very different thing. We have heard very movingly tonight from my colleague and near neighbour, my hon. and brave Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson). Support needs to be over-arching and proactive. Typically, our traumatised veterans do not ask for help and, if they wanted to, it would not be that obvious to them where they could find it, so we need to do more; we must do more.

The Bill increases awareness among public bodies of the unique nature of military service, improving the level of service for members of the armed forces community no matter where in the UK they live. I look forward to seeing it implemented in every possible practical way and as soon as possible.

9.25 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to Members of this House who have contributed to this debate this evening who have served in Her Majesty's armed forces? I am extremely grateful to every single one of them, and I extend those thanks to every citizen of this nation who has given their service to Queen and country.

I welcome this Bill very much, and I would particularly like to commend the Secretary of State and the Minister for the hard work they have put in to make this happen. How pleased I am that this is a Bill that is unifying across this House in support of our armed forces.

As the Member for West Dorset, it is important for me to note in this Chamber tonight that one in seven people in Dorset has a connection to the armed forces. The progress, therefore, with the armed forces covenant is very important to me and it is very important to the constituents in West Dorset. I am very grateful to the Minister for the progress he is making in that area.

Dorset has a considerable military presence. We have 6,500 serving members in the surrounding military bases: whether that is Blandford Camp, Bovington Camp, RNAS Yeovilton or the Royal Marines base in Poole, Dorset is particularly well served by forces. But it is also important to note that, while West Dorset is the home to many serving and retired members of the armed forces, we play a very important role as well for those who are looking to progress their career in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force or the Marines. At Kingston Maurward College on the outskirts of Dorchester, our county town, there are many students who are preparing for their career in the armed forces with military preparation diplomas.

In Dorset County Hospital in the county town of Dorchester, we have 30 Royal Marines coming to support our doctors, nurses, our support staff, our porters and so on to make sure we can really make progress in this coronavirus pandemic at this time.

It is also very proud for me to be able to articulate, briefly, the very proud history that we have in Dorset with the Dorsetshire Regiment, dating all the way back to 1751, and its successor regiments: the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment and, indeed, today The Rifles; we celebrated its 14th anniversary of inauguration just a week or so ago.

But it is important for me tonight to make very clear that this debate and this Bill are about actions rather than words. For far too long, we have heard warm words rather than actions. I see it. I even see it this last week, when a priest from the Church of England, in the diocese of London, the Rev. Jarel Robinson-Brown, said that the celebration of Sir Tom Moore's life is an act of white cult nationalism. That is fundamentally shocking and it should be called out, and each and every one of us in this place has a role to make sure that happens. Indeed, when we see action such as Extinction Rebellion's act on Armistice Day this year to put a protest on the Cenotaph, it is absolutely shocking. I hope I can call on every single Member of this House to ensure that those actions do speak louder than words.

To conclude, I feel it is my duty and it is the duty of all of us in this House to represent our constituents in supporting Her Majesty's armed forces. I, indeed all of us, have sworn an oath of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen, alongside members of the armed forces, and it is with great pleasure and pride tonight that I support this Bill.

9.29 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder). I was down at Bovington

not that long ago with the armed forces parliamentary scheme and my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham). My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset and I share a separate connection too: both Dorset and County Durham are Rifles recruiting grounds. I associate myself with his comments regarding the sad death of Captain Sir Tom Moore.

I am delighted to speak today. It is so important that we recognise what an important role our armed forces play in our country. As a former special adviser in the Ministry of Defence, I witnessed the actions that they take—overt and sometimes covert—on our behalf across the globe, and at home in their support to the civil authorities in dealing with coronavirus and various other issues.

I am particularly delighted that the Bill delivers on our manifesto pledge, ensuring protection for our armed forces and putting responsibility on public bodies at the heart of what we are doing. It is great to see the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), on the Front Bench. I know that he has campaigned for this for so long. Other hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), spoke very well today, but I think the whole House recognises the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), who made a superb speech.

Turning to the contents of the Bill, I am particularly glad to see clause 8, which moves towards enshrining the armed forces covenant in law. It is also superb to see clause 9, with the flexibility around commitments for our reserve personnel. More broadly, schedule 1 and clauses 2, 3, 5 and 6 help to deliver better justice in the armed forces for our serving personnel.

My constituents in North West Durham are more than patriotic, but it is not a jingoistic patriotism. It is much deeper than that; it is much more personal. As I mentioned, my constituency is a major recruiting ground for the Rifles, formerly the Durham Light Infantry, and for the Royal Marines.

I was delighted on the 14th anniversary of the Rifles to speak to Major General Charlie Collins, who is currently the commander of 1st Division and commanded British forces abroad not long ago. He emphasised to me the importance of our armed forces' regional connections. In County Durham, we have seen in recent years the sad loss of the DLI museum. I really hope that we can get it a new home as soon as possible, because it is such a key part of recognising the deep personal relationship that so many people across County Durham have with our armed forces.

Finally, I would like to speak up on behalf of the professionalism and dedication of those who put their lives on the line for us. I have met several families with young people going through basic training at the moment. It really is amazing to see how those young people develop so quickly in our armed forces. I want to put on record the thanks of all my constituents to them for what they do. They are there for us. They are the hard edge of Britain's global power. They deserve our respect, they deserve our support, and they deserve a Government behind them every step of the way. I am glad to hear that the Bill goes some way further to delivering on that.

9.33 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: In Wantage and Didcot, I represent a constituency with a strong tradition of admiration for our armed services but also of service in them, including by some of my predecessors, one of whom was Airey Neave, who had a proud record of service in world war two. His immediate predecessor was Ralph Glyn, who fought in the first world war and was given a Military Cross. We have the Defence Academy at Shrivenham, and we have the 11 EOD & Search Regiment in Didcot. However, my admiration for the services came long before I became an MP. My dad served in the British Army for 18 years, and that left me with a close interest in what we do and how we treat our armed men and women.

The Bill has a lot in it to welcome. I have spoken to quite a number of people from the veteran community in my constituency, as well as to some serving personnel, and there is a lot that they welcome too, from the new Service Police Complaints Commissioner to allowing reserve forces to serve flexibly in the way that regular forces do. I heard particular praise for allowing the rescinding of judgments made in error; one person made the point to me that, particularly where judgments are done very quickly, mistakes can be made, and they thought that was a very welcome provision of the Bill. The extension of the posthumous pardons, often for crimes that should never have been crimes, provides at least some small relief to the family members who are still alive.

The armed forces covenant runs throughout the Bill, of course, and I welcome the “due regard” that will be paid in the areas of housing, health and education. The people I talked to suggested that those were the three areas where they most commonly saw complaints—either their own or those of colleagues. I hope that in time we will be able to extend it to other areas, and perhaps employment is one of the areas that has the strongest case.

I also think it would be good for us to extend this to national Government Departments in time. What we are doing with local authorities is very welcome, and I recognise that health, education and housing are in keeping with the Armed Forces Act 2011, but my general view on a lot of things that go on in the UK is that national Government Departments could and should lead by example. I recognise that there are challenges with that at this time, but I hope we can aspire to that in due course.

Overall, this is a very welcome Bill that builds on everything this Government have been doing, from the guaranteed interview scheme to the veteran’s railcard to the Office for Veterans’ Affairs. None of us, unless they are a gallant Member of this House, has made the sacrifices that our armed forces do. Many of those sacrifices are out of sight of most of us, but they should not be out of mind, and with this Bill today we take an important step towards recognising that and giving them the respect and care they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Aaron Bell. I am not going to put the clock on you, Aaron. Just carry on talking, and I will stop you at 9.40 pm. If you stop earlier, we will go straight to the winding-up speeches.

9.36 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow so many distinguished contributions from so many hon. Members

who have known service, either themselves or through their families, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), who gave us a speech that was brave, honest and full of integrity. He did not spare himself and he did not spare this House, and the whole House is much richer for his presence in it and his contribution here today.

This is a very good Bill that will be welcomed by my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and I am glad it has cross-party support. It renews the mandate for our armed forces, and I cannot be the only hon. Member somewhat awed by the fact that we are here today with a Bill that is necessary because of an Act that was passed in this place one third of a millennium ago, in 1689. The Bill of Rights is fundamental to our constitution and that of so many countries around the world, and this is a useful reminder of the supremacy of Parliament and where we have come from.

This Bill makes improvements to the service justice system, with a new independent mode of redress, and offers more support for reservists. However, like many colleagues, I want to focus on the armed forces covenant in this, its 10th anniversary year, and on clause 8 in particular. Members of the armed forces and their families simply must not be disadvantaged, particularly in the areas we are talking about today: healthcare, education and housing.

I recall that every time I went to visit my cousins when I was growing up, they seemed to be living somewhere else, all over the country, because their father was in the RAF. Now my sister and her husband are both serving in the senior service—they are both commanders in the Navy. There is a real burden for service families. Servicemen and women put their lives on the line, but I know how difficult service life is for their families too—having to re-establish themselves frequently, maybe every couple of years, in a new place, with a new school and new friends. We owe it to them to get this sort of thing right.

I also welcome the fact that the covenant covers veterans. We have many veterans’ organisations in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and I highlight 58 Signal Squadron Association and the Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre, which works with SSAFA to support veterans who may have fallen on harder times. I have met them, and they have been doing great work throughout covid.

As I come towards the end of my shortened speech, speaking about veterans brings me nicely on to Captain Sir Tom Moore. Over 75 years ago, he served our nation with his service in India and Burma during the second world war, as part of that greatest generation, and then he served our nation again last year. Veterans such as him are truly the very best of British; I am proud to support them, to support servicemen and women and their families, to support the Government and to support this Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Exemplary time discipline.

9.39 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I want to start by echoing the contributions from across the House that have recognised and honoured the commitment and service of our armed forces, and it has been a really good-spirited debate this evening.

Labour stands firmly behind our service personnel. We are immensely proud of the role our world-renowned servicemen and women continue to play in making our

country and our world safer, and we pay tribute to the local authorities, public bodies, service charities and voluntary organisations that support our forces across the United Kingdom; they are working hard to make the covenant a reality, as my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said.

From peacekeeping missions in Mali to helping frontline services tackle the pandemic and vaccinating Britain, our forces continue to embody the values that British people most admire: courage, integrity, loyalty, discipline and service. While our forces will continue to evolve and modernise, they will always have our brave servicemen and women at their core.

My grandfather left Portsmouth—the constituency I now have the privilege to represent—turning just 17 on D-day, to take part in the Normandy landings. He is one of the reasons I am standing at this Dispatch Box today. He fought for peace and fairness, and he would later establish the Portsmouth Normandy Veterans Association, which provided support as he and others left service. For him and for all others who have served, we have a duty to make sure that this legislation provides the very best.

The Armed Forces Bill presents a real opportunity to make meaningful improvements in the day-to-day lives of our armed forces personnel and veterans and their families. There are welcome efforts to provide new flexibility for reservists, who continue to balance work and military training as the hidden heroes among us. But the central part of this legislation is an effort to enshrine the armed forces covenant into law. Labour welcomes those efforts and the intentions of the Bill, but while the Government like to talk up their commitment to our service communities, the Bill misses a crucial opportunity to deliver on the laudable promises made in the armed forces covenant. From substandard housing to veterans' mental health and social care, the promises made in the covenant often do not match the reality experienced by our service communities.

I want to acknowledge the personal and passionate contribution of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) and the sense of abandonment he described. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) spoke about the need to guarantee services for those who have served, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) addressed ending the injustice faced by war widows, a point also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) rightly recognised the work of our personnel during the pandemic, yet the Government want to outsource responsibility for their support. I also want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), a thorn in the Minister's side, for reminding us of the great record of the last Labour Government in standing up for service people and veterans, and I look forward to his sharing his expertise and insight on the Select Committee. Finally, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who spoke passionately about support for Commonwealth veterans. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his tireless campaigning on this important issue.

The covenant guarantees priority healthcare for those who have served, but service charities continue to point out the uneven nature of its application. We know that waiting times for mental health treatment have skyrocketed, and we know that service housing is in an appalling state and those transitioning out of the forces are increasingly struggling to find jobs, but the Bill does little to tackle these issues head-on. The proposals requiring public bodies to have due regard to the covenant are unlikely to make any real impact on the day-to-day lives of forces personnel.

Ministers have already let the cat out of the bag that they are not serious about delivering for our armed forces. Last week at Defence questions, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans said that

“the legislation is very clear that it does not specify outcomes, but simply ensures that a set of principles is adhered to.”—[*Official Report*, 1 February 2021; Vol. 688, c. 668.]

I invite the Minister to explain exactly how these principles and the ambiguous legalese of due regard would deliver practical action for our service personnel: the squaddie in poor-quality, single-living accommodation who is without the basics such as heating and hot water; the veteran struggling with their mental health who has to endure waiting times for treatment more than twice as long as Government targets; or the dispersed service family who struggle with the cost of childcare and getting into work. Instead of lumping extra responsibilities on cash-strapped local authorities and other stretched public bodies, the Bill should set measurable, enforceable national standards for which central Government are accountable. Only then can we truly end the postcode lottery on the armed forces covenant.

Ministers say that they will be producing statutory guidance on how the new responsibilities should be delivered by public bodies. Given the importance that this guidance will have on the impact and delivery of this legislation, I urge Ministers to publish it during the passage of the Bill to allow for proper scrutiny.

Service charities such as the Royal British Legion have also expressed disappointment that the scope of the Bill is narrow. While the focus on housing, healthcare and education is welcome, this legislation should ensure that all areas of potential disadvantage are addressed. The Bill is silent on employment, for instance. We are all seeing joblessness among veterans rising above the national average, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic service personnel and those medically discharged. There are no specific commitments on forces' pay, which has been below inflation for seven years running, leading to real terms cuts for our servicemen and women. It fails to seize the opportunities to make a long-overdue step change in the way that we approach the welfare of veterans and particularly the transition back into civilian life. It could finally take steps to improve coroners' data collection, so that we can better understand and combat the tragedy of veteran suicide. It could tackle the ongoing challenges of access to benefits, but here as well it falls short. By setting a legal standard that is below the existing voluntary offers in some areas, the Government risk creating a two-tier covenant and a race to the bottom on services for our forces' communities.

The threats of poor pay and conditions posed to recruitment and retention, and our overall defence capability were made clear this weekend, with leaked reports,

[Stephen Morgan]

suggesting that 32 of 33 infantry battalions are dangerously short of battle-ready personnel. The Government cannot simply outsource responsibility for delivering on the covenant with this performative show of support for our armed forces.

Let me now turn to proposals on the service justice system, because here again we find that this legislation fall short of what was promised. Labour welcomes the efforts to implement key recommendations in the Lyons review. We particularly welcome the creation of an independent Service Police Complaints Commissioner, which will ensure greater oversight and fairness in service justice cases, but it must urgently clarify why it has not adopted the Lyons' recommendation of civilian courts having full jurisdiction over murder, rape and serious sexual offences committed in the UK. Civilian courts have a much better record of trying these cases.

Labour believes that the armed forces covenant represents a binding moral commitment between Government and service communities. The last Labour Government delivered the first cross-government strategy on welfare of armed forces personnel. That introduced the armed forces compensation scheme, doubled the welfare grant for families of those on operations, gave better access to housing schemes and healthcare, offered free access to further education for service leavers, and extended travel concessions for veterans and those seriously injured. The Tories have not only stalled this progress, but reversed it. Every time a member of service personnel is deployed overseas, every time a reservist signs up, and every time they deliver a covid test or vaccine, the promises in the covenant are renewed, but when I speak to service personnel, they often do not know what the covenant promises or how it can help them in their day-to-day lives. The Government's ambition in this Bill should match the high standards our armed forces display in their service and demand of themselves. While we welcome the principle of this legislation in its current form, it is a missed opportunity to deliver on the laudable promises set out in the covenant. The Government must deliver on the covenant in full for every member of our armed forces, veterans and their families. Our country expects it and our troops deserve it.

9.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

Let me declare at the outset that I am president of the Scots Guards Association for veterans and have been for nearly 20 years.

I pay tribute to all Members who have spoken in this debate. Looking after our veterans and our armed forces does not belong to any one political party, nor to any one Member of Parliament. Reflecting on the contribution from the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), one would easily be forgiven for thinking that serving personnel's experience of the armed forces is that they all live in substandard accommodation, have an awful time and want to leave. One would also think that the veterans in this country are not enjoying successful careers, becoming incredibly employable, working hard, contributing to society and using their skills. Up and down this country, tens of thousands—nay, even hundreds of thousands—of people who have enjoyed service to this country, whether short or long, show those skills to

all and sundry. They show their loyalty to their country, they show their patriotism, they show their ability to work, and they are incredibly employable.

For many people, the system works and they have a great time in the services. For many people, the best part of their lives—probably the best part of my life—was as a serving soldier in the armed forces. Was it perfect? No. Did I lose 30% of my sight? Yes. Did I find myself rushed to hospital being told that they would not save my sight? Yes. Did I feel slightly abandoned when afterwards, with a one-inch gash in my eyeball, I woke up alone in a hospital in west Belfast, and did not really know how to transition? Yes. But do I regret a minute of my service? No. Do I regret the skills it gave me? No. Do the hundreds of thousands of veterans in this country regret it? No.

It is true, however, that for a proportion of veterans and serving personnel, all is not well, and we all recognise in this House that we could always do more and do better. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) made the very important point that the journey never ends. The reason the journey never ends is that conflict never ends, and the nature of conflict never ends. The distance between society and the people who serve in the armed forces—fewer and fewer people—never ends. The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who is a very thoughtful Member of this House who seeks the best for the armed forces, and, as a member of the Scottish National party, is always open to listening, understanding and exploring ideas, made the very real point that there are fewer and fewer serving personnel in society and the gap between the understanding of what they do and what others do is growing greater. We must address that.

This Bill is a good step in the right direction. It improves many of the things that in my day were not even really in existence. I served as a member of the armed forces under both a Conservative Government and a Labour Government. If we just consider the treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder—the transition and liaison service, the complex treatment service and the high-intensity service now delivered by the NHS for the mental welfare of our veterans—we can see that all that is much, much better; a step change from what it was.

This Bill takes another step forward—it goes further—because clause 8 puts the armed forces covenant into law. As the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, this has been a long journey. It started off with a charter, then a Green Paper, then it became a duty to report, and now this is a step forward whereby we will put a duty on a number of services to pay regard to the covenant.

The Bill is also a step forward in improving the assurances around investigations, which many Opposition Members said during the passage of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill was something that is missing. It is about improving the quality and the independence of those investigations, alongside that of the prosecutions and the judiciary. It is about improving the training so that our soldiers—men and women of our armed forces—are never again in the position they were in in the early years of the Iraq war, where they were accused of war crimes when they thought they were simply doing what they were trained

to do. That happened because the training had fallen far behind the development of the law and human rights legislation.

Many Members called for the Bill to go wider and deeper, and I will do my best to respond, given that nearly 60 colleagues spoke during the debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) suggested a £500 thank you payment to our troops in the same way as was provided for NHS workers in Scotland. She also said that we could do more in health and education. The Scottish Parliament has those devolved powers, and there is nothing to stop the Government of Scotland tomorrow morning doing even more on a whole range of issues to support the covenant.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) pointed out the excellent report produced by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), “Living in our Shoes”—an extremely good piece of work. As Secretary of State for Defence, I have not only listened to and read the reports from my colleagues and from Select Committees on issues such as protecting veterans and legacy, but have made sure that the Department does not put those reports on the shelf and ignore them. I believe that many of our colleagues have some of the best ideas, and throughout the conduct of this Bill, I assure the House that the Government will be open to suggestions about how to improve it. Everyone in the Government will be interested in doing that, because we all have that interest at heart.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and many others raised the issue of Northern Ireland veterans. I refer him to the written ministerial statement on 18 March by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and add that we are all keen to get the legacy over the line as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) gave us an insight into what it means to be a commanding officer, having to discipline soldiers and balance military discipline with the needs of the unit, sometimes on operations—that experience is unique. My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) referred to his experiences as a magistrate in the civilian world. I have sat on a court martial in the military world—before the reforms—but the military world and the civil world are different, so that is a unique experience.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire talked about why it is always the military that is called upon to do the resilience. The fundamental reason is how we are trained: it is the pressure, the different discipline and structure, and often the difference between life and death in operations. There is no need to always replicate that across society. It is a unique experience—a unique set of circumstances—because only we in the armed forces are called upon to kill or be killed. It is a unique thing, one that we often take with us for the rest of our lives, and that is why we provide resilience at pace in anything from a pandemic to flooding and snowstorms. That will always continue, because that is the very nature of why our armed forces are special, and we must make sure we protect that special nature. At the same time, we must modernise welfare and aftercare for our troops, but the military is different, and will always be different.

That is why when it comes to co-jurisdiction, there is the obvious difficulty around murder, manslaughter, rape and other offences, but there are many serious

offences. There is attempted murder; there is grievous bodily harm; there is armed robbery. Why is it okay for those offences to remain in a service system, but it is recommended that three other offences be potentially removed into a civil system? It is perfectly legitimate to argue against the concept of service justice, although I would disagree, but if we accept that there is such a concept, where we draw the line has to balance the needs of the victim with those of the accused. That is why I think the solution we came up with, which was not the Lyons recommendation of Attorney General consent—which can happen behind closed doors—but consent based on an open and transparent protocol that will be decided between the Crown Prosecution Service and the service justice fraternity, was the right one.

I will just make one other point on this topic, because a number of colleagues make this mistake: the service justice system is independent. I do not appoint the judge advocate; I do not appoint the judges; I do not interfere with the police and the justice system, in the same way that the Home Secretary or the Lord Chancellor do. It is independent. People seem to think that it is all cosy because we are in the armed forces, and that we sit around and choose who to prosecute and who not to prosecute. We do not. Yes, the service justice system and the quality of investigations have been found wanting over many years. That is why we commissioned the Lyons report, and it is why Sir Richard Henriques has been commissioned to increase the assurance, because that is the best way to make sure we do not constantly get taken to court under article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and to ensure that people are not dragged through the courts. We will continue to do that.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about the need for the 16-year-olds. In response to his question, I urge him to visit the Army Foundation College in Harrogate—I will happily make that possible.

All I will say in conclusion is that at their heart, our armed forces are about the people. Over the next few months, we will have debates about equipment, integrated reviews, and which service wins over which—which regiments do and do not—but in the end, if we do not invest in our people, we will not have anything for the future of our armed forces.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ARMED FORCES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Bill:

Select Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Select Committee.

(2) The Select Committee shall report the Bill to the House on or before 29 April 2021.

Committee of the whole House, Consideration and Third Reading

(3) On report from the Select Committee, the Bill shall be re-committed to a Committee of the whole House.

(4) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House on recommitment, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in one day in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(5) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings in Committee of the whole House are commenced.

(6) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

Programming committee

(7) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(8) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Armed Forces Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

ARMED FORCES BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Armed Forces Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ARMED FORCES BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill:

(1) The Committee shall have 16 members, to be nominated by the Committee of Selection.

(2) The Committee shall have power—

- (a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from day to day the minutes of evidence taken before it;
- (b) to admit the public during the examination of witnesses and during consideration of the Bill (but not otherwise); and
- (c) to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity relating to the provisions of the Bill.

(3) The Order of the House of 24 March 2020 (Select Committees (Participation and Reporting) (Temporary Order)) shall apply to the Committee as if it had the power to report from time to time.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Resolved,

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—
(*Johnny Mercer.*)

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

RATING AND VALUATION

That the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (9 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 9 February, the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may continue until 7.00 pm or for two hours after its commencement, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of and may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (10 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 10 February—

(1) Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) shall not apply to proceedings on the Motion in the name of Secretary Priti Patel relating to Police Grant Report or on the Motions in the name of Secretary Robert Jenrick relating to Local Government Finance;

(2) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

- (a) the Motion in the name of Secretary Priti Patel relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and
- (b) the Motions in the name of Secretary Robert Jenrick relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first of those Motions or six hours after the commencement of proceedings relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later; and

(3) those Motions may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption, and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Covid-19: Zoos and Aquariums

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

10.2 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: It is with great pride that I rise virtually today to speak up for the zoo and aquarium sector—a sector that every year makes a substantial contribution to our society and to the world at large. The members of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums contribute more than £31 million to conservation projects. Those projects protect, conserve and add to our understanding of precious species, from seahorses to elephants, many of which are now on the precipice of extinction as a result of human actions on this planet. Aquariums and zoos inspire more than 1.2 million schoolchildren every year through learning outside their usual classroom experiences. They employ more than 11,000 people and bring an economic benefit to this country of more than £650 million.

I would like to thank the members of the all-party parliamentary group for zoos and aquariums for all the work that they do on behalf of these fantastic organisations. Because I am unable to take interventions, I would like to mention the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who secured an Adjournment debate last summer to raise the issues that zoos and aquariums were then facing, after which the Government announced the zoo animals fund. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for that, and I thank the hon. Member for Romford for all the work he has done. However, the APPG has since expressed grave concerns about the lack of funding that has been released and the fact that the sector has not received the specific support it requires in this pandemic and is now in urgent need of help.

I am deeply motivated in this matter by the plight of one of Hull's iconic landmarks and great success stories: The Deep aquarium. My first visit to The Deep was as a newly graduated teacher, shortly after it opened in 2002. The building, designed by Sir Terry Farrell, remains as striking today as it was then. The experience inside lived up to the promise outside. I was impressed that, while it clearly inspired and captivated its visitors with its astonishing deep-sea tanks and fantastic collection of creatures, it tackled difficult issues too, such as ocean acidification, species loss and the urgency of protecting our marine habitats, in the same innovative, engaging manner.

Since its opening, this educational and environmental charity has continued to engage and enchant visitors from all corners of the globe, and to inspire future generations. A lottery-funded millennium project, The Deep was conceived as a catalyst for regeneration in Hull—a continuation of the city's historic relationship with the sea and a focus for reimagining the waterfront for the 21st century. It is, by some considerable margin, the most successful of the lottery-funded millennium projects, and this success is not an accident. From the very start, those involved knew how vital it was for the city that the project was sustainable. Intense effort went into every aspect of the planning, especially the finances. Visitor estimates were deliberately conservative and budgets were meticulously scrutinised. The Deep would wash its face from day one, and it did.

As it turned out, 850,000 people visited The Deep in its first year—well beyond the numbers planned. The Deep now contributes £14.8 million of economic benefit every year to the city of Hull. It employs 130 local people and is home to 345 species of animals, including rescue loggerhead turtles and its most recent addition, a breeding colony of penguins. 2019 saw over 33,000 children from the surrounding area visit as a part of their formal education. The Deep also operates a successful partnership with Hull University, supporting dissertation and master's students each year, and housing its total environment simulator, a state-of-art research facility that is in constant use. The simulator supports 10 high-skilled jobs and has attracted £10 million of research funding into the university over the last three years.

The Deep is now an integral part of our identity as a city, and of both the monetary and learning economy of Hull. I share the pride of everyone in the city in being home to such a well-respected charity—one that contributes so much to the conservation and welfare of precious species. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of The Deep, and the rest of the industry, in bringing the urgent issues facing zoos and aquariums to the attention of the Minister.

The pandemic has meant that, since March last year, The Deep, which relies on visitor income to operate and support its work, has so far been closed to the public for 32 weeks, with no firm reopening date in sight. It is highly likely that indoor attractions will be among the last to reopen, and with daily animal care costs of £5,500, this normally self-sufficient charity is facing an uncertain future. It has survived this far on its own reserves, on what was generated during the short restricted opening in the summer, from much welcome local public support, and with a loan. However, this money is fast running out.

The whole sector is of course grateful for the coronavirus job retention scheme, and I know that The Deep has furloughed 90% of its crew. But just as in other establishments, those caring for the animals cannot be furloughed—those scuba diving in the huge tanks to care for the needs of all the animals, feeding the penguins and providing ongoing rehabilitation for two loggerhead turtles are needed every day. As with many of the animals, there is no option of a return to the wild for these two turtles. Sensa and Mabouche have suffered lower jaw amputations from being caught on long lines and propeller blade damage to their shells, resulting in nerve damage. There is no prospect of them surviving in the outside world. They now have their forever home at The Deep, as one of the only aquariums in the UK with the facilities to care for them.

As I have said, I cannot take interventions, but I have been asked by the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) to mention Marwell Zoo, on the edge of his constituency, and I am happy to do so. On its behalf, he would like to call on the Minister to consider a commitment to the earliest possible safe reopening. Marwell was able to open under tier 3 restrictions, as it was considered able to offer secure venues and open green spaces. It would like to impress on the Minister the current extreme financial pressures it is experiencing, which are jeopardising the future of the important conservation and educational work it does.

[Emma Hardy]

I wish also to mention the marine research work done on commercialising carbon-sequestering seagrass by the National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth, which is being championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard).

The loss of an aquarium or zoo such as Marwell, the National Marine Aquarium or my beloved The Deep would not only wipe out the conservation work these facilities undertake but devastate the local economy. It would result in the loss of much-needed jobs and reduce educational opportunities for 1.2 million children—particularly in science, technology, engineering and maths—as well as graduate and postgraduate learning and vital research projects.

I acknowledge and thank the Minister for recognising, although to a limited extent, the unique position of the industry through the creation of the zoo animals fund. Although the sector's income was reduced to nil for the majority of the last year, it cannot compromise on its substantial animal care costs. They are fixed and non-negotiable. It is true that the zoo animals fund has had the deadline for applications extended until 28 February. However, I must bring to the Minister's attention the fact that all parts of the sector have told me that that has no practical benefit. The fund remains incomparable with recovery funds put in place successfully for other sectors.

The zoo animals fund supports only animal costs, not the costs associated with supporting the organisations through this pandemic, and, crucially, these funds become accessible too late in the day for large zoos and aquariums. They simply cannot run with resources as low as eligibility for the fund requires. It is in effect a winding-up fund, available to support the costs of rehoming the animals or downsizing a collection should a facility fail; I do not want The Deep to fail. That is why, from the £100 million available, £94 million of the zoo animals fund remains and only 8% of the sector has managed to access the fund—that is, 33 facilities out of 400.

For the vast majority of zoos and aquariums, those funds are inaccessible at the point at which they would do any good. The fact that 94% of the fund lies untapped when zoos and aquariums are likely to continue to remain closed for some time to come should make it clear that the fund is not functioning to provide the support intended in a timely manner. There is therefore a clear need for the Government to commit to amend the scheme so that it becomes a true recovery fund, as we have seen implemented so proactively elsewhere in the cultural and heritage sector. Such a fund is needed to support the teams who have worked painstakingly throughout the pandemic to conserve the species in their care and to safeguard the many benefits to society, the economy and the environment that they provide. It seems only right and proper that we fight for the survival of a sector that takes such considerable time and effort to fight for conservation and the survival of the natural world.

If the Government genuinely believe, as they stated in their 2019 manifesto, that:

“Conservation is, and always has been, at the heart of Conservatism”,

they should have no hesitation in protecting the sector that is at the forefront of much of this work with money they have already ring-fenced but not actioned. I would like to remind the Minister that this is an industry that contributes over £650 million a year to the UK economy.

So, my ask. The British and Irish Association for Zoos and Aquariums is calling for the remaining funding allocated for the zoos and aquariums fund to be ring-fenced and made available to support zoo licence holders in the 2021-22 financial year in the form of a zoo recovery fund. This should not be an extension of the existing emergency zoo animals fund, which as I have explained is not meeting the needs of the sector, but a recovery fund similar to those made available to other visitor attraction sectors, such as the cultural recovery fund.

The recovery fund should focus on supporting zoos and aquariums as they transition back to a viable and sustainable operating model during the 2021-22 financial year, by covering the shortfall between operating costs and income until restrictions are lifted; support zoo and aquarium operations more fully, including in their key statutory mission work in conservation, education and research, to sustain these vital projects during the recovery period; and require organisations to demonstrate the financial impact of covid on their income, rather than needing to be close to running out of reserves to access support, which will enable the fund to support a wider proportion of the sector to recovery in a more timely manner.

I ask the Minister to consider these steps as a necessary response to the shifting context of the pandemic. Further, this action is consistent with the Government's stated desires to support the sector through covid-19, and in particular to avoid animal welfare concerns and ensure that otherwise successful zoos and aquariums are match-fit and ready to thrive post covid. By contrast, allowing support to cease at the end of this financial year would not align with the Government's arguments put forward throughout 2020, nor would it be consistent with the support provided to other sectors in the visitor economy.

I have spoken already of the fantastic work that The Deep charity does and the wonderful animals that call it home. I will finish by mentioning my favourite creature from The Deep, the great diving beetle. That fantastic insect carries its own air supply with it from the surface, in the form of a bubble attached to its rear. It forages at the bottom of ponds, lakes and streams, returning to the surface to replenish its supply of air when needed. The sector's air supply is running out, and the very necessary covid-19 restrictions are preventing its return to the surface. A realignment of the zoo animals fund into a zoo recovery fund to support those important organisations over the coming months would provide the air they need and help to ensure their survival.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this important debate. She is right to be proud of The Deep. It is the largest aquarium in the UK and an international player in marine conservation. It was lovely to hear more

about some of the animals and other creatures for which it cares so well, and to hear the passion with which the hon. Lady spoke about them.

I also thank hon. Members from across the House for their extensive engagement with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on zoos and aquariums since the outbreak of the pandemic. The hon. Lady will remember—as may you, Mr Deputy Speaker—that the last Adjournment debate on this subject went on for some three hours. I do not know that this one will, but I single out two hon. Members who would like to be with us: my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), already referred to, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group; and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has the honour to represent Whipsnade and has made a lot of the running in this area.

I thank the zoos, aquariums and wildlife sanctuaries that have worked so hard to ensure the welfare of the animals in their care. Zoos, as we have heard, contribute to conservation and education, helping both to sustain endangered species and to teach us all about animals' natural habitats. We know, too, how hard zoos have worked to provide well managed covid-secure spaces, when they have been permitted to open. We ensured that the outdoor areas of zoos could open after the first lockdown, and we allowed those areas to remain open in tier 4 before Christmas.

We will continue to press the case for zoos to be allowed to open as it is safe to do so. A great deal of work on the procedure for reopening is under way, and our officials are working very closely with the sector on safe guidance for that. We understand the particular issues of indoor areas, to which the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle referred.

I reassure the House that Government support schemes remain in place and available for zoos to access. Zoos can apply, and are applying heavily, for furlough, VAT deferral, business rates relief, the business interruption loan schemes, the option to reclaim the costs of statutory sick pay, and ordinary hospitality and leisure grant funding.

In addition, as we heard, we set up the zoo animals fund to help zoos at immediate risk and to prevent the unnecessary euthanasia of animals. The priority of the fund is to ensure that animal welfare is maintained. This fund, together with its predecessor, the zoo support fund, has supported a wide variety of zoos, both large and small. We are continually keeping the fund under review, and it is fair to say that we have already made significant changes to it. We now allow claims not just for feeding livestock but for maintenance and repair, for example, and we have extended the fund to run until the end of the month to allow for the impacts of the latest lockdown. We now also allow zoos to claim when they have reached their last 12 weeks of reserves, and they can start the application at any point in the run-up to that period. I would strongly encourage zoos to apply to the fund.

I am aware that The Deep is in conversation with my officials, and I know that it has furloughed staff and tried hard to reduce its running costs. I am also aware that it has received a substantial loan from the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. I have talked to Lord Goldsmith, who leads on this policy area, about this again today, and we will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the fund with a view to ensuring that it is meeting its aims. We have already made changes to the zoos fund in order to move flexibly and adapt to the changing circumstances of the pandemic. I know that Lord Goldsmith will be following this debate with interest, and he has asked me to reassure the hon. Lady and the House that the fund is very much being kept under active review. I can assure the House that the Government fully appreciate the value of well-managed zoos to society, and I am very much looking forward to the day when they are able to open again and we can all visit them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Me included.

Question put and agreed to.

10.21 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 8 February 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Local Elections

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): I am updating Parliament on the Government's plans to proceed with the local elections on 6 May 2021 and the statutory instruments I am laying today on nominations.

Safe and secure elections are the cornerstone of our democracy. The Government have long been clear that there should be a very high bar for delay, but they were responsible to keep the situation under review in order to take into account the views of the electoral community and of public health experts. Having considered these views, the Government confirmed on Friday 5 February 2021 that the range of polls scheduled for 6 May 2021, including council and mayoral elections in England, and the police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales, will go ahead as planned. It is important that we give this certainty to the electoral sector and political parties.

The Government has also published a delivery plan setting out how the polls will be delivered in a covid-19 secure and effective way. It sets out how these polls will proceed, from announcement to results, and then covers the four major areas that we are addressing: public health and social distancing; nominations and campaigning; voting; and the delivery of elections. The Government are providing a package of measures to support statutorily independent returning officers to deliver these elections successfully and with the right precautions in place. Those measures include changes to proxy voting rules so that those affected by covid-19 can still vote; and the provision of indemnity to returning officers for covid-19 risks in respect of these elections.

There will be an estimated £92 million of Government grant funding that will be provided to local authorities for the elections; of this, £31 million is an uplift to directly address costs associated with making the elections covid-19 secure.

I am today providing further detail of the measures the Government intend to take to change temporarily the nominations process, in light of the exceptional circumstances. For potential candidates standing for elected office in the council, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections, we are introducing measures to reduce the travel and contact involved in completing their nomination form.

The Government have listened to the views of the electoral sector, candidates and political parties that the need to collect a high number of signatures for nomination as a candidate in some types of poll was encouraging an unhelpful and unnecessary amount of interaction, as well as complexity for candidates. While it is essential that candidates in a poll can demonstrate a clear amount of local support, we must balance the importance of democracy with the need to protect people in these unique circumstances. In reaching a decision about the approach to nominations we have consulted the Parliamentary Parties Panel and considered other cross-party representations.

These statutory instruments, one affirmative and one negative, will therefore make changes to the nomination process to reduce the number of signatures that candidates are required to collect for almost all types of poll due to be held on 6 May, including council elections, mayoral elections and police and crime commissioner elections. These provisions are time-limited; the elections next May (2022) will automatically revert to the standard rules.

I intend to publish further guidance for candidates, their agents and political parties later this month. The Government will be engaging with the Parliamentary Parties Panel on the new guidance and on campaigning provisions, to ensure the views of political parties are taken into account.

The associated documents have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS773]

EDUCATION

Free Schools and School Rebuilding Programme

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I am confirming details of the first 50 schools to benefit from the new school rebuilding programme announced by the Prime Minister in June 2020, as well as details of a further 21 new free schools.

As part of the Government's plan to drive growth beyond the covid-19 pandemic, we are committed to investing in infrastructure, skills and innovation. Investing in our school buildings is vital to deliver the world-class education needed to get the country back on its feet.

As set out at the recent spending review, we are delivering on our promises by launching a 10-year rebuilding programme, with a commitment to 500 school rebuilding projects over the next decade. This will replace many poor condition and ageing school buildings with modern, energy efficient designs, transforming education for thousands of pupils.

The 10-year school rebuilding programme demonstrates our continued commitment to investing in the school estate and providing a long-term pipeline of projects for the construction sector as we build back better.

The Department for Education will build on its existing construction expertise with a continued focus on innovative modern methods of construction to support more highly skilled jobs and improved productivity. Our market leading frameworks, including a new construction framework later this year, will continue to provide opportunities across the industry and enable small and medium-sized enterprises to benefit from the opportunities that a decade-long pipeline will bring. The construction projects procured through these frameworks will support jobs and create apprenticeships and T-level placements across England.

The first 50 schools to benefit from this programme have been prioritised based on condition need and will be supported by over £1 billion in capital funding. These first projects include primary and secondary schools as well as a sixth-form college and special and alternative provision settings.

This also represents a substantial investment in schools in the midlands and north of England, with 38 out of 50 projects located in these regions. We expect construction on the first sites to begin from autumn 2021.

The 10-year programme will continue to target school buildings in the worst condition across England and we will set out further plans shortly.

Alongside the rebuilding programme, the Government have committed £1.8 billion in 2021-22 for maintaining and improving the condition of the school estate.

Thousands more children across the country are also set to benefit from a new free school opening in their local area in the years to come, as I have approved 21 successful new free schools, providing over 15,500 new school places once open. In addition, I have approved in principle a further eight schools, subject to meeting certain conditions.

These schools will help level up opportunity across the country by providing high-quality school places in the areas where they are most needed. Ten of the 21 free schools approved will open in some of the most deprived areas—including three in opportunity areas, where the Department works to remove barriers that could stop young people achieving their potential.

These new schools reflect the Government's continued commitment to the free school programme. Two hundred and forty nine free schools have now been approved to open in the coming years, spreading the benefits of the free schools programme to even more areas of the country and joining the 558 free schools already open.

We are also investing £10.1 million of funding in schools across England, to allow them to open their existing school sports and swimming facilities outside of the school day.

Funding will be distributed via Sport England's network of county-level Active Partnerships. Schools will have the opportunity to bid for this funding in the summer term.

Further details, including lists of the school rebuilding projects and successful free school applicants, have been published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS768]

Remote Education

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): On Friday 5 February, I laid before Parliament the Education (Coronavirus, Remote Education Information) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which require schools to publish information on their website about the remote education they are providing to their pupils. If schools do not have a website, the regulations set out alternative requirements for ensuring that this information is accessible.

The regulations come into force on 12 February 2021, which is seven days after being laid, rather than the 21 days required by convention. This is to ensure parents have the earliest access to the information they need about schools' remote education. The Department for Education has published a suggested template that schools may use to present this information.

The requirement for schools to publish this information on their website will not be more onerous than what has already been asked of schools in the guidance, "Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak". This guidance was updated on 3 December 2020 to include an expectation that schools would publish this same information by 25 January 2021.

On 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that all schools would immediately move to remote education provision for all but vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. The Prime Minister's statement on 27 January confirmed that full return to on-site education will not occur until 8 March at the earliest.

Remote education has become the principal means of delivering the school curriculum. Requiring schools to set out the details of their remote education curriculum will provide parents with key information about schools' plans for ensuring pupils continue their education at home.

[HCWS771]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deletion of PNC Records: Response and Recovery

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): Further to my statement to the House on the 18 January, this is an update on the work being carried out to recover the records deleted from the Police National Computer (PNC) in error.

The Home Office is taking forward a four-phase plan to respond to the incident and recover the data:

Phase 1 has been completed and involved using code to identify and extract the complete list of what had been deleted;

Phase 2 has also been completed and involved analysis to establish an accurate list of the affected systems and records for each force;

Phase 3 is ongoing involves recovering the data from the PNC and the IDENT1 (Fingerprint) and National DNA systems;

Phase 4 will involve work to ensure we are deleting any data that should have been deleted as usual when this incident first began.

Phases 1 and 2 of the work found that a total of 209,550 offence records have been wrongly deleted, which are associated to 112,697 persons' records. Of these 15,089 individuals have had their data deleted in totality. Our analysis has identified that only 195 full fingerprint records were deleted, with all these records relating to cases over 10-years old. We have also confirmed that no records of convictions have been deleted. Our analysis shows that 99.5% of the deleted records were created prior to 2011.

Phase 3 is now well under way and technicians are confident that all the data that has been deleted can be restored. Work to recover that data is moving forward as quickly as is possible, but it is vital that the data is restored safely to protect the integrity of the data. Our current assessment suggests that the work will take approximately 12 more weeks to complete, though clearly, we will accelerate this if we possibly can.

While the data is incomplete, there is the possibility that law enforcement partners will not have access to records and information that could help progress their inquiries and investigations.

Outlined below are details of such mitigation activities:

First, they can search the Police National Database (PND).

This is a national intelligence database that holds records of arrests of individuals and contains information that will allow law enforcement partners to judge whether there is biometric information or other key evidence missing from the affected systems. If missing data records are identified, then the investigating officers can request copies of biometric samples and arrest records from the owning organisations.

Second, forces have a wide variety of local systems in place to log calls and to maintain custody records. These are frequently used as the primary system into which information is entered, before it is then integrated into PNC for national use.

Third, the police can also continue to search other relevant national databases, such as the violent offender and sex offender register.

Fourth, where an individual is suspected of a crime and the PNC confirms the existence of a duplicate set of fingerprints then officers can request the set of prints from the force who retain a hard copy.

Fifth, if the police have enough evidence and they believe that the DNA of a suspect is required but cannot find any records on the PNC or other systems, they can arrest suspects and collect their DNA in line with their powers.

Sixth, the Home Office, and our suppliers, have worked to make the incorrectly deleted DNA profiles available to policing while the full capability is restored. In order to deliver this mitigation, we have restored the DNA database backups to a temporary, secure location. We have made this data accessible to forces and national agencies this week and setup a business process has been created to enable matching in support of ongoing investigations. During this period all audit and legislative requirements will be met.

Finally, the Home Secretary and I have commissioned an external review led by Lord Hogan-Howe to ensure the necessary lessons are learned to avoid similar incidents in the future.

The review is expected to report by the middle of March. After the review has concluded and been considered by the Home Secretary, a summary will be placed in the Library of the House.

We will provide a further update to the House in due course.

[HCWS774]

UK Terrorism Threat Level

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): On 4 February, the joint terrorism analysis centre (JTAC) lowered the UK national terrorism threat level from severe to substantial. This means that a terrorist attack is still likely.

The decision to change the UK terrorism threat level is taken by JTAC independently of Ministers. JTAC keeps the threat level under constant review and conducts a formal review every six months. This is a systematic, comprehensive and rigorous process, based on the very latest intelligence and analysis of internal and external factors which drive the threat.

The decision to lower the threat level from severe to substantial is due to the significant reduction in the momentum of attacks in Europe since those seen between September and November 2020. However, the UK national threat level is kept under constant review and is subject to change at any time.

Terrorism remains one of the most direct and immediate risks to our national security. “Substantial” continues to indicate a high level of threat; and an attack on the UK is still likely. The public should continue to remain vigilant and report any concerns to the police.

The Government, police and intelligence agencies continue to work tirelessly to address the threat posed by terrorism in all its forms and the threat level remains under constant review.

[HCWS769]

WALES

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I hereby give notice of the Wales Office’s intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund. The Department requires an advance to meet an urgent cash requirement pending parliamentary approval of the supplementary estimates 2020-21.

The Wales Office’s net cash limit for 2020-21, approved in the main supply estimate, will be reached by mid-February 2021. This is a consequence of meeting in full the funding requirements of the Welsh Government. Significant additional consequential funding for the Welsh Government, arising from announcements made by the UK Government, will be provided in the supplementary supply estimate. This will cover the increased costs incurred by the Welsh Government in response to the covid-19 pandemic.

Parliamentary approval for additional non-budget expenditure of £3,800,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Wales Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,800,000,000 will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid immediately following Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill in March 2021.

[HCWS767]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Plan for Jobs

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Our Plan for Jobs is an ambitious programme of job creation and support to help people of all ages move into work or gain the skills that will open up job opportunities. I would like to update the House on two of the schemes: SWAPs—our Sector-based Work Academy Programme, and our new Job Finding Support service, which went live across Great Britain on 11 January.

SWAPs are helping people in England and Scotland to upskill, retrain and pivot towards surging sectors, including construction, infrastructure and social care to meet local labour markets and employer demand. SWAPs are not currently offered in Wales as there is a similar programme provided by the Welsh Government. Today I am pleased to inform the House that we are increasing the number of placements on the scheme to 80,000 for the upcoming financial year. This builds on the more than 40,000 starts we have already seen since last April.

I am very excited about this expansion of SWAPs—it will mean work coaches can help many more people open the door to jobs they may not have previously considered and move back into work with new skills, work experience and a guaranteed interview for a job. They will join those who have already started roles through SWAPs, including in care worker jobs with Derby City Council, security roles with the Mercury Group and GMS Group in Birmingham, and banking jobs with Barclays and the Wise Group in Kilmarnock.

These are just a few examples of how SWAPs is helping people gain the right skills and experience to support them into work following the impact of the pandemic and into the jobs employers and the country needs as we look to secure our national economic recovery.

Job Finding Support also launched last month and has made rapid progress to help people quickly bounce back into work. The new digital support service is in operation across Great Britain and we expect this vital service to help up to 160,000 people over the course of the next 12 months.

This new light-touch support, provided entirely online, is helping those who have become unemployed and claimed benefits within the past 13 weeks. Many of them will have worked in continuous employment for several years and will not have recent experience of applying for jobs,

so Job Finding Support aims to address any skill gaps and help people move rapidly back into work.

Participants receive a minimum of four hours' flexible, personalised support, including a mock interview, and at least one digital online group session aiming to help identify their transferable skills and provide sector-specific job advice. Participants will also be helped to fine-tune their CV, with a Job Finding Action Plan tailored to their needs. Those who fulfil the eligibility and suitability criteria will be referred by Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches, on a voluntary basis.

Our Plan for Jobs is a plan for everyone; creating the opportunity to level up the nation, the opportunity for hope, and the opportunity to build back better.

[HCWS770]

Petition

Monday 8 February 2021

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Extension to transition period for UK exit of the European Union

The petition of a resident of Twickenham,

Declares that the absence of a deal with Europe has made it impossible for businesses in the UK and in Europe to prepare properly for Brexit; further declares that there are reports from authoritative independent sources, such as, but not limited to, the Institute for Government, that parts of central and local government and other public bodies are far from ready for Brexit by the current end of the transition period, even if a deal with the European Union is agreed in coming weeks; further that this problem affects trade in goods and services with Europe and with the rest of the world where trade deals need to be renegotiated; further that it is likely that this incomplete preparation in many areas of the UK will impact the UK's ability to meet its substantial and ongoing need to import medicines, foods and key workers from Europe and elsewhere and export goods and services to generate economic growth, employment and tax income to pay for public services and pandemic-inflicted state debts; further that it is likely this will result in substantial and easily-avoidable harm to the lives, liberties and livelihoods of UK citizens; and further that the country needs time to recover economically from the pandemic to make sufficient changes to prepare for leaving the European Union.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take all necessary steps to persuade the European Union to recommit to

the originally offered two-year extension to the transition period, to ensure that the UK has time to secure long-term trading arrangements with Europe and the rest of the world and to stabilise the state and private sectors after the effects of the pandemic so that they are ready to leave the European Union.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Munira Wilson, *Official Report*, 17 December 2020; Vol 686, c. 6P.]

[P002642]

Observation from the Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt):

The Government have agreed a deal with the EU which fully delivers on what the British public voted for in the referendum and in last year's general election. We delivered this great deal for the entire United Kingdom in record time, and under extremely challenging conditions. We have protected the integrity of our internal market and Northern Ireland's place within it.

On 1 January 2021, the UK regained its political and economic independence, marking the beginning of a new chapter in our national story—out of the EU and into the world. 2021 will be our opportunity to show what global Britain means to the rest of the world: striking trade deals with new markets, reasserting ourselves as a liberal and free trading nation; and acting as a force for good in the world.

The European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020 passed on 31 December 2020, which has made the necessary changes to UK domestic law to implement obligations under the UK/EU Trade Co-operation Agreement (TCA) and the Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (CNA).

Last July we launched a public information campaign to prepare businesses and citizens for the changes and opportunities the end of the transition period has brought. We will continue to engage with business in sectors that are most affected by our changing relationship with the EU to help them adjust and compete on a global stage, including through ministerial roundtables, sector specific calls, and the ongoing Business Brexit Task Force.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 8 February 2021

TRANSPORT

Transport Decarbonisation

The following is an extract from oral questions to the Secretary of State for Transport on Thursday 28 January 2021.

Alan Brown [V]: More needs to be done to create jobs in decarbonised transport. I have three asks of the Secretary of State: introduce mandatory e10 fuels; provide funding for sustainable aviation fuel plants; and provide a bus strategy that copies the combined Scottish Government-EU initiative that saw the world's first hydrogen double-decker buses in Aberdeen. The bus

strategy needs to include orders for Scottish and UK manufacturers. Will he confirm dates and funding for these initiatives and in writing as well, please?

Grant Shapps: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for all things hydrogen, and I think I am right in saying that the UK Government fund a hydrogen bus project in Glasgow.

[Official Report, 28 January 2021, Vol. 688, c. 537.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Transport:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

The correct response should have been:

Grant Shapps: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for all things hydrogen, and I think I am right in saying that the UK Government fund a hydrogen **refuse trucks** project in Glasgow.

ORAL ANSWERS

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