

Thursday
1 July 2021

Volume 698
No. 27



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 1 July 2021

House of Commons

Thursday 1 July 2021

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tourism Industry: Covid-19

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the recovery of the tourism industry from the covid-19 pandemic. [902110]

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the recovery of the tourism industry from the covid-19 pandemic. [902111]

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the recovery of the tourism industry from the covid-19 pandemic. [902127]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): We recognise the impact of covid-19 on the tourism industry, which is why we published the tourism recovery plan to help the sector to return to pre-pandemic levels as quickly as possible and build back better for the future. The Government have already provided over £25 billion of support to the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors in the form of grants, loans and tax breaks. As our plan sets out, we will continue to support the sector as it recovers.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer and for his visit last week to my beautiful constituency of Eastbourne, where he will have seen no shortage of ambition or potential—only a shortage of new recruits to the hospitality workforce. What plans do he and the Department have to promote careers in hospitality and tourism, which is a vital sector in the UK and in Eastbourne? Would maintaining the 5% VAT rate help employers to offer ever more competitive wages?

Nigel Huddleston: It was a joy to join my hon. Friend in her incredibly sunny and warm constituency last week and see at first hand the hard work she has been doing on behalf of her constituents, and particularly those in the tourism sector. I know she shares my view that developing skills and careers within tourism and hospitality is vital for the sector's recovery. As stated in the tourism recovery plan, we will work closely with the sector to ensure that businesses can employ more UK

nationals in year-round better paid, high-quality tourism jobs. Regarding extending the temporary VAT cut, as we discussed last week, including with her constituents, the Government keep all taxes under review. I have noted her suggestion and I am sure that Treasury Ministers have, too.

Henry Smith [V]: Inbound tourism in normal times contributes about £28 billion to the UK economy. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with other Departments about reopening safe international travel so that UK tourism jobs can be protected and indeed grown as we go forward?

Nigel Huddleston: I know what a great champion my hon. Friend is for tourism and international travel, as we heard at Prime Minister's questions yesterday. He is right that inbound tourism is vital. A lot of talk has been about outbound tourism, which is also a really important sector, but, in 2019, 40 million visitors came to the UK, spent money and had a great time. We are having frequent conversations. I talk to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts)—the aviation Minister—and others on an almost daily basis. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also has an interest in this area. I can therefore assure my hon. Friend that we are having many cross-Government discussions about the importance of the tourism, international travel and aviation sectors.

Gordon Henderson [V]: As more people decide to holiday at home in the UK, we have a golden opportunity to improve the economy of our seaside communities, some of which have high levels of social deprivation. However, to direct visitors to those areas, we need more brown tourist signs on motorways and major trunk roads. What support can my hon. Friend give to the campaign in my constituency to get Highways England to put up a brown tourist sign on the M2 to showcase the many wonderful attractions on the Isle of Sheppey?

Nigel Huddleston: I commend my hon. Friend for his work on behalf of tourism businesses on the Isle of Sheppey. The purpose of brown signs is primarily to direct road users to a tourism attraction or facility to aid the efficient management of traffic. They are not meant to be billboards or adverts as such, but, as he articulated, they do fulfil a useful purpose. He will be aware that such decisions are for local authorities and Highways England, but I appeal to them to listen sympathetically to his request.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op [V]): I have been speaking to leaders in the tourism industry who are distinctly underwhelmed by the Minister's tourism recovery plan. An inclusivity ambassador, a rail pass and £10 million of vouchers is not the level of ambition that they were expecting from the much vaunted plan. In particular, coach operators, fairgrounds and tour guides missed out on support during the pandemic. What sector-specific support does the Minister plan to give to those areas that missed out on support during the lockdown and pandemic and had to suffer through three consecutive winters with a lack of support from the Government?

Nigel Huddleston: To date, as the hon. Member will be aware, the Government have provided more than £25 billion of support for the tourism, hospitality and leisure sector. That may not be appreciated by him but I know it has been by the sector as a whole. We are continuing to give support and that number will go up considerably. In terms of the sectors that have not automatically qualified for assistance, that is precisely why, as I have stated in the Chamber, the additional restrictions grants were out there—more than £1 billion of funding to help those sectors that did not automatically qualify—and we will keep the support under review constantly. Many in the sector welcome the ambition in the tourism recovery plan not only to get back to 2019 levels of tourism activity domestically and inbound, but to go well beyond that, and I hope that the Opposition will work with me and others to achieve that goal.

Channel 4

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with relevant stakeholders on the future of Channel 4. [902112]

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What plans the Government have to privatise Channel 4. [902114]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What plans the Government have to privatise Channel 4. [902117]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): As part of our ongoing strategic review of the UK's system of public service broadcasting, the Government are consulting this summer on the future of Channel 4, including its ownership model and remit, and we intend to engage a broad range of stakeholders to inform any decisions taken.

Anum Qaisar-Javed [V]: As part of its public service broadcaster responsibilities, Channel 4 does not have an in-house production function, relying on independent external production houses. Former Channel 4 commissioning editor Peter Grimsdale said that over 1,000 such production companies have been supported over the years. How do the Government mean to support those production houses if they sell off Channel 4, or do the thousands of jobs that would be destroyed in the sector not matter to this Tory Government?

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Lady is right that Channel 4 does not have an in-house production company, which means that it is entirely dependent on advertising revenue, which is one of the reasons why we think it right to look at the ownership model, but it does support independent production right across the United Kingdom. That is part of its remit and we intend to preserve the remit, although we will be examining whether that needs to be changed—indeed, possibly strengthened in some areas—as part of our consultation.

Mr Dhesi: Channel 4 is a great British success story and an iconic institution. It has invested £12 billion in the independent production sector and regional TV, given voice to local communities across our country, and exported content around the world; and it has recorded a record £74 million financial surplus. Despite all those successes, for the sixth time, the Conservative Government are seeking to privatise it, even though

they concluded just four years ago that that was a very bad idea. Could that possibly be because “Channel 4 News” is doing a solid job, in particular, of holding an incompetent and crony-connected Government to account?

Mr Whittingdale: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that Channel 4, which was, of course, the creation of a Conservative Government, has done an excellent job and it is our intention to sustain it into the future. That is why we believe that now is the right time to look at its future ownership, because it is coming under increasing pressure due to the changes taking place in the way in which television is consumed. While I may not always agree with “Channel 4 News”, I do believe it does a good job. I very strongly support plurality of news providers and would expect that Channel 4 will continue to feature a news service as part of its future offering, and that would remain part of its remit.

Navendu Mishra: John McVay, the chief executive of the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television, has described Channel 4 as

“a catalyst for generations of entrepreneurs”,

which

“plays a critical role in the UK's broadcasting ecology”,

having

“invested in hundreds of independent production companies over the nearly 40 years of its existence, enabling and improving access, skills, international activity and diversity.”

Would the Minister agree with me that selling off this precious public asset to an overseas competitor with no remit for commissioning innovative British content would be a body blow to the UK's creative economy?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree that selling off Channel 4 with no remit would be a mistake and that is certainly not our intention. John McVay, who is somebody I know well and have a great deal of respect for, is right that Channel 4 has done an excellent job in investing in independent production, but it is up against competition from big streaming services that can make 10 times the kind of investment that Channel 4 is capable of. That is why we think it is the right time to look at its ownership in order that, potentially, it can have access to much greater capital, which it will need in order to have a thriving future.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) [V]: My own personal view, and I stress that it is my personal view, is that the recovery of Channel 4 and the evolving media landscape warrant close consideration of privatisation and sale. Four years is a lifetime in the modern media marketplace. Does the Minister agree that this would be a good juncture at which also to consider whether Channel 4 could be bolstered by a merger with ITV or even by hiving off BBC Worldwide, the commercial arm of the BBC, which has often underperformed but has tremendous international potential to build scale for Channel 4?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I commend him and his Select Committee for the excellent report on public service broadcasting that they produced recently, which drew attention to the fact that the way in which we consume television is changing fast and that the switch from linear to digital is taking place even more quickly than some people anticipated. We

have reached no conclusion as to the appropriate future ownership model for Channel 4—we maintain a completely open mind—but he raises a number of interesting possibilities and we look forward to seeing what submissions we receive as part of the consultation.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The case for the privatisation of Channel 4 was, of course, debunked by the then Secretary of State last time the issue reared its head. I think her assessment was that it would be too much grief for too little money. Privatisation would see profit put first, a slash in the £500 million that goes annually to independent production companies, a centralisation of headquarters—the antithesis of levelling up—and likely cuts to Channel 4’s brilliant news and current affairs programming. Channel 4 recorded record profits last year and it does not cost the taxpayer a penny. Given that this much-loved institution is profitable and free, why do Ministers want to do down Britain and sell it off to avaricious American investors?

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on several counts. It is the case that Channel 4 recorded a profit last year, and I commend the management for taking the action that made that possible, but the reason they did so was because they cut the amount of money that they spent on content by £140 million in anticipation of a big fall in advertising revenue, which indeed took place. It is to sustain Channel 4 going forward that we are looking at the possibility of alternative ownership models, and it would certainly be our intention that Channel 4 would do more outside London and across the United Kingdom, not less.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): “Countdown”, “Derry Girls”, “Gogglebox”, “The Word”, “It’s a Sin”, “Chewing Gum”—which gave us the astonishing Michaela Coel for the first time—“Educating Yorkshire”, “24 hours in A&E”, “24 hours in Police Custody”, “Location, Location, Location” with Phil and Kirstie, “Friday Night Dinner”—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure what we need now is the telephone book.

Christian Matheson: I will simply finish with “Hollyoaks” and “The Secret Life of the Zoo”, Mr Speaker, which as you know have something in common with me—[*Laughter.*] They were both filmed in Chester. For four decades, Channel 4 has reflected and given voice to the diverse parts of the United Kingdom. Why do the Minister and the Government want to take that voice away and, as other hon. Members have said, sell it off to foreign tech companies that have no loyalty to the United Kingdom?

Mr Whittingdale: I am extremely impressed by the hon. Gentleman’s viewing habits, although I notice he left out “Naked Attraction”, which certainly does appeal to diverse tastes. However, I absolutely agree that Channel 4 has been responsible for some great programmes over the years, and it is our intention that it should be able to continue to do that in the coming years. It is precisely because it is going to need access to investment capital in order to maintain that record that we think now is the right time to consider alternative models, but we have not reached any conclusion yet.

Important Historical Documents

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that documents of historical importance are retained in the UK. [902113]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): The UK’s export control system provides a safety net to protect our national treasures from being sold abroad, whereby Ministers can delay the issuing of an export licence to allow an opportunity for a UK buyer to acquire it. Between 2008 and 2018, 62 items were saved for the nation in this way. A recent example was the notebooks of Sir Charles Lyell, the renowned Scottish geologist who influenced Charles Darwin, which were acquired by the University of Edinburgh in 2019.

Mr Sheerman [V]: May I declare an interest as chair of the John Clare Trust, a charitable trust, and of course one of my daughters is a poet? May I draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that we have discovered in recent weeks a beautiful treasure trove of letters from the Brontës, Jane Austen and Robert Burns? It is unique. If we cannot act now and raise £15 million to keep it in this country, it will be broken up and sold at auction in New York. Will the Minister and the Government help us? Could the National Trust, which has huge reserves, help us to keep it in Britain? Most of the literary houses have had a year of no income and are struggling to help and raise this money. We desperately need this collection kept in our country. Will she help and help soon?

Caroline Dinenage: The Government are delighted that a public consortium led by the Friends of the National Libraries has come together to seek to acquire the Honresfield library. We hope that the fundraising campaign is successful and is able to realise its plans to allocate parts of the collection to libraries around the UK, for the benefit of the public. We will, of course, keep a very close eye on this and I know that the Secretary of State is planning to meet the group shortly.

Electronic Communications Code

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): If he will make it his policy to conduct an impact assessment of the potential financial effect on community organisations of proposals to reform the electronic communications code. [902115]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government are currently considering the responses to the consultation on the electronic communications code, which closed in March, and we will, of course, carefully consider the impact of our proposals on all stakeholders, including community organisations, which we all value so highly.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that thousands of farmers, churches and community groups who host mobile telecoms infrastructure on their land have faced financial hardship because of the 2017 ECC reform, with some seeing enforced rent reductions of up to 90%, as has happened in my constituency. What measures is he planning to support those who face losing these critical sources of income? Will he kindly agree to meet me and representatives of these impacted groups as soon as possible?

Matt Warman: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this. It is important to be clear that those 2017 reforms were intended to cut the amount paid by operators and put them on a similar footing to other utilities, and that supports the roll-out of connectivity that we all want to see. However, it is important that the negotiations that take place are fair commercial ones and that landowners ultimately receive a fair price. The reason we are consulting as we speak is to make sure that the system works effectively and that those fair prices are delivered.

Digital Connectivity: Rural Areas

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas. [902116]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government are focused intently on improving digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas, both through the £5 billion Project Gigabit programme and the £1 billion shared rural network. That will deliver huge increases in connectivity across the whole country, while Project Gigabit provides fibre to at least 85% of the country.

Jerome Mayhew: I very much welcome Tuesday's announcement on the shared rural network and the news that 98% of my constituency will receive some form of coverage. However, those who visit Great Snoring and many other villages in my constituency will find that they have to go outside to get a signal, if they get one at all. Will the Minister confirm to me that in order to claim this coverage people have to have a signal sufficiently strong to penetrate a normal building, so they can have a conversation inside and not only in the garden?

Matt Warman: The target of the 4G shared rural network is based on outside coverage, but of course the effect of that outside coverage is a huge halo that brings signals indoors: into, as my hon. Friend puts it, normal homes and beyond. I think we will see a really significant improvement in indoor coverage, alongside an improvement on 45,000 km of roads and in 1.2 million businesses and homes across the country.

Tourism Recovery Plan

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What further steps the Government plans to take to support travel agencies as part of the implementation of the tourism recovery plan. [902118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Government have provided more than £25 billion in support to the tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors over the course of the pandemic. We are continuing to support travel agents with, for example, restart grants and the extended furlough scheme. Our tourism recovery plan sets out a range of measures to support the sector, with the aim of recovering domestic tourism to pre-pandemic levels by 2022 and international travel by 2023, both at least a year faster than independent forecasters predict.

Neale Hanvey [V]: The headline numbers—that £25 billion—tell only part of the story. Unfortunately, because of the asymmetry of the Government support and the asymmetry of the travel recovery plan, much of that money has not found its way into the hands of travel agents such as Moorelands Travel and Travel Your World in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency. These family-run small and medium-sized enterprises have, like many others across the country, kept the lights on for the travel industry. They have given their all and sold the silver, and there is nothing left to give. They now face the possibility of going under. That will disrupt holidays and the travel recovery itself, so will the Minister explain to them—not to me—why their efforts and their businesses no longer matter?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman's final comment is an unfortunate characterisation. He will be aware that many elements of the tourism sector are devolved matters, but we are working co-operatively with the Scottish Government on many issues. The Scottish Government have developed their recovery plan and we have developed one as well, and it does have UK-wide implications. For those sectors in England that have been unable to get grants and support automatically, we have put in place measures to help them, such as the additional restrictions grant. We will continue to assess support measures.

Paralympic Games

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What plans his Department has to (a) promote and (b) encourage people to watch the Paralympic Games in summer 2021. [902120]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The Paralympic games are one of the highlights of the sporting calendar. In recognition of their special national significance, we added the Paralympic games to the listed events regime in 2020, meaning that they will remain available on free-to-air television. I wish all our athletes every success in Tokyo and very much welcome Channel 4's plans to broadcast live coverage of the Paralympics throughout the games.

Dr Cameron [V]: New research by Scope has shown that 69% of people with disabilities believe that the Paralympics help to tackle negative attitudes. This comes as three in four people with disabilities believe that the public's perceptions of disabled people have worsened or not shifted during the pandemic. Scope and ParalympicsGB have teamed up to call for the Paralympic games to be a catalyst for change. The all-party group on disability, which I chair, asks the Secretary of State and the Government to commit to work across broadcasting to champion inclusion in sports and employment for people with disabilities, alongside celebrating the fantastic achievements of our Paralympians.

Mr Whittingdale: The Government absolutely share the ambition of the hon. Lady and her all-party group to increase the participation by disabled people in sport. The Paralympics have been an extraordinary success in demonstrating the remarkable achievements of disabled athletes. I share her hope that the Paralympics will again receive record viewing figures and that the UK Paralympic athletes will continue to do as well as they have in recent times.

Cultural and Sporting Sectors: Covid-19

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to open up the cultural and sporting sectors as covid-19 restrictions are eased.
[902121]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): We have provided unprecedented support for arts and sports and have only just opened up applications for the latest round of the £2 billion culture recovery fund. That will focus specifically on helping sectors to reopen fully. Our aim is, of course, to get everything—sports, live music and cultural events—back at full capacity from 19 July, and we are making good progress towards that goal.

Chris Green: The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that, if the direction of travel in respect of covid data is maintained, we will be able to have our terminus day on 19 July. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that terminus day means an end to social distancing, an end to compulsory mask wearing and a full return to normal, not just for the end of July but permanently?

Oliver Dowden: As my hon. Friend rightly says, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has said, we are making very good progress towards 19 July. We are hopeful and, indeed, confident that we will be able to remove, as planned at stage 4, all the remaining legal limits on social contact, reopen the remaining closed settings and remove all limits on weddings and other life events. That is very much what I am working towards.

National Lottery Licence: Procurement

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What progress he has made on the procurement process for the fourth national lottery licence.
[902123]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The Gambling Commission is running the competition for the next national lottery licence, which will come into force in August 2023. The Gambling Commission has undertaken several rounds of market engagement with prospective applicants, and I was pleased to note that the commission received the expected number of applications. We expect to announce the preferred applicant at the end of the year.

Carolyn Harris: The Gambling Commission has turned down an invitation to appear before the gambling-related harm all-party group to discuss the upcoming national lottery licence procurement and the performance of the current provider. Many products developed by the current provider, such as online instant win games, have potential to cause serious harms, so will the Minister reassure the House that there will be proper scrutiny of the next provider and that appropriate harm prevention measures will be introduced?

Mr Whittingdale: The incidence of problem gambling is lowest among players of the National Lottery, but nevertheless the need for protection of players remains of paramount importance. It was for that reason that the Government recently increased the minimum age for purchase of national lottery tickets from 16 to 18,

and I can assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to monitor, as will the Gambling Commission, whether any further measures are necessary.

Topical Questions

[902070] **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): I have announced ambitious proposals for broadcasting reform, including the equalisation of regulation of video on demand services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, prominence for public service broadcasters, and the potential change in ownership of Channel 4 in order to secure its long-term success.

We continue to work closely with all our sectors as we plan for the full reopening on 19 July, and our next wave of pilots is helping us to do so safely and permanently. One of those pilots will, of course, now go down in history after England's glorious win at Wembley on Tuesday, and I know that the whole House will join me in wishing the team the very best of luck in the quarter finals in Rome on Saturday.

Dr Wallis: I want to draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the issue of displaying the Union flag in the Welsh Parliament. As many will know, the Presiding Officer of the Senedd banned the display of the Union flag by Conservative Members last week. Yesterday, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford, described it as "vacuous symbolism" by

"tea towel Tories of 2021".

Does my right hon. Friend agree that people across Wales are proud to display the Union Jack because of their pride in the country in which they live and of what the UK stands for? What actions will—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we've got it. Sorry, but topical questions are to be short.

Oliver Dowden: I share my hon. Friend's pride in the Union flag, because it unites us as a nation and a people. As he well knows, the Union flag is the national flag of the United Kingdom, and it is so called because it embodies the emblems of three countries united under one sovereign: the kingdoms of England, Wales, Scotland and, of course, Northern Ireland. It is quite extraordinary that the First Minister should describe it as vacuous symbolism by tea towel Tories. It really does show how out of touch he is with the people of Wales, and the Labour party is with the wider United Kingdom.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I remind the Secretary of State of the election results in Wales in May.

I too wish England all the best for the quarter finals. It was a fantastic game, and I look forward to a repeat of the performance in the quarter finals.

On 23 March, the Minister for Digital and Culture, when asked about Government-backed insurance for the live events industry, said that

"the decision is with the Treasury right now."—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 309WH.]

We are three and a half months on, and there is silence from the Government. Can the Secretary of State say today whether the Government are going to underwrite time-limited insurance for live events? The industry just needs to know the answer—a straight yes or no, please.

Oliver Dowden: I very much understand the industry's desire for insurance, and I have engaged with it. I have said all along that, as with film and TV insurance, the first step is to get all the other restrictions removed. We are making very good progress towards doing that on the 19th. At that point, if there is a market failure, namely that the commercial insurance providers cannot insure for that, we will look at whether we can extend insurance with some sort of Government-backed scheme. We are engaging extensively with the Treasury and other Government Departments to see what that might look like.

Jo Stevens: Festivals continue to be cancelled, even those scheduled for after 19 July, such as Womad, because the Government still have not published any guidance about sector reopening. They were forced into publishing the results of the events research programme last week after our urgent question, but they are also briefing to the press that nightclubs, for example, are going to reopen with no testing or proof of vaccine requirements. Businesses have had 15 long months of this chaos. The Secretary of State will not confirm insurance now and he will not publish guidance, so will he explain how festivals and live events scheduled for after 19 July can go ahead?

Oliver Dowden: As I have said previously, we are making very good progress towards 19 July. Given that the evidence is suggesting that despite rising infections, we are breaking the linkage to hospitalisations and deaths, I really do hope and expect that we will be able to have that full reopening from 19 July. We have always said that we would clarify and confirm that at least a week in advance, which would be by 12 July. Festivals have benefited from millions of pounds of wider support through the culture recovery fund, and, of course, at least one of our events research programme pilots is in relation to a festival.

[902071] **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con) [V]: At the risk of sounding like a broken record, may I ask the Secretary of State how the shared rural network and other measures are finally going to get us the improvements in mobile phone coverage across north Lincolnshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire that we so desperately still need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The shared rural network will eliminate the partial notspots across huge swathes of the country, particularly in Yorkshire and the Humber; it will take the region from 95% to 99% coverage from at least one operator, and from 81% to 90% coverage from all four operators. I know how hard my hon. Friend has been working on this issue, and I look forward to working with him to continue that progress.

[902073] **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: May I take this opportunity to wish the Sunderland Empire in my constituency a happy 114th birthday?

The Government boast free trade deals with 17 countries, each having different rules, making the situation almost as hard as it is with countries with which we do not have trade deals. When are the Government going to sort this out and get a deal to allow our artists, musicians, truckers and support staff to tour across Europe properly, and save this industry before it is too late?

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): We are 100% aware of the importance of the UK's creative and cultural industries, and the importance of musicians and performers being able to tour easily abroad. We have moved with great urgency to provide the clarity that they need about the current position. Through our engagement with member states, we have established that at least 17 of the 27, including France, Germany and Italy—some of the biggest economic contributors—do allow visa and permit-free touring. We continue to talk to the others.

[902072] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): I think we can all agree that football is absolutely, 100%, definitely coming home. With charity beginning at home, when the two come together they are absolutely unstoppable. This weekend, I am joining the Maccabi 24-hour football challenge in Prestwich in my constituency. Will the Minister join me in wishing everyone the best of luck and crossing his fingers for the best weather for us?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I am afraid that I cannot promise the weather—I wish I could! I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in wishing all those participating in the Maccabi 24-hour football challenge the very best of luck. I have no doubt that the time will fly by if they keep top of mind the inspirational example of Harry Kane and Raheem Sterling from Tuesday's success against Germany. This is a fantastic opportunity for volunteers to raise money for their club to refurbish a local pitch, and I understand that the FA will be matching some of the money raised. I wish him the very best of luck.

[902077] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) [V]: Nightclubs cannot open today, and they do not know in what capacity and under what rules they will be working when they do. They have no income and are still racking up debts, and today they have to start paying towards furlough payments. Does the Secretary of State think that is fair on them?

Oliver Dowden: Nightclubs actually fall within the responsibility of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I am very happy to answer the question. The key thing is to get them to reopen. We are making very good progress towards doing that on 19 July. Many of the existing schemes—certainly the culture recovery fund—will continue to pay out for the coming weeks and months. Indeed, we have said that claims can be made in respect of the culture recovery fund until the end of this year, so a wide range of support remains available for our cultural institutions.

[902074] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: Many of my constituents have benefited hugely from investment by Hillingdon Council in youth facilities. The youth investment fund has the potential

to bring these benefits to a much wider group of young people. Will my hon. Friend provide an update on the plans the Department has for the use of this money?

Matt Warman: The youth investment fund aims to level up access to youth provision over the course of this Parliament, but £30 million has already been committed as capital funding in 2021-22. That will provide investment in new and refurbished safe spaces for young people so that they can access support from youth workers and enjoy beneficial activities, including sport and culture. We know how valuable these facilities are, and details of the bidding process for the next rounds will be announced in due course.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Court Cases: Media Comment

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): What steps he has taken to help ensure that court cases are not prejudiced by inappropriate (a) reporting by the media and (b) comment by the public. [902030]

Mr Speaker: The question has been withdrawn, but I will ask the Attorney General to provide an answer, then I will call Kenny MacAskill to ask his supplementary.

The Attorney General (Michael Ellis): In order to avoid prejudice to criminal proceedings, I may issue what is called a media advisory notice in order to inform and ensure responsible media coverage. I have launched a campaign called #thinkbeforeyoupost to promote awareness of the risks of ill-judged social media posts. It is critical that the evidence is tested before a jury—any evidence should be tested before a jury—in a court of law and not in the court of public opinion.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): In a recent Scottish case, a High Court judge suggested that offences by a blogger were to be dealt with differently from similar breaches by mainstream media. Given that most, if not all, of the recent serious breaches have been carried out by the mainstream media, and given moreover that the press and media are evolutionary, with many of the current mainstream media once themselves having been radical outsiders supporting, for example, universal franchise, does the Attorney General agree that while bloggers rightly require to be held to account, they are equally entitled to the protections that apply to the rest of the mainstream media?

The Attorney General: Everyone is equal under the law. In general, the media are responsible and are very much aware of reporting restrictions, the limitations on reporting of active proceedings, and what reporting might amount to a contempt of court. As I said, I do issue and have issued media advisory notices where that is not happening and in exceptional cases. The hon. Gentleman's point about bloggers and others on social media is a live one. It is right that everyone is aware that whether they have training or not, they are responsible under the law for what they post. Interfering in, prejudicing or undermining court proceedings is a serious matter and can be visited with a sentence of up to two years' imprisonment.

Royal Albert Hall: Charity Tribunal

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to support the Charity Commission's request to refer the Royal Albert Hall to the charity tribunal. [902031]

The Attorney General (Michael Ellis): The disagreement between the Charity Commission and the Royal Albert Hall is long-running and raises complex issues of charity law. The parties have been asked to try to resolve these issues without recourse to potentially costly litigation. That process is ongoing. My officials are continuing to engage with the parties to assist them in working through the contentious matters raised by this case.

Mrs Hodgson [V]: A face-value ticket for an Eric Clapton concert in May next year at the Royal Albert Hall costs £175, yet tickets are on sale on Viagogo at a 577% mark-up, at £1,185 per ticket. The seats in question are owned by a party related to a vice-president of the corporation. The Attorney General wrote to me last week to say that he wishes to

"move this matter towards a satisfactory resolution as swiftly as possible."

Will he therefore take immediate action on this serious and clear conflict of interest at a British institution and permit the Charity Commission to take this to a tribunal?

Mr Speaker: Eric Clapton is a rock star, just to help the Attorney General!

The Attorney General: I am grateful for that elucidation, Mr Speaker. The Royal Albert Hall and the Charity Commission have been working to try to resolve the matter that the hon. Lady refers to without recourse to litigation, and I am awaiting the outcome of that process. I have instructed my officials to continue to engage with the parties that the hon. Lady refers to, to assist them in working through the complex issues raised by this case. I will say, however, that no decision has been taken on whether to consent to the referral to the Charity Commission. I will approach the matter as a neutral umpire, commensurate with my role as Attorney General and as *parens patriae*.

Criminal Justice System Recovery: Covid-19

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the recovery of the criminal justice system as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [902032]

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the recovery of the criminal justice system as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [902046]

The Attorney General (Michael Ellis): I frequently meet criminal justice partners to discuss this important issue. The covid-19 outbreak has been felt keenly by the criminal justice system. Recovery is a priority for this Government. I have been proud of the resilience that criminal justice agencies have shown. There is still more to do, but both the CPS and the Serious Fraud Office have been commended for their efforts at this difficult time. I thank them for continuing to support the delivery of justice.

Simon Baynes: I thank the police, Wrexham and Denbighshire councils and other authorities in Clwyd South, who have done a great job during the difficult days of the pandemic. How can my right hon. and learned Friend reassure my constituents of efforts to continue to deliver justice in Clwyd South, despite the pandemic?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for his generous question. I am proud that all criminal justice agencies have worked closely together since the covid-19 outbreak to ensure that essential justice services continue to be delivered. The CPS and the court service in north Wales have worked closely together throughout the pandemic to ensure that courts can be run safely and to maximise the flow of cases, while preserving public health. For example, domestic abuse cases in particular have been prioritised in the magistrates courts, so there are no delays or backlogs for those sensitive cases, where victims deserve our protection and support, but that goes in Clwyd South and it goes everywhere.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his answer. In Sussex, we have a backlog of over 800 Crown court cases—one case is now approaching four years without coming to court—and a rising drop-out rate. The Nightingale court in Chichester is making a real difference, but we still need greater capacity and pace. Can he assure me that every avenue is being pursued to address this backlog, so that we can ensure justice for victims in Eastbourne and in Sussex?

The Attorney General: Yes, indeed. CPS South East in her region is working with all criminal justice partners to support the recovery activity within Sussex, including to ensure court capacity can be maximised and file quality improved—of course, the better the file quality, the speedier proceedings can follow. The latest levels of cases that I have seen flowing through the courts indicate that in recent weeks at least, outstanding case load in the Crown court has begun to reduce. However, there is still more to be done, and I should say at this point that there is no limit on the number of days that Crown courts can sit for the next fiscal year. That will enable Crown court judges to hold as many hearings as they safely can and as is physically possible, as we continue to recover from the pandemic.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As we come out of the pandemic, to restore confidence in the criminal justice system, the public need to know that the law will apply equally to everyone, irrespective of rank, job or title. It is clear from the footage of the former Health Secretary and his aide that the law on indoor gatherings was breached. This very same law prevented Her Majesty the Queen from sitting with her family at the funeral of her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. Does the Attorney General agree that by failing to investigate the former Health Secretary's breach, this Government are sending the message that there is one rule for Government Ministers and their advisers, and another for everyone else?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady will know that we do not discuss individual cases, putative or otherwise. The reality of the matter is that, as she will recognise, everyone is equal under the law in our system. That has always been the case and remains the case. We have an extremely pressing CPS case load, and a court system

that is working very hard to bring justice to all, and that includes victims of serious crime, so I do not recognise the problem she raises. We have a system in this country in which everyone is treated equally, and it is a matter entirely for the independent authorities to investigate each and every case as they see fit, not for Government Ministers.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): With a record 60,000 cases in the backlog of Crown court cases, past UK Government austerity is closing legal aid centres and now covid is impacting significantly on access to justice. Does the Attorney General agree that the justice system is vital to keeping cases moving through the justice system, and what does he plan to do to ensure that access to legal aid is available for everyone across the UK?

The Attorney General: The hon. Member is right to raise this point. Of course, access to legal aid is very important in the administration of justice, and this Government have maintained funding for that purpose. She is also right to focus on the impact of the pandemic on the system. As I have already indicated, financial matters are being dealt with very generously by the Treasury and the Ministry of Justice. This Government have spent over a quarter of a billion pounds on recovery, as she may know, that has helped to make court buildings safe, including by rolling out new technology for virtual hearings, which of course is less expensive and less time-consuming. There is recruitment of additional staff, and there are Nightingale courts. Whether it be at one end of the criminal justice system or the other, this Government are funding the process so as to ensure speedy, safe and equal justice for all.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Attorney General rightly referred to the work of the various justice agencies in this regard. The Director of Public Prosecutions gave powerful evidence to the Justice Committee on 15 June about the pressures that the backlog places on the Crown Prosecution Service. Every case that goes to court has to be worked on by CPS staff, and he is concerned that there is a real risk, in his word, of "fatigue" with case levels running at 50% above pre-covid levels. Can we make sure we have a whole-system approach of sustained investment in the Crown Prosecution Service and the rest of the prosecution service so that staff can cope with the demands of getting back on track and having cases brought forward timeously?

The Attorney General: I thank my learned friend for his question, and he is right to make this point about the wellbeing of staff in the criminal justice system and, having had Max Hill before his Committee, in the CPS in particular. My hon. Friend will know that Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate's reports have praised the Crown Prosecution Service and its focus on the wellbeing of staff during this period, because they have continued to deliver essential public service. In spite of the pandemic, staff have continued to attend courts, where necessary, to enable them to fulfil their public duty. I should say that the evidence his Committee has heard is correct: the total live CPS post-charge case load is 51% higher than pre-covid, which equates to 52,000 additional cases. In the magistrates court, there is an estimated increase of 3,800 cases that will require a trial listing, and there is an increase of 11,700—70%—in

the Crown courts. So he is right to think about the wellbeing of staff and the fatigue that they are naturally enduring during this time.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: Many of my constituents who are small business owners and self-employed are struggling with unpaid invoices and bills for work and services provided, and are threatened with losing their homes. They are not eligible for national support schemes and need to rely on courts to recover their lost money. What will the Minister do to help them get justice as quickly as possible?

The Attorney General: The Government are very conscious of the pressure that businesses of all sizes—small, medium and large—have been put under by the pandemic. The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on small businesses, because losses occasioned by the pandemic and its exigencies put considerable pressure on small businesses in particular. Where they have to recover debts owed to them through the courts, the courts will process those matters, but there are prioritisations within the system. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that, to my knowledge, the Ministry of Justice is working hard to support the court process, so that all matters can be dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

Serious Fraud Office: Economic Crime

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the Serious Fraud Office's effectiveness in prosecuting serious economic crime. [902033]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): I recognise the significant work that my hon. Friend has done to protect victims in this area, both as a constituency MP and in his role on the all-party groups on fair business banking and for whistleblowing. In the past 12 months the Serious Fraud Office had brought a number of individuals and corporations to justice, including successful prosecutions in its Unaoil case, uncovering \$17 million in bribes. A conviction against GPT resulted in £30 million of confiscations, fines and costs, and deferred prosecution agreements with G4S and Airline Services Limited have resulted in more than £47 million in penalties and costs.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her answer. The GPT case she refers to was one of the SFO's rare successes in court in a proven case of corruption. I think there were £28 million of penalties, although it may be £30 million, as she said, including costs. My constituent, Ian Foxley, was a key whistleblower in that case, but he has been completely hung out to dry by the SFO, and has had 10 years without any financial compensation—10 years of lost income. What effect does the Minister think that will have on future whistleblowers, and the likelihood that they will come forward with key evidence? Will she meet me and my constituent to discuss the matter and see what can be done?

The Solicitor General: I reassure my hon. Friend that the SFO recognises the importance of whistleblowers to its work, and if appropriate I would be happy to meet him to discuss the case and perhaps the issue more broadly. In that particular case the judge concluded that

it was not suitable to make a compensation order, and that is why the SFO concluded that it would not be appropriate to put Mr Foxley's victim impact statement before the court. I hope to discuss those issues more fully with my hon. Friend.

End-to-End Rape Review

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement the end-to-end rape review's recommendations for the CPS. [902036]

The Attorney General (Michael Ellis): I recognise the need to restore the faith of victims of these horrific cases. The recently published rape review outlines the Government's ambition to ensure that justice is served and more cases progress through the system. The CPS is fully committed to delivering actions under the rape review, and those will result in improved joint working between police and prosecutors, to build stronger cases earlier and with less intrusion into victims' private lives.

Kerry McCarthy [V]: The review includes setting the CPS targets of getting rape prosecutions up to 2016 levels. Labour has said that the Government should return to those levels by next year, not by the end of the next Parliament—something the Lord Chancellor said was “constitutionally illiterate.” Will the Attorney General confirm whether the Government intend to stick to those targets, or have they already U-turned on that?

The Attorney General: The matter to which the hon. Lady refers is for the Ministry of Justice, but she is right to raise it because cases involving rape and serious sexual offences are some of the most challenging and complicated cases—I emphasise that—with which the CPS deals. That is why only prosecutors with specialist training manage these incredibly sensitive, time-consuming and complex cases. The CPS is committed to ensuring that specialist prosecutors are equipped to deal with the complexities and sensitivities of those types of case.

For example, in May, the CPS published revised rape legal guidance, following public consultation, including new content on challenging rape myths and stereotypes, and a trauma-informed approach. The reason I raise that is that speed is important, yes, but it is also right that the complexities and sensitivities of those cases are handled by highly trained and professional CPS lawyers. That is what is happening.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Government's end-to-end rape review has been a missed opportunity to address the systemic failures in our criminal justice system. In the Attorney General's own words, rape victims “are being failed” by this Government. After a two-year wait, the review offers only piecemeal pilots, tinkering around the edges and next to no new funding. When the dire rape conviction statistics were raised with the Prime Minister last week in the House, he dismissed that as “jabber”—a disgraceful response. Will the Attorney General apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady is mischaracterising what was said last week. The cross-Government rape review was published on 18 June. It has produced key actions: an initial ambition to return volumes of cases

progressing through the system to pre-2016 levels by the end of this Parliament; an ambition to ensure that no victim is left without access to a mobile phone for more than 24 hours; the launching of pathfinder projects to test innovative ways for the police and the CPS to approach rape cases—so much has been included in the rape review.

I very much accept, as I said in the rape review's opening paragraphs, that a great deal needs to be done and that we are not happy with where the process has been. A great deal of work is going into that, however, and increased support for victims throughout the criminal

justice system is important. That is happening, including through increased provisions, for example, with ISVAs— independent sexual violence advisers.

Mr Speaker: I am disappointed by the number of questions we have got through today. In future, I hope, we might be able to get through quite a few more. I will now suspend the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.35 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 5 July will include:

MONDAY 5 July—Remaining stages of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

TUESDAY 6 July—Second Reading of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill.

WEDNESDAY 7 July—Opposition day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 8 July—General debate on fuel poverty, followed by debate on a motion relating to the implementation of the recommendations of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 July—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 July will include:

MONDAY 12 July—Second Reading of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

TUESDAY 13 July—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of the Chairman of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

WEDNESDAY 14 July—Second Reading of a Bill.

THURSDAY 15 July—Debate on a motion relating to the Northern Ireland protocol, followed by debate on a motion relating to the Peking winter Olympics and Chinese Government sanctions. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 July—The House will not be sitting.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business, and we can discuss later the apparent absence so far of a motion to change rules about recall.

Mr Speaker:

"It's extraordinary. I don't understand."

And:

"I think the social distancing rules are very important and people should follow them."

Those words were spoken last year by the now former Health Secretary, when a scientist admitted to meeting his girlfriend indoors, breaking covid rules, and now we know that the former Health Secretary broke the same rules. He also flouted rules on procurement, handing out contracts to dodgy mates; he let down staff and residents of care homes with his not-really-a-ring-of-protection around them; and much more. For instance, what sort of Health Secretary hands out contracts for personal protective equipment to his pub landlord, from a pub called—I am not making this up—the Cock Inn? A few weeks ago at business questions, the Leader of the House referred to the former Health Secretary as a "successful genius". Does the Leader of the House wish to amend that judgment?

This May, the rules were that there should be no indoor social gathering of two or more people from different households. We have all seen the CCTV footage of the former Health Secretary and the former non-executive director of his former Department—that is not a work meeting. However, does the Leader of the House know where Government cameras are in Departments? Is there a list? If not the Government, who put the cameras there, and how?

On "The Moggcast" this week, the Leader of the House said that

"if a man were to appoint his wife to be a non-executive director you would hope that the Cabinet Office knew that the lady was married to the man".

He clearly agrees that it matters who a Secretary of State appoints to check his or her work, so will there be a review of the appointment process, and will the Government publish details of the appointment of this specific former non-executive director?

This week, the British people have felt the joy of football victory. Keen followers of business questions will know that football is not my sport, but even I witnessed both the goals and the joy. I am a great fan of joy, and may there be more joy on Saturday. However, in light of the concerns about covid outbreaks associated with Euro matches, what reassurance will the Government give about protection for the remaining matches, and does the Leader of the House understand the bemusement of amateur choirs, which are still not allowed to sing indoors, when they see football fans cheering indoors? Can he explain why VIPs and business execs are exempt from travel restrictions when others, who are very ill, cannot even get a response to an application to isolate at home, instead of in a hotel, on medical grounds? It is rules for all of us, and no rules for Government and their mates.

A year ago, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work said that the review of the six-month rule for terminally ill people would be published "shortly". Last week, the Leader of the House said that it would be published "soon". On Monday, the Minister said that it would be published "very soon", and then said the same about the disability strategy promised two years ago. Yesterday, the Prime Minister gave a "soon" about the Online Safety Bill. Will the Leader of the House tell us how long is "soon"?

Thanks to months of campaigning by steelworkers, their trade unions and MPs, yesterday the Government finally acted to protect steel jobs, but just saying "soon" does not help people who are worried about their jobs and livelihoods. Will the Government learn that lesson?

When Ministers break rules, the Prime Minister rewards them instead of sacking them. When the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government helped out a Tory donor mate, the Prime Minister did not sack him. When the Home Secretary was found to have bullied her own staff, he did not sack her. When the Education Secretary messed up, well, pretty much everything, he did not sack him, and that saga continues, owing to children missing months of school and a catch-up plan that does not catch them up.

And no, this is not just Westminster bubble stuff. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said yesterday, it hurts people. They feel betrayed. People dutifully watched No. 10 press conferences to check rules, and in following rules, people struggled,

[Thangam Debbonaire]

some lost jobs, some could not hold the hand of a parent at the end of life or be at their funeral, but they stuck to the rules, even when that really hurt. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister cannot get his Ministers to stick to any rules. What consequences does the Leader of the House think there should be for Ministers breaking rules?

People hate hypocrisy. They know it when they see it, and they have seen it again this week: the man who set the covid rules breaking the covid rules, and the Prime Minister just waving his hands in the air. The Leader of the House will say, "There's a new Health Secretary and the vaccine roll-out is great." Yes, we are eternally grateful to scientists and the NHS for the vaccine—we are all queuing up—but that does not change Government rule breaking and why this matters. When will the Government stop breaking their own rules? It really is one set of rules for the people, and for the Government and their mates, it is no rules for them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the hon. Lady's fox was shot some time ago, because my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) is the former Health Secretary, and the word "former" is quite an important one. We have had references to association football, and my right hon. Friend has been replaced by the super-sub—the Jack Grealish of politics—in the form of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), the new Secretary of State, who has come on to great effect and with great panache.

The hon. Lady challenges me on what I said about the great genius of the former Secretary of State. I stick by that because he worked incredibly hard for 15 months. If I may resort to Dryden once again, the hon. Lady will know:

"Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide."

Unfortunately, my right hon. Friend made a grave mistake, for which, because the rules are enforced fairly, he resigned. He resigned the day after the story was printed in the newspapers. Here we get the splitting of hairs between the resignation and the sacking. The man has gone. He has lost his job, as has the non-executive director in the Department of Health and Social Care with whom he seems to be closely associated. That is quite the right way for it to have happened. My right hon. Friend is no longer in office.

The hon. Lady complains about procurement, but that is not what the Opposition were saying a year ago, when they specifically asked the Government whether we would

"now commit to provide local public health services and Public Health England with 'whatever it needs' to build up the test, trace and isolate regime so obviously needed".

The Opposition made a strong demand that that should take place very quickly. Of course, it was done quickly. What did the Opposition do? They very helpfully set out 10 proposals for the Government, and No. 3 was:

"Test, test, test. For testing to be effective, Government should provide capacity for widespread, regular community testing. Everyone showing symptoms should be able to access a test within 24 hours."

On and on they went, asking the Government to do exactly what the Government were doing, but now, a year later, they complain that we did it quickly. What

did they want? Did they want us to do it with torpor, inactivity and idleness? Well, we would not have got very far with it if we had. Last year they said we should do whatever it takes, but this year they say that doing whatever it takes was wrong. There is a word for that, Mr Speaker, but it is not parliamentary, so I will not use it. It was quite right of the Opposition to ask for what they did a year ago. It was right for the Government to do it and it had to be done at speed.

I am delighted that the hon. Lady wants to spread joy. As we all know, joy cometh in the morning and this morning is a morning of joy for us all. She asks about remaining matches. Now, I do not know the specific plans for football, but I can inform the House about the plans for anyone intending to go to the match between England and Pakistan at Lord's, a one-day match on 10 July, which I will be going to. I got the circular from the MCC—the Marylebone Cricket Club—yesterday. One will be required to show either that one has been double vaccinated within a fortnight or that one has had a recent test, so there are procedures in place. This is one of the test events—it is actually a one-day match, not a Test, Mr Speaker, but you get the point—where things will be carefully kept in order to ensure the safety of people going there.

The hon. Lady thanks the Government for bringing forward the duties for the steelworkers. I am grateful for her thanks and support for the robust action the Government have taken. That is being done quite properly in the right way to ensure that the steel industry is protected where it needs to be.

Then we get into an obscure argument about the Westminster bubble. It is unquestionably true that there are some issues which this House is beset by. I think that deciding how many angels dance on the pinhead of a resignation or a sacking is one of those and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was right to say so yesterday.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: Good morning, Mr Speaker. Two weeks ago, my right hon. Friend promised to chase up local government Ministers for failing to answer my questions about the consultation in Somerset. I know he has chased them and I do thank him enormously for that, but I am beginning to understand why the Ministry and the Government kept this a secret. The results of the survey attracted only 5,000 responses—a pathetic 1% of the Somerset population—but 111,000 people cast their votes in the referendum organised by the district councils and a huge majority voted in favour of the two unitaries. This referendum cannot be ignored by Ministers because of democracy and legality. They will damage themselves if they do. This deserves a debate in Government time to be able to talk about the land of King Arthur and what a marvellous honourable people they are.

Mr Speaker: Let's be on the level on this one then.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Ah, Mr Speaker, your puns are getting almost as bad as mine.

What I would say to my hon. Friend is that he is tempting me in the right direction to have a debate on the great advantages of the county of Somerset and the fact that Alfred's coming out of the Levels and defeating Guthrum is the foundation not only of England, but actually the United States and Australia. All that flows

from that comes from Alfred defeating the Danes, otherwise it would have been a different kettle of fish. So I sympathise with his desire for a debate, but I think the specific issue is more suited to an Adjournment debate. The Government will of course take into account the responses that have come in to the discussion on how the county of Somerset should be administered, but what I would say is of fundamental importance is that actually bureaucratic boundaries are not what people in Somerset mind about. They care about their whole historic united county. That is what matters to my constituents and to his, and bureaucratic boundaries are comparatively trifling.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I suppose the first thing to do is to acknowledge this week's sporting success: I am sure the whole House will want to congratulate Andy Murray on his stunning progress to the third round at Wimbledon. And apparently there was some football game on, too. Now that we are getting rid of EVEL, English votes for English laws, how about we get ESEV, English sport for English viewers, so that Scottish viewers of the BBC do not have to endlessly watch that Gazza goal scored against us and are spared the endless references to 1966 when we are watching Croatia or Denmark?

May we have a debate about ministerial resignations? After the departure of the Health Secretary, the public just do not know what it takes to get the sack anymore. This was a Health Secretary whose tenure was littered with unlimited disastrous policy decisions and riddled with cronyism, overseeing the largest death rate in Europe. But it was not that that brought him down; it was issues around having an affair. Does the Leader of the House not think that that is akin to Al Capone going down for tax evasion?

Today marks the beginning of the end of furlough, and there is no statement from the Chancellor. That will add thousands of pounds of costs to businesses across the country and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that it will lead to lay-offs and redundancies, so why no statement? We also need an urgent update on the settlement scheme, given that the Home Office is unable to cope with the outstanding backlog and that there is ongoing confusion and chaos. Sometimes, it seems the Government are more interested in sausages than people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Well, haggis to that, I think. When the hon. Gentleman complains about references to 1966, I would say "pots and kettles", because we often hear from the SNP about 1314. I think 1966 is a little more recent history than 1314.

On the furlough scheme, this was well announced and well planned, and we are getting back to normal. The date of 19 July is a terminus and, to carry on the railway comparison, we are on track. It is therefore right that businesses begin to get back to normal. Bear in mind that £407 billion of taxpayers' money has been spent supporting the economy. Fourteen million jobs and people have been protected through the furlough and self-employed schemes at a cost of £88.5 billion. There is not unlimited money and it is right that the scheme is withdrawn at the point at which the pandemic's emergency provisions are drawing to a close.

As regards the settlement scheme, I think that through the scheme 5.3 million or so EU member state nationals have been dealt with, out of 5.6 million applications so far. A generous deadline was set and it has been handled extraordinarily well and efficiently by the Home Office. Officials there deserve considerable gratitude from the nation for handling it so smoothly considering the very much higher number of eligible people than the Office for National Statistics thought were in the country.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: We recently celebrated UK National Marriage Week. As we come out of lockdown and welcome back larger weddings, may we have a debate about marriage, recognising that we do not want to price people out of marriage? That is not least because this week the Centre for Social Justice pointed out that those born into well-off families have a 96% chance of having two parents but, in our poorest communities, the figure is 28% and falling. While we all agree that single parents deserve all the help they can get and that so many do a great job, does the Leader of the House agree that if we as politicians are serious about levelling up, we should not hold back from also supporting marriage and the stability that it provides to give children a positive start in life?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question and for the excellent work of the Centre for Social Justice, founded, of course, by our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). Its findings are important and clear. My hon. Friend is right to be supportive of marriage, and it may not surprise her to hear that I am very supportive of marriage. It is a foundation stone of our society and has been for millennia. It is fundamental.

I think the issue here is tonal as much as anything. The Government and politicians should support, encourage and foster marriage, but they must not be harsh on those who are not married. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in her tone to say, "Yes, we need to support people who are single parents but recognise the great benefits to children of being within a couple and a family."

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business Committee debates for 8 and 15 July. On 15 July, as has been said, the Committee proposes debates on the Northern Ireland protocol and on the Beijing winter Olympics and the Chinese Government.

The levels of demand at the Backbench Business Committee remain high, but, alas, we do not have further time to allocate that we know of before the summer recess. We have pre-allocated all potential slots in Westminster Hall, and we have already pre-allocated subjects for debate on Thursday 22 July, should we be allocated that time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We do our best to facilitate the Backbench Business Committee by announcing time, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is grateful for the time that has been made available.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Recently, I joined my local police for a series of visits around Blackpool. I was travelling in a car with PC Jeff Blinow and Sergeant Helen McLaren when we spotted a man carrying a foot-long machete and repeatedly punching a young woman. Without hesitation, the officers got

[Scott Benton]

out of the car. After a short chase and the use of PAVA spray, they were able to get the man to the ground and arrest him. The bravery and professionalism of the officers was second to none, and they deserve immense respect and admiration for their actions. Had they not acted so quickly we could have seen a serious incident, with the loss of life. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Jeff and Helen, and indeed all police officers, for the brilliant job they do, day in, day out, in protecting our communities. Does he think it would be in order to have a debate in this House to recognise the work of our serving police officers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by wishing my hon. Friend a very happy birthday? I hope he will have a suitably covid-secure celebration later on today. What he has raised in this House is of fundamental importance. We are so lucky to have the police who serve us in this country. We know that in this House by the police who are here on duty to protect us, not knowing what risks they may face. Therefore, I do thank PC Jeff Blincow and Sergeant Helen McLaren, and commend them for their bravery, and I am glad to be able to bring to the attention of the House the fact that what they clearly did on that day is a model of good policing. We are improving the police and increasing their number, so that there will be more of them to do this work. There will be 20,000 extra police officers over the course of this Parliament, of whom 8,771 have so far been recruited, because police on the streets make us feel safer. As regards a debate, my hon. Friend may wish to raise this matter again during the Report stage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill on Monday, so there is an opportunity immediately to hand.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Several of my constituents have had a frustrating experience when trying to book a driving test at the Stockport test centre. Sadly, this experience is replicated across Greater Manchester and England as a result of processing delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. Will the Leader of the House urge his colleague the Transport Secretary to come before this House to make a statement and explain why Ministers chose to block a deal that would have brought an end to the industrial dispute with the Public and Commercial Services Union at the DVLA over health and safety? Is this not another case of this Government putting ideology ahead of the needs of the public?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, there is a regrettable backlog in tests because of the pandemic. That is being worked through. The number of tests being done at test centres is increasing. The number of tests being done by driving testers has gone up by an extra one a day, as I understand it, to try to work through this backlog. It will take time and this is, of course, unfortunate, but there are consequences of the pandemic, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the undeniable failure of the pubs code to stop unfair business practices that are continuing against tied tenants in public houses throughout the country? A clear example of this is the experience of Christian and Samantha Gibbs, the current

tenants of The Major in Ramsbottom. Despite not owing a penny to their landlord, Stonegate, and running a fantastic community pub, they have been given notice that their tenancy will be brought to an end. In my view, that is a clear breach of the fairness principle in the pubs code.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this to the attention of the House. We want to support pubs across the country. As he knows, the pubs code is overseen by the Pubs Code Adjudicator, which is itself overseen by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The code was put in place to help support tenant pub landlords, and I urge him to raise this matter with the adjudicator if he believes, as he does, that the code has been broken by his constituents' landlord. The Government published their report on the first statutory review of the pubs code in November last year, which found that the code is consistent with the principles set out in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. The review also set out changes that the Government believe can be made to improve the operation of the code. I encourage landlords to behave well towards their tenants; that is how they make their profit and earn their living, and reward their shareholders, which they have a fiduciary duty to do.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: Under the Government's previous green deal scheme, more than 3,000 Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems customers in Scotland were mis-sold home improvement works, which were often unnecessary and always financially detrimental to the household. I have received assurances from various Ministers and Secretaries of State—who accepted that HELMS defrauded thousands—that it would be sorted. We now have households that have issues with these works, but as the six-year mark since HELMS directors dissolved the company has passed, there is no recourse for those constituents. Can we please have a debate on this important issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise an important and complex constituency issue. I am sorry that he has not received the information that he had hoped to. I will, of course, take this matter up with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on his behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Our national health service has been under incredible pressure over the last 18 months, as we all know, and now it has a new Health Secretary. In April, the Care Quality Commission conducted an inquiry into and review of Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituents. The A&E department was given a glowing report and has shown dramatic improvement, which is good news for everyone. However, the same cannot be said of the maternity service. This is a very bad report indeed. I cannot go into detail at the moment, but clearly the CQC has published this, so could we have a statement to the House from the Health Secretary or a Minister on what extra support will be provided to Northwick Park Hospital so that the maternity unit is returned to the service that should be provided, and expectant mothers will receive the help and care they need to deliver healthy babies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a deeply troubling matter. The House will know that there have been similar problems; the scandal at Telford and Shrewsbury particularly comes to mind. For the women, children and families affected, this is a terrible situation. I assure my hon. Friend that NHS England and NHS Improvement are spending an additional £95 million on maternity services to support the recruitment of 1,200 midwives, 100 consultant obstetricians and implementation of the immediate and essential actions arising from the Ockenden report. I will pass on my hon. Friend's remarks to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and ensure that the matter is taken with the seriousness that it unquestionably deserves.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: The Leader of the House will be proud, as I am, of the high animal welfare and environmental standards of British farmers. The Australian trade deal looks likely to betray those farmers by allowing lower standard Australian farm produce to undercut them. Given that this deal will set a precedent for every subsequent trade deal, will he allow time for MPs to debate it, as was done with the Japan deal last November, when his right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary said that that was the "first of many debates" about negotiated trade deals? Will he keep faith with British farmers and keep the promise made by his right hon. Friend?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have more confidence in my farmers; I think they can compete with the best in the world. The Australians are fantastic farmers who have high standards of animal welfare. We should not be so frightened, nervy and feeble in feeling that a bit of competition from Australia will do us harm. It will do us all good, and our farmers will flourish and prosper as they get access to new markets too.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I need not remind anyone in this House about the scale and horror of the child sexual exploitation scandal that blighted Rotherham and affected many of my constituents, including courageous whistleblower and campaigner Sammy Woodhouse. That these children—because that is what many of them were when the abuse took place—were failed so monumentally by the system in the first place is horrific, but living as a survivor of sexual exploitation or any form of sexual assault is fraught with many issues, particularly for those girls and women who became pregnant as a result of their ordeal and are now trying to raise a family.

The children born to survivors of sexual assault should not, as currently happens, be automatically identified as being at risk of abuse, and their mothers, many of whom have been failed once already, should not be threatened with the removal of their children on the basis of no other evidence than that they themselves were once victims. Does the Leader of the House agree that these women and their children should be better supported by social services, and can we have a debate in Government time on the disturbing findings of "The Case for Change" report, published by the chair of the independent review of children's social care, so that we may right this historic wrong, which is still victimising survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual assault today?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What my hon. Friend brings to the House is really rather shocking. It should certainly not be the case that women who have themselves been abused should be deemed as being at risk of being abusers purely because they were abused. That is wrong, unfair and unjust and I am troubled that he should say that that is the case. I will take this up on his behalf with the Home Secretary and the Education Secretary, because the abuse scandal in Rotherham is one that has left many scars and troubles for families and for individuals who were abused, and they should not be suffering further. They should be getting the support that my hon. Friend talks about.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have a debate about ministerial bad habits? When I was a Government Minister, it was unthinkable that we would have conducted Government business on private email accounts and absolutely unthinkable that, as a Minister, I could have held 27 meetings with companies that were seeking Government contracts, resulting in £1 billion-worth of contracts being awarded, and that those meetings could have mysteriously disappeared from my diary for a whole 12 months. The Leader of the House likes quoting Dryden. I remind him that Dryden said, "We first make our habits, and then our habits make us." These bad habits of Ministers in Government will lead to a Government of grifters, cronies and chisellers, and they have to stop.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not sure that email was invented when the hon. Gentleman was last a Minister, but perhaps it had come into its early stages. It is absolutely right that Ministers had meetings with people who were going to provide personal protective equipment. I refer him to what I said to the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). It needed to be done urgently, the Opposition were encouraging us to do it urgently, and it was done urgently and effectively to ensure that supplies were brought in.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join you, Mr Speaker, and others in wishing Mr Ian Davis MBE a long, happy retirement. He has been a magnificent servant of this House and has great musical talents. My goodness, if he ever wrote a book, it would be well worth buying and would be a top seller.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on proposals to allow the parents and guardians of disabled children access to their savings? Some 200,000 disabled children are locked out of the savings from children's trust funds, and it is quite wrong that those parents have to go to court and spend a great deal of money to get those savings.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely agree about Ian Davis. He has been a fabulous servant of this House and a kindly and helpful figure to Members—particularly new Members when trying to find out how to approach the Speaker to ask to be noticed in a debate and so on—with a phenomenal knowledge of who the Members are, recognising all of us from a remarkably early stage in our parliamentary careers. He has been a model public servant, as you, Mr Speaker, set out yesterday, in both his military career and his service to this House, and he will be greatly missed across the House.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

As regards the very important issue that my hon. Friend raises, I understand that the Ministry of Justice and HM Treasury are currently working together, as a matter of priority, to ensure that parents and guardians can secure the legal authority that they need to act on their child's behalf as straightforwardly as possible. The Government have announced that those who need to apply to the Court of Protection to access funds in a mature child trust fund can access fee remission, allowing for the court fees to be waived, but I will pass on his concerns to both the Chancellors: the Lord High Chancellor and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On 27 May, in response to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme decision on suspending Members not being subject to a recall petition, the Leader of the House said that he would deal with the discrepancy in

“the most straightforward way possible”.—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 564.]

Will he provide a separate statement to the House about how he intends to resolve this issue? He will recall that, on 27 May, I praised him for his honesty about what should happen in these cases. I agree with him that it is frankly ridiculous that Members can technically be suspended and subject to recall for the misuse of stationery but not when sexual misconduct has been proven. I ask the Leader—I plead with him—to close the loophole and solve the problem as quickly as possible, because it is not fair to victims who make complaints when Members who are found to have conducted themselves completely improperly as Members can simply carry on regardless. It is not acceptable.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I fully recognise the widespread view across the House on this issue. I assure the hon. Gentleman that consultations are taking place—earlier this week I spoke to staff representatives—because the reason for not engaging recall was a bottom-up view, not a top-down view. It is really important that any changes are made with the support of the staff, which I believe is now there. It is a matter for the Commission rather than for the Leader of the House, but I will facilitate bringing forward the necessary motions required to put things into practice. There is also discussion with the chairman of the independent expert panel, Sir Stephen Irwin, about how best to do things. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the wheels are in motion and there is great support across the House and, indeed, from the shadow Leader of the House, with whom I have a meeting later today, to ensure that things are done in a timely manner.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for his excellent response on schools last week, but may I please press him a bit further? Parents in Bracknell and beyond are telling me that entire classes and year groups are still being isolated because of one positive covid test; that extracurricular activities are being banned, not least for year 6 leavers; and that parents cannot attend sports days, even when they would otherwise be outside and distanced. Headteachers will be beholden to the unions for as long as they are permitted to use their judgment. Something has gone very badly wrong. Does the Leader of the

House feel, as I do, that the only way to get children back to school and living normal lives is for the Government to mandate it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am, obviously, torn on this matter, because I believe in local decision making. I believe that headmasters and headmistresses throughout the country can show leadership. Some sports days are going ahead. I will be going, on 7 July, to the Hill House School field day, which is going to be arranged in a covid-secure manner. I encourage the leadership of schools to work with the regulations in a way that is allowed and that means things can happen. It is sometimes easier, administratively, to stop things and say no than it is to look at how to be positive and allow things to happen. I reiterate the point that I made last week: while in some cases a whole class may be required to isolate, many settings use seating plans and other means to identify close contacts in order to minimise the number of individuals who need to isolate. Yes, we should push from the top, but there should also be a response locally, from individual schools, to try to ensure that children get to school as often as is possible.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Campaigners such as Ailsa MacKenzie gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee two years ago and secured a commitment from the Department for Work and Pensions to place a remedial order to extend eligibility for widowed parent's allowance and bereavement support payments to cohabitants with children. Given that 60 days—not including recess—are required to consider the proposal, will the Leader of the House liaise with the DWP to ensure that the remedial order is put in place as soon as possible, so that people such as Ailsa MacKenzie and their relatives and family get this state support?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point and is so right to be defending his constituents. Yes, I will take this matter up with the DWP and try to facilitate what he asks for.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Last week, I was at the excellent West Rise Junior School with Ms Somerville and year 6. They are super-motivated in their work on the environment, and I committed then to step up to the challenge of plastic-free July. Will my right hon. Friend publicise this initiative throughout the House, perhaps join me himself and, more importantly, allow time for a debate so that we can share our collective experience to understand what the barriers are to success in this initiative? We all know that making small changes can make a huge difference to our carbon footprint.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to campaign in this way. We all have our own private responsibility to reduce the amount of plastic that we use. I am not sure that I can guarantee a plastic-free July, because I might want a glass of water at the Dispatch Box and we have plastic cups here rather than glasses, but I must confess that my hon. Friend is pushing with my own personal preference. I have never liked those cups of coffee in disposable cups, which I think have a rather nasty taste; having it in china cups—preferably Spode china cups—is infinitely preferable. I encourage people to use glass, china and other things that may be used more than once.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Today, 750,000 businesses across England have lost their business rates relief, but, in Wales, the Welsh Labour Government have extended rates relief for a year and provided new support for businesses impacted by the pandemic. Can we have an opportunity to impress on Ministers the need to do more, help shops and businesses get back on their feet, and follow the Welsh example?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I have mentioned already, £470 billion of taxpayers' money has been given in support to business, and a 66% business rates cut for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses exists for the next nine months, so there has already been very significant support. The strength of the United Kingdom is that Wales has had £8.6 billion of UK taxpayers' support, which is supporting more than 360,000 self-employment scheme claims and over 468,000 jobs in the furlough scheme. That is an indication of the strength of the United Kingdom, but the taxpayer has already been leaned on to a very considerable extent, and there is not unlimited money.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House was pretty clear at the Procedure Committee on Monday that he has converted—well, he has not converted, as it was always his position, alongside the SNP—to see the back of the EVEL Standing Orders. It seems that they will, nevertheless, be switched on when the Standing Orders for the procedure during the pandemic lapse at the end of term. He will switch them on only to switch them back off again at some point. Rather than that, can we not have a debate and a vote on all the hybrid proceedings before the summer recess so that we can decide what we want to retain and what we want to change?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have great zeal for ridding this House of EVEL.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): The Croydon bottleneck is a major rail junction for the Brighton main line, but also serves suburban London, such as Carshalton and Wallington. Congestion here is causing massive delays and also prevents more frequent rail services from being run to outer London, which the Croydon area remodelling scheme is designed to fix. Can we have a statement from the Department for Transport about Government support for this scheme so that we can deliver additional rail services to Carshalton and Wallington?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Improving track layouts, remodelling the Selhurst triangle and constructing new tracks and two new platforms at East Croydon station would remove the bottleneck, which causes delays and disruption, improving the punctuality and speed of services. As I understand it, Network Rail has consulted on proposals to unblock the Croydon bottleneck and progress is expected later this year. I understand the concern that this must be to my hon. Friend's constituents as so many of them are likely to be dependent on this service.

Let me say how much I enjoyed visiting my hon. Friend's constituency recently, going to the Sutton vaccination centre and meeting Wendy, who was the subject of a Commons mention. May I say how surprised I am that he has managed to find something in his

constituency that is not the fault of an incompetent Lib Dem-run administration? I hope that next week he will try harder.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the High Court yesterday, Mr Justice Colton confirmed what the Prime Minister himself had repeatedly denied in this House, which is that the withdrawal Act, which we in the DUP rejected in this House on all three occasions, has repealed article 6 of the Act of Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are no longer equal partners in trade. The consequences for Northern Ireland from the Government deal are clearer than ever before. The Northern Ireland protocol has the potential to derail the democratic process. As summer approaches and opinion can potentially become inflamed, this House has a role to play, as the decision has emanated from the Government here. This House can and must change this for the sake of long-lasting peace. Will the Leader of the House agree to a very urgent debate in this House so that Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom can be clearly laid out?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The court judgment was unquestionably an important one, and it is clear that the protocol, as it is currently operating, is presenting significant challenges for the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. We will continue to work through those issues with the EU to try to find a way forward to ensure that the protocol is implemented in the proportionate way intended. That is how we hope to sustain peace and prosperity for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom is fundamental. It is just as much a part of the United Kingdom as Somerset is, and there is no court judgment or ruling that could possibly remove part of the United Kingdom from our United Kingdom. We must all do everything we can to support Northern Ireland within our United Kingdom and to ensure that the trade flows that go with it and that underpin the economic success of our United Kingdom work properly.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I have many major businesses headquartered in my constituency, and they have raised concerns about the inability of senior executives to travel to the US at the moment. Certain things often cannot be done by video conference call. For instance, many of them own subsidiaries in the US that they cannot go to manage and oversee, and many have major investors in the US whom they need to meet. May I stress to my right hon. Friend the importance of getting a US-UK travel corridor for business up and running? Would he contemplate a debate on that subject?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In my business life, I have spent a lot of time going back and forth to the United States for business purposes to see investors, so I completely understand the importance of the issue that my hon. Friend raises. The Prime Minister and President Biden have made it clear that this is important and look forward to bringing about the return of safe transatlantic travel as soon as possible. The newly formed joint UK-US expert working group is now under way, and we are working closely with our US allies on delivering on this important goal. Entry into the United States is, of course, a matter for the United States, but there is a

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

clear business case for the need to solve this issue as quickly as possible for both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: I have had emails from constituents who wish to seek exemption from hotel quarantine on the grounds of the serious ill health of themselves or their family members. They have mentioned the difficulty of booking a quarantine hotel, the splitting up of families and the substandard food and accommodation. Further, when I have written to the Department responsible for the exemptions, I have not had the courtesy of a reply. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on this issue in Government time? Will he also pass on my observations to the Secretary of State for Transport and ask him to meet me to discuss this issue, as I am not getting an answer from his Department?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If Members from either of the House are having problems getting answers from Departments, I will always use my office to try to facilitate an answer as soon as possible. In the cases to which the hon. Lady refers, getting answers urgently is obviously important, and I can give her the assurance that she asks for.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: I recently had the pleasure of meeting my constituents Paul and Ruth Fisher, both of whom have played vital roles in our country as key workers. This young couple bought a new-build property from a large, well-known developer in 2019, but soon discovered that the property was substandard, although finished beautifully, with the ceilings not level with the floors and with outside walls also not level. The issues have yet to be resolved.

Sadly, soon after the purchase, Ruth was diagnosed with breast cancer and is currently receiving palliative care. My heartfelt best wishes go out to both of them and to her family. May I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate in Government time to consider situations such as Paul and Ruth's, paying particular attention to the need for an independent watchdog or ombudsman designed to help others like my constituents to reach a satisfactory settlement with large developers? That simply is not the case at the moment.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. The House's sympathies will be with Ruth and Paul in these appalling circumstances. It is quite wrong for developers to sell substandard homes. Developers of new-build homes must meet their responsibilities, resolve issues quickly and treat homebuyers fairly when things go wrong. I sympathise with my hon. Friend, because as a constituency MP, one has sometimes found that developers have not been good at responding when there have been complaints, and there has been very little recourse. The building safety Bill will include provision for the new homes ombudsman scheme to provide stronger and effective redress for new-build homebuyers and to hold developers to account. This reform is long overdue, and it will be welcomed across the House.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I heard the answer that the Leader of the House gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), but we have to have the right checks and balances in place.

The Health Minister Lord Bethell held a series of meetings with companies that went on to win contracts worth over £1 billion, and the week in question was omitted from his diary. That raises questions about the role of civil servants in the letting of these contracts. Where is the monitoring officer for the letting of these contracts, and who signs them off?

We need a statement in this House on the role of the civil service when it comes to such issues so that we can reassure ourselves that civil servants are not being bullied into silence and that they are holding Ministers properly to account and making them abide by the rules. I suspect that the only reason why we know about the meetings is that a civil servant leaked the emails because they knew that wrongdoing was going on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that a fundamentally foolish point. There were 27 meetings, nine of which led to contracts being awarded by my noble Friend Lord Bethell on behalf of Her Majesty's Government when we were under great pressure to act. That was exactly what the Labour party was asking for. It asked that whatever was necessary should take place—it wanted speed, urgency and decisiveness. That was what the Government delivered. The Government had to get on with awarding contracts to ensure that supplies were in place.

The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. If normal procurement procedures had been followed, it would have taken three to six months to award contracts—we would have been halfway through the pandemic before we had had a single extra piece of PPE. Would he have wanted such incompetent service? Is that what the Labour party would have done? Would it have just fiddled while Rome burned or would it have got on with things, as my noble Friend did?

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I championed town and parish councils long before the great Jackie Weaver made them go viral on t'interweb. But Nailsworth, Stinchcombe, Stonehouse and other councils across the Stroud district were quite dismayed at the removal of the option for virtual proceedings, and I would like to see that reversed. Will my right hon. Friend provide an update about the Government's work in this area and let us know when Parliament will be looking at this particular issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are grateful for the efforts that councils made to allow meetings during the period from 4 April 2020 to 6 May 2021, when the emergency regulations made under section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 applied. Extending the regulations to cover meetings after 6 May would have required primary legislation.

The Government carefully considered the case for legislation and concluded that it was not possible to bring forward further emergency legislation on the issue. We launched a call for evidence on 25 March, which closed on 17 June, to gather views and inform a longer-term decision about whether to make express provision for local authorities to meet remotely on a permanent basis. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is now reviewing the response to the consultation, and the Government will respond in due course.

I would say that we all welcome getting back to normal, and I think the whole of society wants to get back to normal as soon as possible.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): When the Prime Minister's chief adviser blatantly broke the rules despite the huge sacrifices made by the British people, the Prime Minister backed him; when the Home Secretary breached the ministerial code, he backed her; when the Housing Secretary was busy awarding planning permissions to Tory donors, he backed him; and when the Health Secretary broke the very rules that he had been passionately preaching to the rest of us, the Prime Minister backed him by saying that he considered the matter closed.

Would the Leader of the House be kind enough to facilitate a debate in Government time on integrity, British values and the ministerial code and to ensure that the Prime Minister attends the whole session, so that he can learn some of the basics?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are fortunate in having a brilliant and effective Home Secretary who gets on with her job. We are also fortunate in having an extremely effective Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who believes in building the houses that people will be able to live in and in ensuring that we are a home-owning democracy. My right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is no longer in office—a point that seems to escape Labour Members.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Radcliffe in my constituency is a proud town with a rich heritage and a strong identity that has unfortunately been forgotten for far too long by the Labour council, but this Conservative Government are delivering for the town. They have

given it a brand-new high school, and hopefully the levelling-up fund will also go some way towards providing civic and leisure facilities in the heart of the town. Will my right hon. Friend provide time for a debate on the benefits of the levelling-up fund for forgotten towns like Radcliffe?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will spend taxpayers' money to improve everyday life across the country, from transport projects to high streets. My hon. Friend does not have long to wait for a decision on the scheme; the decisions will be announced in the autumn. There is so much to do.

Even in our own Parliament, we have to level this place back up. I want to say how marvellously you have done, Mr Speaker, in saving 95% of the cost of doing up the Speaker's House. People may not know this, but there was a proposal for a very lavish temporary home for the Speaker, and Mr Speaker, as a model defender of taxpayers' money, has saved 95% of that cost. I hope that other people, when spending taxpayers' money, will do the same.

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

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

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

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

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

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

Windrush Day 2021

11.33 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Windrush Day 2021.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate today. 22 June 2021 was the fourth official annual Windrush Day, designated by the Government as part of the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury docks in 1948, and following a long campaign led by Patrick Vernon. I wanted to ensure that, to mark Windrush Day, Members from across the House had the opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of the Windrush generation in their communities, and I hope that that is what we will hear in this debate.

Windrush Day is a national day to celebrate the extraordinary and enduring contribution of the Windrush generation to the UK. I am proud to represent a constituency with a very direct connection to the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948. About 200 Windrush passengers travelled from the temporary accommodation provided in the Clapham Common deep shelter to Coldharbour Lane in my constituency, where many found work at the local labour exchange and settled in the surrounding area, putting down deep roots and helping to form and sustain the Brixton we know today. They include the late Sam King, who became the first black mayor of Southwark, and Aldwyn Roberts, the grand master of calypso, who performed as Lord Kitchener.

This Windrush Day, I joined members of the community in Brixton for a socially distanced celebratory lunch, and we were delighted that the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), was also able to join us at that occasion. We were privileged to hear a performance of a new song by the wonderful Pegasus Opera Company, "Rush", which is described as a "Windrush anthem for Lambeth". It is very moving, and I would encourage everyone to watch the recording on the Pegasus Opera website. The song captures perfectly the eager anticipation, excitement and aspiration of a generation who came to the UK at the invitation of the British Government as citizens of the mother country under the British Nationality Act 1948, and who met terrible adversity in racism, discrimination and poor housing, but nevertheless gave so much and became a part of our national DNA.

At the other end of Coldharbour Lane from the labour exchange lies King's College Hospital. The arrival of the Empire Windrush coincided almost exactly with the founding of our NHS, and we know that members of the Windrush generation have been essential to our NHS from its founding until the present day. In 1948, there were an estimated 54,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS, and the Government worked actively to recruit nurses from the Caribbean and subsequently from across the Commonwealth. By 1965, it is estimated that there were about 5,000 Jamaican nurses working in the NHS, and there are more than 200,000 black, Asian and minority ethnic staff working in our NHS today.

We cannot let this year's Windrush Day celebration pass without paying special tribute to the diverse workforce in our NHS and social care, public transport and other frontline roles, who have worked tirelessly through the covid-19 pandemic, often sacrificing their own health and wellbeing to provide treatment and care to others. We particularly remember those who have tragically lost their lives to coronavirus—including 28-year-old pregnant nurse Mary Agyapong and public transport worker Belly Mujinga—two thirds of whom were from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude for their service. I hope the Minister will agree with me that no one who aspires to lead our NHS should ever suggest that those who come from overseas to work in our NHS are anything other than highly valued professionals without whom the NHS would struggle to keep going.

Windrush Day was established in 2018, in the same year that the horrors of the Windrush scandal were revealed—the appalling betrayal of so many of the generation who had come to the UK as British citizens, at the invitation of the British Government to play vital roles in our economy and public services, who were denied their status and suffered immeasurably as a result. A Windrush Day celebration that fails to acknowledge the ongoing hardship and injustice suffered by victims of the Windrush scandal would be sentimental, hollow rhetoric.

The Government promised to right the wrongs of the Windrush scandal, but are failing to do so. An evaluation of the Windrush compensation scheme published by the National Audit Office in May found that the scheme had paid compensation to fewer than 700 victims and had 2,000 claims outstanding. The report also highlighted mistakes and poor-quality assurance, the high proportion of the scheme's funding that has been spent on staff, and the low number of victims who have come forward to make a claim compared with the estimated total number of victims. Appallingly, 21 victims have died while still waiting to receive compensation.

Listen to the words of some of the victims and their families. Natalie Barnes, the daughter of Paulette Wilson, who died in July 2020, says that the

"Home Office still operates the hostile environment policy which contributed to the death of my mother. Before she passed, she was struggling with the forms and lack of support and respect from the Home Office. The scheme needs to be moved so there is proper justice to families like mine."

Stephanie O'Connor, whose mother Sarah moved to the UK in 1967 and died in July 2019, said:

"For my mum the compensation scheme has come too late, and I am so disappointed that it is still taking this long for people to get what is owed to them. I just hope that people get compensated fairly for everything that they have been through."

Anthony Bryan, whose utterly devastating experience, including two periods of detention in Yarl's Wood, was the basis for the BBC drama "Sitting in Limbo", said:

"The Home Office took away my liberty, livelihood, sanity, and fellow friends and campaigners...as a result of the hostile environment. They have offered me a compensation package which does not reflect what I need to build my life again and to move forward with my family. We need urgently an impartial and independent organisation to support all compensation claims and to provide mental health and wellbeing support. The Home Secretary is not righting the wrongs to sort out the Windrush Scandal."

Anthony Williams, who served for 13 years in the British Army and was forced to remove his own teeth as a result of being denied access to dental care due to the scandal, said:

“The Home Office have no experience or track record in running a compensation scheme for people traumatised.”

These testimonies point to the urgent need for the administration of the Windrush compensation scheme to be taken away from the Home Office and handed to an independent body. Will the Minister commit to that today?

Yesterday was the deadline for EU nationals living in the UK to apply for settled status. In that scheme, the Government have yet again put an administrative barrier in front of people who have made their home in the UK and contributed to our country in multiple different ways. It risks making them illegal, with all the appalling consequences that would bring. The Government have not only failed to address the hostile environment that led to the Windrush scandal or to deliver justice for its victims; they are laying the foundations of the next scandal.

In response to the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on black and Asian residents during the first wave, the Government set up the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, chaired by Dr Tony Sewell. It had been hoped that the report would provide a rigorous analysis of racial and ethnic inequality in the UK and a detailed action plan that could be implemented with urgency to address it. Instead, the Sewell report left many black, Asian and minority ethnic residents, including many of my constituents who I have spoken to since it was published, feeling that their own Government were trying to gaslight them by denying that there is structural racism in the UK. The report has been condemned by respected organisations, including the Runnymede Trust and Black Cultural Archives, which I am proud is based on Windrush Square in my constituency.

Black Cultural Archives, the only organisation dedicated to the collection, preservation and celebration of black history in the UK, criticises the report for its absence of historical context and selective quoting of evidence and concludes that a report so lacking in rigour cannot provide the basis for meaningful action to address racism and racial inequality.

One of the ways in which we can stop a Windrush scandal happening again is by ensuring that our children are taught British history in an inclusive way that tells the story of our complex history of migration and the painful reality and legacy of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. That is not rewriting history; it is our shared history. Many schools have already developed good curriculum content, including some in my constituency, but that now needs to be expanded to all our schools. The Government have, in accepting the recommendations in Wendy Williams’ lessons learned review, accepted the importance of the teaching of history in preventing a future Windrush scandal. The Government have accepted that as being necessary for all Home Office staff, so it follows that it is also necessary for our schools.

Finally, will the Government support the campaign to raise the anchor from the Empire Windrush, which currently lies off the coast of Libya on the Mediterranean seabed, so that it can be displayed as part of the

75th Windrush anniversary celebrations in 2023? It is a tangible piece of that famous ship, which could be used to tell the story of the remarkable Windrush generation for years to come.

We celebrate today the remarkable Windrush generation—British citizens and part of our national DNA—who have contributed so much and suffered such appalling injustice. Celebration, however, is hollow while injustice and inequality continue. I call on the Minister to mark this Windrush Day by committing to meaningful action.

11.44 am

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on her introduction to this debate, and I hope that the Government will follow up her suggestion and see whether it is possible to retrieve the anchor from HMT Windrush off the coast of Libya. The history of the ship is interesting, but in six minutes I should probably not divert my remarks to that.

The article I was reading before coming to the Chamber is in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, vol. 60, no. 2, June 2021, page 251. It is by Anthony Quinn, Nick Hardwick and Rosie Meek, and its rather long title is, “With Age Comes Respect? And for Whom Exactly? A Quantitative Examination of White and BAME Prisoner Experiences of Respect Elicited through HM Inspectorate of Prisons Survey Responses.” It is a serious analysis of the information available. It does not condemn people, but it shows that the experiences of those who are black or minority ethnic are different at all ages in our prisons. I look forward to the time when that is not so.

The overall question I put to myself is this: will I live long enough to know when the colour of my skin will be as important, but no more, than the colour of my eyes or my hair? I count a number of retired bishops among my friends, and I know of eight times that bishops or archbishops have been stopped by the police. Every single one of those times it was John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York. He is now in the other place in his own right, rather than as an ecclesiastical bishop. We must answer our own question: is he the most curious driver there has been on the ecclesiastical Bench over the past 20 years, or does some degree of discrimination still apply to those driving while black?

I have spent a lot of time helping black police officers and doctors—or Asian; I am talking about people who are non-white rather than just black or Caribbean—and all the times I have taken up cases for black or Asian people, I found that they were treated by their employers, by employment tribunals, by the General Medical Council, and at one stage by the Information Commissioner’s Office, in ways that I regarded as inappropriate.

One good woman doctor was looking after diabetes patients. She was concerned about South Asian women being those least likely to come to advice centres. She wanted to set up a self-help project with them, supported by the trust. She sent their details to herself at another NHS address, and then got put in front of the GMC and the ICO for sharing patients’ details. She was doing what is now common practice, but 10 or 15 years ago it took the Information Commissioner’s Office a year to discover that she could not have committed an offence, and it took the GMC about the same amount of time.

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

Her trust has never been held to account for the appalling way she was treated. I could go on about Dr Bawa-Garba, the paediatric doctor who was left by herself, and left to swing by the GMC and the courts, until people came together—white and black—to say, “This is unfair. Get it reviewed.” The case was reviewed, and her prosecution ended.

I have previously mentioned in the House the case of the very good Sikh sergeant, now retired, Gurpal Viridi. He spent a week and a half on trial in the Crown court, having allegedly put a collapsible police truncheon up the bottom of a young man in the back of a police van 26 years before. The thing did not happen. The so-called police witness contradicted every statement of fact by the complainant. The complainant forgot that he had been arrested by Gurpal six months later, and another police officer in his company was never interviewed by the Directorate of Professional Standards of the Metropolitan police. When Gurpal complained to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the case was referred by the commissioner, Dame Cressida Dick—who, by the way, had been a sergeant with Gurpal Viridi in Battersea—to the Directorate of Professional Standards, which said that its own investigation had been all right.

Will the Minister get the Directorate of Professional Standards of the Metropolitan police together with the CPS and the Attorney General’s office, and ask how Gurpal Viridi got prosecuted? Why will they not have a Richard Henriques-type inquiry—even a brief one—to learn the lessons from something that should never have happened?

I grew up—more accurately, my children grew up—in Stockwell in a mixed area, among people, black and white together, in their scout groups, Brownies, schools and confirmation classes. They did well. Many of them did well, whether they were white or black. I ask that we learn the lessons from the people of the Windrush generation, and other parts of the world, who try to bring their children up in a way that means they learn, play, and have the same kind of development as that described by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) in his report. Give people chances, let them take them, and when we spot unfairness, do not leave it to the victims to sort things out, but decide that we should. If I am white, middle class, and in full-time employment—which I think I am; I cannot class myself as middle aged anymore—it is my responsibility. I hope to go on contributing to these debates until I can answer that question by saying that the colour of skin and place of origin do not matter in this country. It is merit; it is friendliness; and it is mutual support.

11.50 am

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on having secured this important debate to commemorate Windrush Day 2021. Windrush Day is a day to redress the imbalance of injustice and sorrow our elders have experienced at the hands of this Government, and a day to pay homage and respect to the journey they took—many as toddlers—to what they thought was the motherland. The UK is where they call home, despite the stain of prejudice and racism they have experienced. Knowing

as we do the huge contribution that the Windrush generation have made to this country, it is even more galling that so many members of that generation were so badly let down, and continue to be let down, by this Government.

The cause of the Windrush scandal was an institutionally racist policy and culture levied at the top of Government, dwelling in the underbelly of the Home Office. This, above all, was focused on whipping up hostility to immigration and posing as tough. Serving these ends resulted in the disdain for individual people that the hostile environment policy represents, and which tore so many lives apart. After hearing countless stories of people who have lived in the UK for decades—some of whom could barely remember life before living in the UK—losing their jobs and homes, being refused medical care, and even being detained and deported in the worst cases, it is obvious that the Government should have had great humility and sought to address this great injustice as soon as possible.

It took a year after launching the Windrush compensation scheme for the Home Secretary to finally agree to lower the burden of proof required from “beyond reasonable doubt” to “on the balance of probability”. Sadly, we recently learned that 21 people have died while waiting for their compensation to be paid. My constituent Anthony Bryan has only just received his offer of compensation, a full year after the moving drama “Sitting in Limbo”, based on his experiences, was screened. Even once an offer is made—many of which appear to be unacceptably low—there is no mechanism for an independent review of the sum. The Windrush compensation scheme only re-criminalises the Windrush generation, and continues to fail the victims of the scandal day in, day out. It is obvious that the Home Office has lost any trust that could be placed in it to operate such a scheme, and that independent oversight should be brought in to ensure that recipients are properly compensated in a timely manner.

11.53 am

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I begin by referring to my unremunerated interest as chairman of the advisory board of Conservatives Against Racism For Equality. I am very glad to follow the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), and I think it is time that we embrace the truth that she spoke: I certainly hope to do so. I do not think anybody could fail to be moved by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—I was particularly taken and moved by what he said—and I hope that both of us live long enough to see the day when skin colour matters no more or less than the colour of our eyes.

I am very glad to have co-sponsored this debate, and I am delighted to speak in it. I want to do three things: celebrate the Windrush generation, put a lament before the Minister, and then make some suggestions about what can be done. I really do celebrate the Windrush generation. About 5% of my constituents are black. They are overwhelmingly people connected to St Vincent and the Grenadines. They make a wonderful contribution to our community. No one who has listened to Wycombe Steel Orchestra could fail to enjoy it and no one could fail to notice the wonderful range of people involved in it—black and white together, enjoying themselves, celebrating their music and contributing to our community.

The Windrush generation saved, rebuilt and contributed to our country, and have shared in our prosperity, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West said, all too often they have not been well treated. That brings me to my second point.

When I look back at that time, I do really lament the way that people were treated. The Windrush generation came off the boat, as it was, and can clearly be seen in the footage and photographs to be wearing their very best clothes, putting their best foot forward, and coming—in a spirit of good will, hope and optimism—to contribute to this country. But when I listen to the stories that people tell me, very plainly they were not welcomed as they should have been; very plainly, the United Kingdom was not prepared to welcome people as it should have done. People were not treated as I would wish. I am very sorry about that, but it is not an injustice that I think we can put right today. We can put right, though, the things that people suffer in this age.

I recently met a young woman and was surprised to hear her story, which she has given me permission to mention. She was schooled in Wycombe. She is not very much younger than me—perhaps in her 30s; I flatter myself, having just turned 50. She told me that when she went through school in Wycombe, a teacher actually put her, as a young black girl, in a separate room with Asian children and did not teach them. What unspeakable racism such a thing would be.

I am happy to say that it must surely be unthinkable that such a thing would be tolerated today. If it were to happen, surely children, on speaking to their parents, would find that their parents were today empowered to complain immediately; and all of us would move swiftly to condemn it. Yet the woman who told me this story was not that much younger than me and it happened in my town. Let me be very clear that it is not happening today. If it was, it would be rooted out. I am very proud of all our schools, which are diverse and brilliant, and give children the best possible opportunities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have been sitting here listening to the contributions, including the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). As the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) will know, in Northern Ireland we have had 30 years of conflict. That conflict is over. We have an opportunity to build a future where we can have a shared society and a shared history, and there are many good things in Northern Ireland that I believe could be used for the betterment of people in this House and in England. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that we can all learn lessons from Northern Ireland, as our society has moved forward constructively?

Mr Baker: There certainly are lessons from Northern Ireland, yes. I have occasionally visited Belfast to hear from people there. The hon. Gentleman reminds me that humanity's capacity to find reasons for hatred is almost unbounded, and it is sorrowful, particularly in Northern Ireland, that people have hated one another on the grounds of theological matters, which should be matters of academic interest and certainly not things over which anyone should hate.

I want to touch on the Windrush Day celebration that we had this year. Somebody on the call complained, actually, that the first item we watched was a film—I think from the '80s; perhaps the late '80s—that related

to a moment of tension in Wycombe, when some young black men and some young white men had come into conflict over football and an event going on somewhere else. When I watched the film, there were young black men in Wycombe complaining about how they had been treated, and one of the things I noticed was how justified they were. They were clearly intelligent, articulate and well-meaning, and completely dumbfounded and bewildered that anyone had so misconstrued their intentions and misrepresented the actions that had taken place. For example, the film covered an allegation that petrol bombs had been used, when no such thing had happened. It was a fiction, an invention targeted at these men—again, racism. I can see why black people would really resent being treated in such a way. People have long memories; they remember today how others were treated in the past, and they expect us to behave differently and to show some contrition, apology and humility, and I hope that I am doing so.

To turn to the Windrush scandal, I think the scheme is working. I have had a limited number of cases and I therefore cannot go into them, but it worked very well in one particular case that I hold in mind. I think that was perhaps because we were involved and that should not be necessary, but clearly the scheme is being improved. I am conscious that I should probably allow the Minister to describe later how the scheme is being improved, but I note in particular that the minimum award has gone from £250 to £10,000, and the maximum award from £10,000 to £100,000. I welcome those improvements.

However, I just want to say to my hon. Friend the Minister—he is my hon. Friend and a great man—that it is only by engaging with people and really listening to what they say and how they experience things that we can improve matters. For example, on a recent call to raise awareness of the Windrush compensation scheme in my community in Wycombe, I listened with horror and shame to somebody explaining that their mother had had to go through multiple hoops to prove that she was entitled to be here after decades of living comfortably in the United Kingdom, quite rightly, as a British person. Worse, her British-born children with British passports were worrying and anxious about their right to remain in the United Kingdom.

Why should such a thing happen? Inevitably, schemes have rules. What I would say to my hon. Friend the Minister and to officials listening is that I have great faith in him and I have great faith in officials. They are doing the very best they can in the spirit of good will. Yet the experience of the public engaging with the scheme is hurdles and bureaucracy and proof. For it to have provoked—in our age, today—the anxiety in British-born people with British passports for whom this is home, is itself, while inadvertent, shaming. I do not wish to spring this on my hon. Friend. I would not expect him to apologise apropos of nothing without looking into it, but I certainly want to apologise to those people. I will certainly always stand up for people who have felt like that and raise their case with Ministers. However they vote, it is my duty to make sure that—very much a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West—we stand up for people, those of us who are, if I may say so, privileged to be middle class, in full-time employment, white and not facing these difficulties.

Awareness, empathy, contrition and humility—they should be our watchwords. As we go forward, as chairman of Conservatives against Racism for Equality, I really

[Mr Steve Baker]

want our whole society to choose, in a radically moderate way, to be much more positively anti-racist; for all of us to be living out a life that says, “I accept the moral equality of every person and the legal equality of people in all our institutions”. That speaks to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West. Of course, everybody is politically equal. From that follows equality before the law and equality of opportunity, and embracing one another, so that we can go forward in hope to live in a world in which our skin colour matters no more or less than our eye colour.

I really do celebrate the Wycombe Windrush generation. The community is a wonderful, gentle loving community and I am very proud that they are in Wycombe. I am very proud of them. I just say to my hon. Friend the Minister—I can see he has listened very carefully; he is a great and good man—that in time, perhaps very swiftly, we might see institutions that make sure that people never again feel undervalued.

12.3 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate.

It is a rich irony that as we hold this debate to mark Windrush Day, another immigration scandal similar to that which affected the Windrush generation is potentially in the making. On Wednesday this week, the deadline for EU nationals to apply for settled status in the UK passed amidst worries that thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, had missed the deadline. It is important for their sake, as well as for the sake of the wider black, Asian and minority ethnic community, that we do not miss the opportunity of this debate to address the reasons why so many of the Windrush generation and their descendants were wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights.

It is important to be clear about what Wendy Williams identified in her “Windrush Lessons Learned Review”, in which she said:

“While the Windrush scandal began to become public in late 2017, its roots lie much deeper. Successive rounds of legislation and policy effectively set traps for the Windrush generation... Over decades, legislation progressively eroded the rights of the Windrush generation... The hostile environment was another step on the long road towards a more restrictive immigration regime, but it was also a departure in terms of the scale and seriousness of the effects which would be directly felt by individuals.

The department”—

by which she means the Home Office—

“developed immigration policy at speed, impelled by ministerial pressure, with too little consideration of the possible impact of the measures”.

That is reflected in the evidence monitoring the impact of the right to rent scheme, one of the key measures of the hostile environment that the Windrush generation came up against. The evidence monitoring that scheme shows that it discriminates on nationality and racial grounds.

Many of the hostile environment policies operate by outsourcing immigration enforcement to people in the community such as health workers, bank workers and employers. That process carries the same risk as that

identified in the right to rent scheme. Yet in the “Windrush Lessons Learned Review”, Wendy Williams found that the Home Office did not consider the risks to ethnic minorities appropriately as it developed the right to rent policy, and that it continued to implement the scheme after others had pointed out the risks and after evidence had arisen that the risks had materialised. Wendy Williams has said that the right to rent policy exemplifies the Home Office’s unwillingness to listen to other people’s perspective or take on board external scrutiny, and that that stems from

“an absolute conviction, rather than evidence”.

As a parliamentarian and a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, in 2018 I was involved in a detailed case study of two of the Windrush cases. When we looked at the files of these people, we saw the way in which those acting on behalf of the Home Office had repeatedly ignored extensive documentary evidence that they had every right to live in the United Kingdom. These people were detained and were on the verge of being deported from the United Kingdom. Given that treatment, it is perfectly understandable that there is serious concern about what might become of those EU nationals living in the United Kingdom who have not met the deadline for the settlement scheme and may therefore find themselves, like the Windrush generation, without the paperwork to evidence their right to be here.

As ever, it is the most vulnerable who will suffer most. During the Windrush scandal, it was old people who were hit hardest. We have heard other hon. Members talk about that. Turning again to the EU settlement scheme, on Twitter last night a consultant anaesthetist set out the story of his 83-year-old German-born mother, who came to the United Kingdom in 1962. She has given a lifetime of dedicated service to the United Kingdom and now, sadly, like so many people of her generation, she has dementia. She has no understanding of the process to gain the settled status, and without her son’s assistance she would not have been able to follow it. What of the elderly and vulnerable people with no loving family to help them navigate our complicated immigration system? Just like the Windrush generation, they will be at risk of losing bank accounts, tenancies, access to the NHS and welfare benefits.

We need to use this debate to make sure that we learn lessons from what happened during the Windrush scandal. Its effects were felt far and wide. One of my constituents, a man in his 70s, returned from holiday a few years ago to be told by Border Force officials that he was an illegal immigrant. He had been born in Canada to a Scottish mother and had come to the United Kingdom as a baby and known nowhere else. He never thought that he would be the kind of person who would be caught up in the Windrush scandal, but he was and he was extremely upset and had a genuine fear that he was going to be deported, until my office was able to sort out his status and paperwork.

Another constituent of mine, a British national from the Commonwealth who came here before 1988, has been unable to get work as a professional bus driver for the past few years because he was wrongly accused of hijacking someone else’s identity. Although his Department for Work and Pensions file was eventually cleared and his right to benefits was reinstated, the Home Office did not regularise his identity, he cannot get a new passport and he cannot get a driving licence. He came to see me

as he was desperate to get his driving licence so that he could work. He was unaware of the Windrush scheme remedy, and the team in my office are now working with him to complete a Windrush application. I hope the Minister is listening and will ask his officials to look at this case specifically, to learn lessons of the devastation that can be caused by failing to properly resolve these types of situation.

As has been indicated, responses to parliamentary questions show that the Windrush compensation scheme is a lengthy experience, for some at least, with many waiting for more than a year. Shamefully, as has been said, 21 people have died waiting for a response. So it is time that the scheme was properly resourced and that legal aid was made available to help claimants through the bureaucracy. So my other ask of the Minister today is whether he can give us an undertaking to properly resource this compensation scheme, on which the Home Office has to date drastically underspent its budget, and whether he will afford legal aid for the more complicated cases.

Above and beyond everything else, what we should take from today's debate is the lessons that should be learned from the Windrush scandal, and the title of Wendy Williams' report refers to that. We should take them forward to make sure that no other people living in the UK suffer that sort of treatment in the future. If we do not address the hostile environment and its implications—through the right to rent scheme, in the workplace, in the health service and in the benefits system—we are at risk of going back to the days of signs in the window saying, “No blacks, no Irish need apply”, except that the signs will not be there because the system is more insidious and more covert, but it is still there. The Windrush scandal should have marked the end of the hostile environment, but the Home Office is forging ahead with it regardless. Its approach was recently typified by the carrying out of an immigration raid during a religious festival on Glasgow's south side. The local multicultural community firmly and peaceably showed what they thought of the British Government's conduct, and the victims of the raid were released. The shameful heavy-handed approach to immigration typified by the Windrush scandal should have no place in the modern United Kingdom. It certainly has no mandate in Scotland and no place in modern Scotland, which is one of the many reasons why the SNP wins election after election in Scotland. The responsibility to realise the means to do something about the hostile environment in Scotland weighs heavily on my party, but ultimately the responsibility for it weighs on the Minister's party and I want to hear from him today that he has learned the lessons of the Windrush scandal and that steps will be taken to avoid it ever happening again.

12.13 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. It is absolutely right that today in Parliament we celebrate the Windrush generation from the Caribbean, from Africa, from Asia. These communities help make the UK what it is today and continue to contribute immeasurable amounts to every aspect of British society. I was very pleased on Windrush Day to join students at Corpus Christi Catholic Primary School on Brixton Hill as they played their steel pans and sang a rendition

of “You Can Get It If You Really Want” by Desmond Dekker. They had spent weeks learning about the Windrush generation and were very excited to tell me about everything that they had learnt—this included teaching me some things. I was pleased to join the CARICOM heads of mission at the Windrush commemoration at Windrush Square, at the African and Caribbean war memorial that is there, which is a very important place, especially given this year's revelation about how disrespected our former Commonwealth officers—members of the military—had been and how those who were involved in various world wars had been treated.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to Arthur Torrington of the Windrush Foundation and acknowledge his organisation's call, joined by many of the Windrush generation throughout the country, to actually have the Windrush memorial that is planned built at Windrush Square, where they believe it rightfully belongs.

After the Windrush scandal broke, the apology that the Government eventually gave was momentous. It was the first time that I know of in my history that the British Government have apologised so unequivocally on an issue related to a matter of race. The celebrations that we have had over years since then, the establishment of Windrush Day and the acknowledgement of the importance of the Windrush generation to this country are important, but they all mean nothing if we do not end the scandal that is very much ongoing; if we do not admit and tackle racial injustice; and if we do not end the hostile environment.

We have to remember that the Windrush generation were treated terribly and some of them have even died before receiving a penny of justice and many died before receiving that apology. People were denied driving licences and homes and made unemployed. They were put in immigration detention centres, some were deported, and others were refused re-entry to this country and are still finding difficulty getting back into this country. Some had their families broken up. They were British citizens and this happened to them and to their loved ones.

As far as many are concerned, the scheme remains unfit for purpose. Too many have died waiting for compensation and too many have been denied it. Since the scheme started in 2019, a total of 2,367 people have applied, 122 claims have been rejected and 22 have resulted in no compensation at all. To date, only 687 claims have received any payment.

Despite the Home Secretary's statement that the scheme has fundamentally changed since December, it is clear that that has not been the case. The author of the scheme, Martin Forde QC, has even said that those who deserve compensation think it is a “trap”—what an indictment of this Government and the Windrush generation's confidence in them.

The scandal continues. Jacqueline McKenzie—a lawyer based in my constituency who has been holding pro bono legal surgeries for those affected by the scandal at the Black Cultural Archives and elsewhere throughout the country—has extensive evidence of persistent Home Office failings in not just administering the scheme but registering those Windrush generation members who require their citizenship. It goes on.

It should be no surprise to the Government that a number of people have signed a petition calling on the Home Office to amend the scheme, and that the Labour

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

party is rightfully calling for the scheme to be moved out of the Home Office. We do not honour the Windrush generation if we carry on like this.

We do not honour the Windrush generation if we continue to apply the hostile environment and continue with our broken immigration and nationality system. How can we say we have learned any of the lessons of the past if we are about to drive EU nationals into an effective Windrush scandal, with thousands of them probably having not applied for the scheme by yesterday's deadline?

It does not honour the Windrush generation that in 2019 some 421,000 children were born in the UK who were not registered as British citizens—some of them, I might add, are the children and grandchildren of the Windrush generation directly—and that in that same year 177,000 children who had been raised in the UK for at least 10 years were also unregistered. These children are not migrants, just like the Windrush generation, and they have gone on or, if the issue of citizenship fees does not change, will go on to experience real-life difficulties, continuing to fall victim to the hostile environment when it comes to accessing healthcare, taking up employment, attending university, renting a home and opening a bank account—all things they should have access to.

It does not honour the Windrush generation if we continue to push issues of racism out of the way. The recent race report was an absolute disgrace in my view. It was a complete whitewash of the institutional racism that the Windrush generation and others have faced and continue to face. Even to imply that there may be no issues with institutional racism is a complete disgrace, in terms of people's experience, but also I believe that it is an attempt to absolve the Government of the responsibility for tackling it: if there is no institutional racism, there are no duties for the Government to impose on institutions. This is just passing the buck as usual. We do not honour the Windrush generation and we do not respect their past when we do not have a plan to change this discrimination that ultimately and undoubtedly could, and will, impact on their futures.

We do not honour the Windrush generation if we do not educate people about the history of slavery and colonialism, which are very much a part of our history as Britain. It cannot be the case that we choose a history that acknowledges neither of these major events that are part and parcel of why we are the country we are today, part and parcel of why people in this country experience racism today, and part and parcel of why the Windrush generation and the Windrush scandal happened in the way that it did. It was because of this racism. It has been inspirational to see children, schools and teachers across my constituency taking up Windrush Day and black history lessons and actively doing it themselves, but they are not doing this with Government support—despite the recommendations in the “Windrush Lessons Learned Review”—and that is wrong.

Yes, the Government have apologised with Windrush Day and have certain measures that may look like they are going in the right direction, but too many fall short of what is required. If the Government stand true to the apology that they made years ago, if they respect the Windrush generation, and if they respect the continued involvement and contribution that this generation and

many others from migrant backgrounds continue to make to this country, they will take stock, remove the Windrush compensation scheme from the Home Office so it can be managed properly, listen to the Windrush generation about where they would like to have their memorial, and take active steps acknowledging institutional racism and working to bring it to an end.

12.22 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate to mark Windrush Day, and the Backbench Business Committee on making time available for it.

The story of the Windrush generation is one of courage, determination, triumph over adversity and success. We mark Windrush Day to celebrate those who came into Tilbury docks in their Sunday best, as other Members have said, on that day in June 1948. We use Windrush to describe the wider post-war immigration from the Caribbean—those who came to Britain from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Granada, St Lucia, Dominica, Guyana, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Haiti, St Kitts and Nevis, Montserrat, Antigua and Barbuda, and Anguilla. Indeed, my Slough constituency has the largest population of people of Anguillian heritage anywhere in the world outside Anguilla. I have had the pleasure on numerous occasions of attending events and dinners as we regularly host the Chief Minister of Anguilla.

Local people are well served by the Anguilla Community Group, Survival, the Slough Dominican Association, the Jamaican Association Slough and SANAS—the St Kitts & Nevis Association Slough—among many other associations and community groups. I am extremely proud to serve as the Member of Parliament for all these fine Slough Caribbean organisations and Slough's Windrush generation and their descendants, who have contributed so much to the vibrancy and progress of our town.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his obvious involvement in the community that he represents, and I think the people of Slough are very fortunate to have him as their MP. Does he agree that Windrush Day 2021 allows those valued and cherished citizens to show the experiences of the West Indian people who have settled here and that their personal stories of migration also give a welcome representation of black British culture as it helped those of with working-class experience to connect with one another in this country—two traditions together under the British flag?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman who, as we all know, is an assiduous and dedicated Member—hardly an Adjournment debate goes past without the pleasure of hearing an intervention by him—and I agree with him fully. We need to learn about the history of the Windrush generation. More widely, our curriculum needs to change, and our children and all schoolchildren must learn that history through the changed curriculum. Only if we learn from our history, our past—as a history student, I know that better than most—can we stop repeating mistakes and stop the racism, slavery and other maltreatment that many individuals endured.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I hope the hon. Gentleman will not look on this as an abuse, but I meant to ask the Minister whether, before the end of the debate or certainly afterwards, he would find the letter sent on 25 May this year at 1.41 pm to MHCLG correspondence by Arthur Torrington who, for 26 years, has run the Windrush Foundation. He has not had a reply. His essential point was to ask whether it was a good idea for the Windrush Foundation to be involved in Windrush Day events in the same way that the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust is involved in Holocaust Memorial Day. The Minister might not be able to respond directly, but I hope that he will respond to Arthur Torrington, who made a number of outstanding points which deserve answers. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way.

Mr Dhesi: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman. I am glad that his intervention placed that on the record. I sincerely hope that the Minister will acknowledge and cover it in his response.

We owe so much to the Windrush generation and their descendants. They contributed to business, medicine, engineering and science, teaching, nursing, politics, academia, the voluntary sector and the armed services. Who can imagine our public life here in Great Britain without the contributions of Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Tessa Sanderson, Zadie Smith, Kelly Holmes, Lenny Henry, Rio Ferdinand and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), among so many others?

I mentioned the contribution of people of African-Caribbean heritage to our politics, and I want to mention one person in particular: Lydia Simmons, whom I mentioned in my maiden parliamentary speech here in the Chamber and whom I am so fond of, especially given the warmth with which she greets me. Lydia is something of a Slough legend. She was born in Montserrat, came to the UK, and did the sensible thing and joined the Labour party. She was elected to Slough council in 1979. She was a council cabinet member and served until 2007. Lydia Simmons has the honour of being the first black person and the first Afro-Caribbean woman to become a Mayor in England. She has rightly been recognised by Her Majesty the Queen with an OBE.

When we hear the name of Windrush, we reflect on 1,001 stories of fortitude, sacrifice, bravery and service. We give thanks for all those who built communities, served our nation and strengthened our bonds of kinship and friendship with islands across the oceans. However, when we hear the name of Windrush, we also hear different connotations. Instead of gratitude, we think of cruelty; instead of recognition, we think of injustice; instead of service, we think of scandal. The Windrush scandal is a terrible blight on our recent past.

Wendy Williams's lessons learned review stands as a terrible indictment of the Government's so-called "hostile environment". Williams stated that the cruel impact was "foreseeable and avoidable". The Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the EHRC, said that the Government ignored its duty to equality. Even after Ministers admitted their failings and mistakes, the Windrush compensation scheme is a disaster: of the 11,500 people the Home Office estimates are eligible for compensation, a mere 687 have received their due. Justice delayed is justice denied and, tragically, at least 21 people have died waiting for justice. The need is there and the money

is there. What is missing is the political will and the basic efficiency to get the cash into the bank accounts of the people who deserve it.

When the Windrush generation arrived, they were frequently met with hostility and racism. They were denied a fair chance in housing, education and jobs. Those infamous signs in landlords' windows were used to stoke up division and dire warnings of rivers of blood. Yet that generation proved the racists wrong. They added immeasurably to our national story and continue to do so. They started out in the cities, towns and villages of faraway Caribbean islands, but they proved—through their intellect, determination and sweat—to be the best of British. We honour them today and in their names we demand long overdue racial justice and equality for all.

12.30 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) [V]: It is a great pleasure to speak in this Windrush debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing it. It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

Last week, we celebrated the fourth annual Windrush Day. It is an important moment to celebrate the British Caribbean community—in particular, the half a million people who came to the UK after the second world war. As hon. Members have said, it is also an important time to reflect on the shameful Windrush scandal and assess what progress the Government have made in righting the wrongs they have perpetrated.

I pay tribute to Patrick Vernon, who has campaigned over many years for this day to be recognised. In 2018, he wrote about the need to remember that

"many aspects of British society today would be unrecognisable without the contributions that immigration and integration have made: from the NHS to the monarchy, our language, literature, enterprise, public life, fashion, music, politics, science, culture, food and even humour."

This year, it is more important than ever to recognise the contribution of the Windrush generation and those who have come after them. Of course, 1948 was the year when both the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury docks and our national health service was founded. Ever since then, the story of the NHS has been entwined with the story of immigration from the Caribbean and more widely. For more than 70 years, the NHS has cared for us in our time of need—never more so than during the last 16 months. Today, I pay tribute to the nurses, doctors, care staff and health workers who have been on the frontline during the covid pandemic.

I now turn to the Windrush compensation scheme. We should be clear that no financial compensation can truly make up for the hardship, suffering and mistreatment that the Windrush generation has experienced as a result of Home Office policies and practices. Nevertheless, the launch of the scheme in April 2019 marked an important step towards achieving justice for the Windrush generation and their families. Since then, however, I have been very concerned by the progress that the Home Office has made to ensure that everyone who is eligible receives their rightful compensation.

A recent report by the National Audit Office raised a number of issues that Ministers need to address urgently. The Home Office has received significantly fewer

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

applications to the scheme than it anticipated. By the end of March 2021, the Department had received just 2,163 applications. I repeat: 2,163 applications. Does the Minister accept that significantly more outreach work is needed to ensure that everyone who is eligible knows about the scheme and is supported to apply to it?

For claims received up to March 2020, the scheme made some form of payment within 12 months to only 10% of claimants residing in the UK and 1.1% of claimants residing outside the UK. Does the Minister think that it is acceptable that 90% of claimants had not received any payments a year after they applied—and if not, what steps will the Home Office take to improve the situation?

Tragically, many of the Windrush generation have died without receiving the compensation they deserve. A recent article in the *Big Issue* quoted several people who have lost their lives as they waited for a decision on the scheme. Natalie Barnes, daughter of Paulette Wilson, who died in 2020, said:

“The Home Office still operates the hostile environment policy which contributed to the death of my mother. Before she passed, she was struggling with the forms and lack of support and respect from the Home Office. The scheme needs to be moved so there is proper justice to families like mine.”

I also have several constituents who have been waiting for well over a year for a decision on their applications. One told me that he has been told to send the same documentation three times, despite calling the helpline multiple times, and he has been unable to receive an update on his claim. I am still waiting for a response to my correspondence on that issue. Other constituents have faced similar challenges in terms of getting basic answers from the Home Office about the progress of their applications. The Home Office must urgently improve how it deals with these cases from start to finish.

Finally, let me turn to the changes that the Government must make to this scheme. The “Fix the Windrush compensation scheme” petition has now received more than 100,000 signatures. It calls for three things: first, for the compensation scheme to be removed from the Home Office and managed by an independent non-government agency to provide trust, respect and confidence to the victims and their families; secondly, for the provision of substantial funding for outreach schemes to reach Windrush victims in the UK, Africa and the Caribbean; and thirdly, for the Government to include a full apology letter with every compensation award.

I urge the Government to consider taking these steps to put some dignity and humanity into the compensation scheme and to give those affected the justice they deserve. Successive Governments have failed the Windrush generation. The Government must now stop repeating the mistakes of the past and deliver justice to those who have been denied it for far too long.

12.37 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this important debate. It is truly an honour to follow the brilliant contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare).

This year marks the fourth national Windrush Day, commemorating the arrival, on board the *Empire Windrush*, of the first Caribbean immigrants to the UK, who played a vital role in rebuilding Britain after the second world war. After the ravages of war, Britain had to heal, rebuild and recover. It was a task that we could not and did not manage alone. This wonderful Windrush generation were the drivers, the nurses and the workers who helped not only to rebuild Britain, but to shape the Britain that we have today, and it is all the better for it. Towns and cities across the country rightly pay tribute to their efforts, including in Luton, where the Windrush flag was raised above our town hall. The ceremony was organised by young leaders in Luton and supported by the African Caribbean Community Development Forum.

I am proud that our town’s tribute and gratitude live on through the generations, but gratitude is something that a Government must not only show and express—at the moment, the only thing this Government are paying is lip service to the Windrush generation, not the compensation that is owed. That is simply not good enough. How many more people must die before they get the justice that is rightly owed to them? When will all the Windrush generation get the compensation that is owed to them? Until we start to see the words match the action, I am afraid that warm words will continue to be cold comfort to those who gave so much. The scale and depth of this injustice is huge: deportations, innocent people being detained, all under a Government who have moved so far to the right that the centre ground is barely visible, let alone the ability to see people as humans and fellow brothers and sisters.

I welcomed the Home Office’s apology, but an injustice on this scale needs to be followed with action. I will come on to the virtually non-existent compensation later, but I am talking about genuinely learning lessons from the past. Instead of taking a more humane, humble and appreciative, as well as economically sound approach to what people from other countries give to and do for this country, the Government have steered down an ever-more hostile and fiercely right-wing approach. Those who seek refuge in our country are now to be processed—such a horrible word in itself when we are talking about people who are fleeing famine, war or oppression in another country. We have seen “Go Home” vans. Healthcare workers who have given their all throughout the pandemic are subjected to immigration health surcharges to pay for the very health service that they are working in. The Prime Minister cosies up to divisive leaders and is himself yet to apologise for racist remarks about Muslim women and black people.

Since their apology to the Windrush generation of 2018, this Government have not learned from their past mistakes. In fact, the situation is getting worse. After I raised multiple questions on the compensation scheme, the Home Office refused to tell me how many people in Luton North, or even in the region, had been awarded compensation. It cited some nonsense about telling me the number of people who had received compensation—I just asked for a number—potentially identifying people, which it would never do. So I ask again: how many people in Luton North and in Bedfordshire are still waiting for what is owed to them? If the Minister will not share that with us, why not? Why has so little of the £200 million compensation fund been allocated to the people who deserve it?

Last year, I wrote to the Home Secretary on behalf of a constituent. I was days away from having my baby. I got a response when that baby was crawling, nearly eight months later. That is simply not good enough. I appreciate that we have had a pandemic and things will take longer for Departments to deal with than normal, but eight months is far too long for the Windrush generation to wait to hear an answer, particularly an older generation that has been left more vulnerable and disproportionately affected during the pandemic.

I hope that the Windrush generation's wait for justice will soon be over, because far too many of their peers never lived to see the day and that injustice can now never be redressed. Now the Minister must act. The compensation owed to people must find its way to their pockets and their bank accounts as soon as possible, and we must know when that is going to happen. If the Government are to truly learn the lessons of the past, they must end the hostile environment that so many of our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities have to live in every day.

12.42 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this important debate.

The findings of the National Audit Office on the compensation scheme for the Windrush scandal can only be described as catastrophic. As we have heard from many hon. Members across the Chamber, more than 21 members of the Windrush generation have died awaiting compensation, and far too little support has been provided to those making claims. These claims need to be processed quicker to ensure that no one else from the Windrush generation sadly passes away while still waiting. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) talked about the scheme needing to be properly resourced, and I agree. If one is to judge the UK Government's commitment to amending the harm they have caused to black citizens of the UK and the Commonwealth by the efficacy of this compensation scheme, one may come to rather distressing conclusions.

Many members of the Windrush generation continue to suffer from another of the Government's ill-judged and callous policies: frozen pensions. Successive UK Governments have pursued an approach to state pensions whereby recipients in some countries receive annual pension payment increments but pensioners in other countries, including all but two Caribbean countries, do not. Some members of the Windrush generation retired to their countries of birth only to find themselves at the receiving end of this harsh policy. That includes more than 300 pensioners living in Antigua and Barbuda, 1,300 in Trinidad and Tobago, almost 1,000 in Grenada, more than 800 in Saint Lucia and hundreds more across a number of other Caribbean islands.

One such pensioner is 90-year-old Nancy Hunte, who moved to the UK from Antigua with her daughter, Gretel, who is now 66. Nancy spent 33 years working in Leicester, while Gretel spent two decades working in UK factories. Due to their return to their country of origin, Nancy has now missed out on £70,000 in pension

payments, receiving only £39 per week, which is less than a third of the pension she deserves. Gretel, who has now reached retirement age, faces the same fate as her mother.

Another pensioner in this situation whom I had the great pleasure of meeting virtually a couple of days ago is 82-year-old Monica Philip. She was born in Antigua and moved to the UK when she was 20 years old. She spent 37 years employed in the UK, including as a civil servant at the Ministry of Defence and in the City of London social services. She had to return to Antigua in 1996 to care for her ailing mother. Her state pension has been frozen at £74 per week, which is half what her sister Naomi, who still lives in Leicester, receives. How can that be fair?

The UK Government could choose to end this injustice at any time. All that it would take to put a stop to the frozen pensions policy is domestic legislation unilaterally uprating the pensions of UK pensioners in countries that the UK has no reciprocal pension agreement with. The Government do not take these steps, as they insist that they will only uprate pensions through such reciprocal agreements. That would be an almost reasonable position if it were not for the fact that the Government baulk at the opportunity when offered new reciprocal agreements, such as the one recently offered by Canada. It would be helpful if the Government could clarify why they take such a contradictory stance, where on the one hand they insist that they merely seek bilateral reciprocal deals, and on the other they will not actively seek such deals or seriously consider them when they are presented with the opportunity to secure one.

I understand that the Minister may not have responsibility for this, but has he had discussions with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions on the impact that these frozen pensions have had on Windrush pensioners who have retired to their countries of origin, especially in the light of the inefficacy of the compensation scheme? Nothing can excuse this lack of support for Windrush pensioners who put in decades of hard work rebuilding the UK after the second world war.

12.47 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate.

I am a daughter of the Windrush generation. When my parents and my family arrived from Nevis and settled in Leicester, they made tremendous sacrifices so that they could contribute to our local and national community. The Windrush generation were part of a brief post-war attempt to reconcile centuries of extractive, violent colonialism by ensuring that members of the British empire could settle in the UK. Despite facing horrific systemic racism and discrimination, the Windrush generation helped to rebuild a country ravaged by war and made an immense contribution to shaping the country we live in today.

The British state has not held up its end of the bargain, and the mistreatment of the Windrush generation that ensnared UK residents in the Government's callous, racist hostile environment immigration system is one of the most evil chapters in modern British history. British citizens who built our NHS, who worked in frontline jobs and whose actions define public service were

[Claudia Webbe]

criminalised. They were denied access to work, housing and healthcare for no other reason than their country of birth or the colour of their skin.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that the Government had failed to comply with their equality duties. Wendy Williams' "Windrush Lessons Learned Review" found a culture of neglect within the Home Office that created conditions in which British citizens were systematically denied their rights due to damaging, pernicious immigration targets. That review made 30 recommendations that the Home Secretary committed to implementing, yet progress has been slow—so slow that Wendy Williams accused the Home Office of paying "lip service" to the urgent reform that is necessary. It is utterly shameful that only 687 people have received compensation from the Windrush compensation scheme out of 11,500 people who the Home Office estimated might be eligible, although the National Audit Office found that 15,000 people might be eligible. That means that less than 5% of people whose lives were unjustly ruined by this Government have received the compensation they deserve. Tragically, at least 21 people have died waiting for justice.

The National Audit Office found that despite the compensation scheme needing 125 full-time caseworkers, when the Home Office launched the scheme, it had only six in post. Applicants are also forced to go through a complex, convoluted and tortuous process that includes at least 15 steps, and the wait times are unacceptably long. This derisory commitment shows how utterly unserious this Government are about making amends for their abuse of human rights. Frankly, it seems that this Government could not care less about the victims of their own institutionally racist policies. Putting the same Home Office that is responsible for the Windrush scandal in charge of the compensation scheme is like leaving a fox in charge of a henhouse. The scheme must be removed from Government and placed under the control of a properly funded, independent regulator.

The mishandling of the Windrush compensation scheme rubs salt into wounds, heaping insult upon injustice. Under this Government, citizenship rights have been deliberately obscured, and deportation and removal targets have taken precedent. They have made no effort to end the institutionally racist hostile environment policies that created this disaster. Indeed, the Windrush scandal is perhaps the definitive example of institutional racism, and the fact that this Government have embarked on a damaging crusade against the reality of institutional racism shows just how little they have learned from the suffering of the Windrush generation. I am very concerned by this Government's denial of structural discrimination, as demonstrated by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities' report, which sought to blame minorities for, and gaslight them about, the structural disadvantages they face. This is not a Government who want to learn lessons from the Windrush scandal; it is a Government who are cynically using culture war tropes that are designed to divide our communities against each other and distract from the real causes of inequality and injustice.

The victims of the Windrush scandal need urgent justice. The compensation scheme must be taken away from the Home Office and rapidly accelerated. Beyond

this, the Government must recall the suffering of the Windrush generation and remember that the demonisation of migrants and African, African-Caribbean, Asian and minority ethnic communities has devastating consequences for the lives of British residents. Ultimately, the Government must abandon their divisive agenda and commit to governing in the interests of all our citizens, regardless of the colour of our skin or our country of birth.

12.54 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this very important debate. Windrush Day is our chance to celebrate the incredible contributions made by the remarkable generation of workers who came at the invitation of the British Government and helped to rebuild our country from the ashes of the second world war and to establish the NHS. I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to their tireless work and to articulate our country's massive debt of gratitude to them.

Our celebrations are marred, however, by the disgraceful way in which this Government have repaid these workers in creating the hostile environment. The Windrush scandal is a stain on this Government's conscience and remains one of the greatest racist injustices of our time. Fewer than 700 people have received compensation to date out of the over 11,000 who may be eligible, and at least 21 people have died waiting for justice—as we know, justice delayed is justice denied. I call on the Government now to apologise for these atrocities, and to commit to overhauling the scheme and placing it under independent leadership to help restore faith in the process to get people the compensation and justice they deserve.

If this Government were truly serious about learning the lessons of the Windrush scandal and righting this wrong, they would review and roll back their entire hostile environment policy. That includes the EU settlement scheme deadline, which passed yesterday and threatens to create yet another similar scandal of the same proportions. Instead of lifting the deadline, as so many of us have called for, this Government have chosen to press ahead with a process that means many EU citizens residing in the UK who, for many reasons, were not able to complete the application process on time, today woke up without the right to rent, work or access free NHS healthcare. This Government's response that millions have applied does not answer the question about what will happen to those who lose out. Will the Minister today give reassurance about his Government's plan to ensure that the disastrous treatment of the Windrush generation and their families will not be applied to EU citizens who have not managed to meet this deadline?

This Government's harsh treatment of those who already have the right to live and work in this country is a matter of reproach, but so too is their treatment of those seeking safety on our shores. Last month, the High Court ruled that the Government's housing of asylum seekers at Napier barracks is appalling, that the crowded conditions were inadequate and unsafe, and that a major coronavirus outbreak there was inevitable. It also found that residents of Napier barracks were unlawfully detained there. This week, plans by the Home Secretary to dump asylum seekers in offshore camps in Rwanda were revealed. These unconscionable plans threaten

rampant human rights violations against some of the most vulnerable people in our society who have come to our country seeking the help and compassion that they have a right to expect and receive. I call on this Government to think again and to reject this inhumane course of action.

Lastly, I turn to this Government's plans for the NHS. This unparalleled institution, which got our country through this pandemic, was built on the backs of the Windrush generation. We now have a Health Secretary who, until just days ago, was on £150,000 a year from investor JP Morgan, a bank that is a major player on the private healthcare scene. He is also on record as being a strong advocate for the privatisation of public services. This year has shown more than ever the value of a public healthcare system that is universally free at the point of use. Today is a commemoration of the incredible contribution of the Windrush generation, and I take this opportunity to call once again on this Government to honour their work and the sacrifices they made, put right the wrongs the victims of the hostile environment have suffered and take the steps needed to put the NHS back on its original footing—publicly owned, publicly funded, free at the point of use and available for all.

12.58 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: First, I pay tribute to those caught up in the Windrush scandal for hanging on in there and sticking with this, and to the many campaigning community groups, activists, supporters, and friends and family of those who have suffered so badly. I thank them for campaigning, signing petitions and speaking to us, as well as for looking in on people and looking after people. Without them, people would have suffered even more greatly than they already have.

I also pay tribute to the hon. and right hon. Members who have stuck with this issue and fought tooth and nail for people. I make particular mention of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—I congratulate her on securing this debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee, too, for agreeing to it—and there are many more who have spoken today and in the past.

As the SNP's immigration spokesperson, I also want to mention the consistent position that both my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) have taken over the years. They joined other voices in pointing out the scheme's many flaws and suggested improvements, including making it independent. If someone is ordered to pay me compensation for a crime they have committed against me, they should not decide how much and when I will be paid. They are the ones in the wrong, and just as it is taken out of their hands, so it should be with the Home Office.

My colleagues argued strongly for legal aid, but again they were ignored. They also argued for changing the standard of proof required in some financial claims away from beyond reasonable doubt to the normal civil standard of balance of probabilities. On that, at least, the Minister took advice from Martin Forde QC, who

designed much of the scheme, and the guidance was changed. That is good, but the other flaws remain and, as we have heard, progress has been painfully slow.

As a new MP in 2015, I regularly felt frustrated at passionately arguing the case for someone or something but almost never getting anywhere in terms of policy changes. However, I underestimated the importance that people place on MPs speaking up for them and acknowledging their injustice. Therefore, as the SNP's immigration spokesperson I will say again that what happened to those people who came here as part of the Windrush generation was utterly wrong. This Government should be ashamed of themselves and should be doing everything they can to make amends, in so far as is possible. They talk about it but, as we have heard, it is not happening for enough people and it is not happening fast enough.

When this scandal emerged, the Home Office claimed that it was a one-off admin error and that delays and complications with administering the compensation were also admin errors. I would argue, though, that it is too much of a coincidence that it all fits with this deeply hostile environment. There is a growing narrative from this Government about two types of immigrants: the good, compliant ones and the illegal ones, who are, it follows, according to this Government, bad, and bad for the UK.

That fits with the wider narrative that there is no such thing as white privilege when there absolutely is, that there is no institutional racism on these islands when there is, and that the British empire was a force for good in the world. The next thing we know, we will be hearing those on the Government Benches telling us that the British went around the globe because they had to civilise people, and they will not blink an eye when they say it, though I make notable exceptions for those who have spoken in this debate. That narrative is increasing and it allows things like the Windrush scandal to happen.

I do not want to spend too much time away from the specific issue of Windrush, because those people absolutely deserve the focus of this debate to be on them. However, I want to list a few other things that the hostile anti-immigrant narrative is allowing to happen right now. It is allowing people to be held in communal accommodation completely inappropriate to their needs, such as army barracks, hotels and hostels, and in Glasgow the dreadful so-called mother and baby unit where babies and toddlers have no space—and I mean no space—to do anything other than sleep and eat.

The narrative allows highly skilled migrants—another group of people we asked to come here because we needed their skills—to be thrown out of the UK on the most spurious of reasons. It has allowed the Home Office to go searching for ways to throw them out, asking the tax office to tell it of any who have ever had any discrepancies in their self-assessment returns. Then, despite Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs having resolved the issue years ago and being completely satisfied, the Home Office is being allowed to kick those people out.

I could not fail to mention today, on 1 July 2021, the up to 1 million EU citizens who have missed the deadline to apply to remain in the country that is their home. Many of them simply will not have believed that they had to apply, perhaps because for many of them, like the Windrush generation, this has been their home for

[Anne McLaughlin]

longer than the Home Secretary has been alive. Whatever the reason, those people have today lost their right to live and work here, and employers have lost the right to employ them, no matter how badly they are needed. That could have been avoided, and it would have been avoided had the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster stuck to the pledge they signed when trying to get people to vote for Brexit. That pledge said to EU citizens: "Nothing will change for you." But it has and I am deeply concerned about those EU citizens living here today. It could also have been avoided if the Government, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West pointed out, actually learned lessons from the lessons learned review carried out by Wendy Williams.

As I have said, I do not want to take away today from the people we are here to talk about—the Windrush generation. They came here because they were invited. My partner's family were among them, but thankfully we are not caught up in this. We needed them to help rebuild after world war two. While people in the Caribbean were well used to having white people in charge of their country, they were not used to the racist abuse to which they would be subjected when they reached our shores. They assumed they would be welcome because they were part of the Commonwealth, they had fought in our wars and, as I said, they were invited here, so it must have been a huge shock when they got here. Let us not forget that the 5,000 Jamaican nurses mentioned by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood who came here to provide us with healthcare meant there were 5,000 fewer nurses in Jamaica, the country that had trained them.

I turn to the complexity of applying for compensation. The Home Office has said it is taking so long because it is very complex and that assessing financial loss and other profound impacts and consequences is not easy and cannot be done overnight. The fact that each claim takes not the 30 hours of staff time that were estimated but, according to the National Audit Office, 154 hours certainly backs that up. How can the Home Office also claim, therefore, that it is so straightforward that those applying do not need a lawyer? All the reasons that the Home Office gives for it taking so much time are the same reasons why legal aid should be allowed to support applicants. That would also make the Home Office's task easier and hopefully build some faith in the scheme. That is why the Home Affairs Committee recommended it and why the SNP tabled an amendment to the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Bill to that effect.

The recent news that the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants is teaming up with seven companies to give free legal advice was so welcome and such a relief. All I can say is: thank goodness for a legal profession that believes in access to justice for all. However, it should not be down to the profession and its resources. People must be given support by the perpetrators of this outrage, and the scheme must be independent of those perpetrators.

Finally, why on earth did the Home Office last year spend only £8.1 million of the £15.8 million budget allocated to run the scheme? The link between that and the lengthy delays is obvious. The solution is obvious, but my fear is that, for all the reasons I mentioned, the Government are not looking for solutions because their

political ideology wants to make these islands as inaccessible and unwelcoming as possible to those they consider foreign, whether they are or not.

1.7 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a privilege to close this crucial debate on behalf of the Opposition. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for it. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on her work in securing the debate and leading it. I echo her praise of campaigners such as Patrick Vernon.

As my hon. Friend demonstrated in her speech, she is a powerful and passionate advocate for the Windrush generation. I was lucky enough, as she said, to visit her constituency for a lunch marking Windrush Day. Spending time in the company of people from that generation is a real honour, and it offered a unique insight into a remarkable part of our national story. The Empire Windrush docked in Tilbury on that Tuesday in June 1948—73 years ago—after travelling thousands of miles across the Atlantic ocean from the Caribbean. On that day, it would have been impossible to predict the incredible impact that those people who became known as the Windrush generation would have on our country.

The Labour Government of the time needed people to come and contribute to the economic recovery after world war two, and so many people travelled so far from home to help rebuild the country from the ruins of the war. They did that and so much more. The Windrush generation and their families have made a huge impact on every facet of our national life, from our NHS to our transport system, public and private sectors, the arts, culture, religion and sports—the list is endless. When I spoke to people at that lunch in Brixton, they gave me a powerful reminder of the appalling discrimination that generation faced when they arrived and the vile racism that made it hard to access work and homes or even feel safe on the streets, yet they persisted. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

We have heard many fine speeches about the Windrush generation, their experience and their continued quest for justice. We have heard moving stories in contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe). It is a national scandal that the Windrush compensation scheme is the offensive mess that it is, because the impact of the Windrush scandal demands a timely, efficient, comprehensive and sensitive compensation scheme that truly reflects the gravity and scale of the injustice. That is so important because people who dedicated their lives to this country were treated in an unforgivable way. People were cut off from accessing the very basics of human life: work, housing and healthcare. Some were stranded away from home. Totally innocent people were forced into desperate situations—destitute and unable to work or receive financial support.

The Wendy Williams review came incredibly close to calling the Home Office institutionally racist. The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that the Home Office did not comply with its equality duty when understanding the impact on the Windrush generation

and their descendants when developing, implementing and monitoring the hostile environment policy agenda. I take this moment to praise the campaigners who fought so hard to expose this injustice and for the rights of victims. Each and every one of them has shown remarkable dedication and care for others.

It was fitting that on Windrush Day a blue plaque was dedicated in honour of the late Paulette Wilson. Paulette Wilson came to Britain in the winter of 1968 after Enoch Powell's infamous speech earlier that year. That her plaque is now on his former constituency office is a sign of progress, but it is also a powerful reminder that change never comes easily and always has to be fought for. It requires perseverance and keeping going when things are tough, and that is exactly what so many Windrush campaigners have done with great courage. We pay tribute to them today, but their deeds must be matched by action from this Government.

That is why the Windrush compensation scheme is such a crucial issue. It is not just a vital way to ensure that people have access to the funds they need as a result of the huge wrongs they have endured, important though that is; it is also an opportunity for those in power to show they have listened, appreciated the scale of the scandal and acted. Sadly, that has not been the case. In one of Britain's most challenging hours, the Windrush generation answered the Government's call for help, but when this Government were called on to act for them, they have done too little, too late.

Appallingly, we know that at least 21 people have died waiting for justice from the scheme. The Government's own figures show that just 687 people have received compensation, of the 11,500 who the Home Office estimate might be eligible. That is nowhere near good enough. I have met people who have been offered derisory compensation payments—insulting amounts that come nowhere near recognising the scale of the damage done.

The Government say they have overhauled the scheme and increased some of the payments, but they have never explained why those measures were not in place from the start and why they are still inadequate. The speed of the scheme is totally unacceptable, and do not just take my word for it: the Home Secretary wrote to me yesterday to say that she agreed with me that "claims need to be resolved more quickly".

The National Audit Office has been critical of the Windrush compensation scheme.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the victims of Windrush who I have spoken to have lost faith in the Home Office to deliver this scheme. That is why the Labour party, along with voices from across society and especially in the Windrush generation are calling for the Windrush scheme to be overhauled, by placing it in the hands of an independent body away from the Home Office. That body must have the confidence of victims so as to restore faith in the process and to quickly get compensation to people who have been so appallingly treated. Ministers must come forward and give cast-iron guarantees on when each and every finding from the Wendy Williams review will be implemented, not just a promise that they will be; when will they be implemented?

The reality is that the time for warm words is over. There has to be a fundamental change: a fundamental change in the Home Office and a fundamental change in the compensation scheme. The time for platitudes is over. The time for action is now.

1.15 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for calling this debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for his co-sponsorship. I also thank colleagues from across the House for their insightful and passionate contributions to this vitally important subject.

Last Tuesday, on Windrush Day, we came together to celebrate the Windrush generation. Events were held all over the United Kingdom and the sight of the Windrush flag flying above so many buildings, including here in Parliament—and, as we learned, Luton town hall—was a splendid illustration of what Windrush means to this country. The arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury docks 73 years ago was a signal moment in our history. It has become a symbol of the rich human tapestry that makes this country great. The passengers on that ship, their descendants and those who followed them have made and continue to make a unique and enormous contribution to the social, economic and cultural life of the United Kingdom.

As someone who was brought up in the constituency of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and who has spent many years in city and local government in central London, I have shared triumph and tragedy, hate and love with the descendants of and members of the Windrush generation, and seen what an enormous contribution they make to our national life. As the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and others noted, many have been at the forefront of the fight against covid, working in the NHS, our emergency services and in other key frontline roles.

The Windrush generation have helped to shape our country. This is their home. Without them, we would be immeasurably diminished; and yet, despite all that, some of them suffered terrible injustices at the hands of successive Governments of all flags. The fact that so many people were wrongly made to feel that this country was not their home is a tragedy and an outrage. I know that the scars run deep. This sorry episode will not be forgotten, nor should it be. This Government have done and continue to do everything in our power to right those wrongs. I will set out some of the steps that we have taken.

In April 2018, the Home Office established a taskforce to ensure that individuals who have struggled to demonstrate their right to be here are supported in doing so. Since then, we have provided documentation to over 13,000 individuals, confirming their status. In April 2019, we launched the Windrush compensation scheme to ensure that members of the generation and their families are compensated for the losses and impacts that they have suffered because they were unable to demonstrate their lawful status in this country.

I reassure Members that we are absolutely committed to ensuring that everyone receives the maximum compensation to which they are entitled. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe mentioned a cap of £100,000. There is now no cap on the amount we will pay out. Since April 2019, we have offered more than £32.4 million, of which £24.4 million has been paid across 732 claims. They have been accepted by the individuals and, as I say, paid. I reassure Members that everybody who accepts and receives a payment also receives a personal letter of apology from the Home Secretary.

[Kit Malthouse]

We are determined to get this right and that means taking action to improve our approach, where necessary. In December, in response to feedback from members of the community, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary overhauled the compensation scheme so that people would receive significantly more money more quickly. The changes have had an immediate impact. Within six weeks, we had offered more than we had in the previous 19 months. Since the end of December, we have offered an average of £5.2 million a month and have paid more than seven times the total amount that had been paid out before then.

Despite this progress, as a number of Members have claimed, a number of people would rather see the compensation scheme moved from the Home Office to an independent body. However, taking such action at this stage would risk significantly delaying payments to people. The first stage in deciding a claim for compensation is to confirm an individual's identity and eligibility. This is linked to their immigration status. It would be difficult to decouple that from the Home Office without increasing the time taken to process an individual's claim and issue payments. There would also be considerable disruption to the processing of outstanding claims while the new body was established and made operational.

That is not to say we are operating without external scrutiny—far from it. For those dissatisfied with their compensation offer, an independent review can be conducted by the Adjudicator's Office, a non-departmental public body that is completely independent of the Home Office. The scheme was set up and designed with the independent oversight of Martin Forde QC in close consultation with those affected by the scandal. Our approach was informed by hundreds of responses to a call for evidence and a public consultation. Earlier this year, we appointed Professor Martin Levermore as the new independent person to advise on the Windrush compensation scheme and ensure it is easy to access, fair and meets the needs of those affected. We continue to listen and respond to feedback about the scheme to ensure it is operating effectively.

We are not complacent, however. We recognise the need to resolve claims more quickly. Some people have been waiting too long for that to happen and that is not acceptable, as the Home Secretary noted in her letter.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In two years and three months, the Home Office has resolved 687 claims. Does the Minister seriously think that any other system properly set up would be that slow?

Kit Malthouse: As I outlined, the current total is actually 732 claims, but it has been too slow. That is why, as I said, the Home Secretary took direct action in December last year and we have seen a significant acceleration in payments thus far. We hope that that progress will continue.

As a number of Members mentioned, the death of 21 individuals before we were able to offer them compensation does weigh extremely heavily on all of us and is a source of sorrow and regret. We are working with their families to ensure that compensation is paid out, while recognising that doing so can never provide adequate consolation. Now we have completed the implementation of the December changes I referred to,

we are committed to reducing the time between submission and decision over the coming months. To do that, we are recruiting additional caseworkers and directing resources to maximise final decision output, as well as improving the evidence-gathering process by revising our data-sharing agreements with other Departments on our forms, guidance and processes.

We also continue to do all we can to raise awareness of the Windrush schemes and encourage all who are eligible to apply. Last year, we launched a national communications campaign and the Windrush community fund, which was designed to reach further and deeper into the communities who were affected. We have now held 180 events, reaching 3,000 people.

Last year, we also published the Wendy Williams "Windrush Lessons Learned Review", to which a number of Members referred, which laid bare the failings and mistakes that led to the Windrush scandal. Each of the 30 recommendations has been grouped into different themes that are being delivered across the Home Office to ensure the lessons from the review are being applied across the Department. Despite what was asserted, Ms Williams did not say that the Home Office was paying "lip service" to her review, and she will be returning to the Department in September to review our progress. Alongside that, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the permanent secretary are also leading an unprecedented programme of change to ensure the Home Office is representative of every part of the community it serves. Our ambition is to transform the Department into one that puts people before processes, an organisation that has fairness and compassion at the heart of all it does.

The Windrush scandal is a stain on this country's conscience. We owe it to those who suffered as a result to deliver lasting and meaningful change, and to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again. I am happy to say on Windrush Day, as we celebrate that generation today and hopefully in the years to come, that the Department for Transport is currently investigating whether the anchor from the Windrush can be recovered and restored to become a fitting memorial to that generation, in the hope that we will all aspire to the aspiration of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) that in the future the colour of our skin will matter no more and no less than the colour of our eyes.

1.24 pm

Helen Hayes: I extend my thanks to every right hon. and hon. Member who has spoken in today's debate. It has been a celebration of the Windrush generation and we have heard again the inspirational stories of people such as Lydia Simmons of Slough, the first black person to be elected mayor in this country. However, much of this debate has rightly been focused on the injustices that so many of the Windrush generation continue to face, the inadequacy of the Government's response and the work still to do. I welcome, in particular, the contributions of the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who both acknowledged the shameful, painful reality of racism still experienced today, and I hope the Minister took heed of their remarks. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) mentioned the important work of the Windrush Foundation and its chair Arthur

Torrington, and I want to add my support, as I have done many times in this Chamber and in correspondence, to the calls for the national Windrush monument to be located in its rightful place in Windrush Square in Brixton, not at Waterloo station.

Disappointingly, the Minister refused to accept the need for the Windrush scheme to be independently administered. That is tone deaf to the experiences of many who have had to make a claim and completely ignores what victims of the Windrush scandal have said about the re-traumatising effects of having to engage with the same organisation that perpetrated the injustice from which they are seeking redress. I hope that when we celebrate Windrush Day 2022 we will be able to acknowledge meaningful progress in delivering justice for the Windrush generation and ending racism and racial inequality in this country. But there is much more to do and many of us will continue to fight for it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Windrush Day 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will suspend the House in a moment, but I just want to say, as we go on to the next debate, when Rosie Winterton will be taking over from me, that I am really proud that we have more openly gay LGBT+ Members of Parliament in this Parliament than any other Parliament in the world. We have fought and won many battles—we still have a bit to go—but when I look around the rest of the world and see so many people living in persecution, with stigma and in fear, I know that we also have a battle to fight for them as well. We have a very important debate to come, but we will now suspend for three minutes.

1.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pride Month

1.29 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Pride Month.

It is a pleasure to open this cross-party Backbench Business Committee debate as Pride Month 2021 comes to its conclusion. All too sadly, once more coronavirus restrictions have meant that it has been more online than on the streets, and less visible and impactful because of that. Coronavirus has hit the LGBT community especially hard, because it has caused huge disruption in those sectors that often provide employment, as well as closing completely many of the safe social spaces on which the community relies.

Pride Month is a time when the LGBT community can celebrate our diversity, commemorate those who fought to end our oppression, and support those who continue to fight against the ongoing discrimination and bigotry that are sadly still prevalent in our society. This Parliament has made great progress since I was first elected, as I think your predecessor in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, was anxious to say at the end of the last debate. We have transformed ourselves from a virtually LGBT-free legislature into one of the gayest Parliaments in the world—that is often on my mind when I sit on these green Benches waiting to be called. I therefore look forward to contributions to today's debate from all parts of the House.

It is impossible, however, not to observe that this debate is taking place against a confusing backdrop of simultaneous progress and backlash for LGBT+ people in our own country, and across the world. On the one hand we have the historic and welcome decision by the Methodists to allow same-sex marriage, but on the other we have an increasingly hostile atmosphere for LGBT people on our streets. It demonstrates that while we celebrate the progress made, we cannot take it for granted or give up on the fight for global LGBT rights across the world.

Here in the UK, the cross-party agreement on LGBT rights, which has been such a welcome feature of our politics since 2010, appears to be under some strain. That strain may not be reflected in today's debate, but it is demonstrated by the Government's increasing appetite for fomenting divisive culture wars that seek to pit one group in society against another. That emboldens bullies and problematises vulnerable minorities. It generates fear and resentments, which can only do harm. That divisive tactic has especially been directed towards trans people, who are often among the least protected and the most vulnerable in our community.

Theoretical support for LGBT+ rights is of course hugely welcome, but we must judge a Government by their actions as well as their words. An LGBT person here in the UK might have been badly affected by the Government's decision to end funding for anti-bullying work in schools last November. They might be worried that the Government are intent on rolling back some of the progress already made, by tearing up their 2018 LGBT action plan and disbanding the advisory panel because, in the words of the current Secretary of State responsible for equalities, it was created by a "previous Administration".

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

If a person is trans or non-binary, they might be mortified that here in the UK their very existence appears to be up for debate in the name of someone else's "free speech", while crucial health support for them is increasingly unavailable. Meanwhile, out on our streets, homophobic hate crimes have soared, increasing by 19% last year, with transphobic hate crimes up 16%. Over the same period the number of prosecutions has plummeted from 20% of reports to a mere 8%. If an LGBT person looks abroad, they might see their Hungarian counterparts being subjected to a section-28 style anti-LGBT law that bans the so-called "promotion of homosexuality"—that has a familiar ring to it—or their Polish counterparts being forced to live in newly established "LGBT free zones".

Although the Government's LGBT envoy Lord Herbert has rightly condemned the new Hungarian law, our own Prime Minister's eagerness to roll out the red carpet in Downing Street for its author Viktor Orbán was an unconvincing way of expressing his official disapproval. The total silence that has accompanied the homophobic baiting of Kim Leadbeater, Labour's candidate in the Batley and Spen by-election, sends its own signal to those perpetrating the abuse.

To improve on their LGBT credentials, the Government have to make good on the promises they have already made. As a minimum, they must introduce a ban on conversion therapy, with no religious exemptions and no loopholes; progress the long-promised reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004; and oversee the proper introduction of inclusive sex and relationship education in schools, with robust, proactive guidance. The Government must take action against demonstrations outside schools that are organised to stir up hatred and intimidate children and teachers.

In March this year, we had a very disappointing response from the Minister for Equalities to the petitions debate on banning the abhorrent and abusive practice of conversion therapy. This led to an unprecedented cross-party letter to the Government in support of an outright ban, signed by the LGBT+ groups of eight political parties represented in this House. A full 12 months have passed since the Prime Minister's pledge to ban conversion therapy. We are told that a Bill is in the works—I sincerely hope one is—but all we have seen are the assurances given to the Evangelical Alliance that "religious freedoms" will be upheld. If the forthcoming Bill creates exemptions for religion, it will not actually constitute a ban, because 50% of conversion therapy takes place in a religious setting.

The leaderships of all the major religions have stated that they are in favour of a ban on conversion therapy, as is the UN. Abuse, coercion, corrective rape and exorcism have no place in a civilised society and no place in acceptable religious practice. The UN independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity has concluded that conversion therapy is

"degrading, inhuman and cruel in its very essence".

The US independent forensic expert group on conversion therapy has concluded:

"All practices attempting conversion are inherently humiliating, demeaning, and discriminatory",

and that they

"generate profound feelings of shame, guilt self-disgust, and worthlessness".

It is no wonder that those subjected to conversion therapy often suffer mental health breakdown as a direct result, so what on earth are the Government waiting for? They should now proceed with a complete ban, with no loopholes.

The Government have reneged on their own stated intention of reforming the Gender Recognition Act. Instead, they appear to be much more focused on encouraging the waging of a disgraceful hybrid war on Stonewall because it is trans-inclusive. The Government should concentrate instead on modernising the arrangements around gender recognition to make them more humane.

Trans people are finding themselves under siege, used as an excuse to bring back the same old anti-LGBT tropes, which those of us who are old enough to have experienced them recognise from the 1980s: stirring up fear about predators, safety in bathrooms and, most insultingly of all, the safety of children. This Government seem to have completely forgotten that at the heart of this long-overdue reform are people who are just trying to live their lives.

I am a proud lesbian, a proud feminist and a trans ally, and I see absolutely no contradiction between any of these values. The battle for equal treatment, dignity and human rights for all can be achieved only with empathy and solidarity between those who have been oppressed by discrimination and bigotry and their allies. Change is achieved by working together. That is why some seek to foment fear and division to prevent progress to a fairer society, free of all discrimination.

The Government continue to claim that the UK is a world leader in LGBT rights. For that to be the case, they must stop giving a green light to those stoking fears and isolating an already vulnerable community that feels under siege and increasingly abandoned. The Government must follow international best practice and allow trans and non-binary people to obtain legal gender recognition through a simple administrative process. To address another myth head on, that does not mean that Keith will be able to identify as Kathy whenever they choose and then switch back again. It means that trans people can establish their legal status in a simple process and do the things that the rest of us take for granted, such as getting married in the right gender or having their pension and insurance policies administered in the right gender. The current bureaucratic, demeaning and intrusive process, which involves them having to get doctors to agree that they are suffering from a mental illness and to certify that they have lived in their preferred gender for two years, is no longer fit for purpose. Again, I implore the Government: you promised you would do this, now just get on with it.

On 27 March 2019, this House took a historic decision when it voted by 538 to 21 to approve a set of draft regulations to introduce inclusive sex and relationship education in our schools, putting it on a statutory footing. That guarantees that children are properly equipped for adult life and ensures that they can be supported to live a happy and safe life. The Government must recognise and defeat the challenge posed to Parliament's intention by the organised demonstrations

outside schools which lie about the content of the lessons and seek to foster panic and hatred, while intimidating children and teachers. They must be robustly dealt with.

We have come a long way in our campaign to ensure that LGBT+ people are a part of our society, with equal rights under the law. We have further to go to ensure that those theoretical rights exist in reality in our country and in the world. I for one will continue to fight until LGBT equality is achieved.

1.41 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). I was proud to co-sign the application for this important debate.

To begin, I wish everyone in this House, in my constituency, in the UK and around the world a very happy Pride indeed. It has not looked the same this year as it has in previous years. We have been moved to online events and we have not been able to have our usual festivities and celebrations, but I hope that from 2022 onwards we can certainly get back to that to celebrate the contribution of LGBT+ people to this country, recognising how far we have come, and acknowledging the work that is still left to do and the progress that is left to be made.

We are now more than 50 years on from the Stonewall riots in the United States and from the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the United Kingdom. Next year, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first ever Pride rally in the UK, in London. LGBT history, however, stretches far back, not just over the past 50 years, but to the beginning of time itself, as I am sure the Minister knows—by that, I do not mean that the Minister was there at the time and could tell us all about it.

I believe it to be a sign of better times that I can stand here today as a proudly openly gay man in what was until last year, when New Zealand beat us to the post, the gayest Parliament in the world, happily engaged to my fiancé Jed, having grown up with an accepting family, a supportive school, supportive workplaces and in a country that recognises my rights. Indeed, just yesterday, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Wallasey, we reached yet another milestone with the Methodist Church's welcome overwhelming support for same-sex marriage in their churches.

During Pride, it is important that we recognise the progress that has been made and celebrate those champions who fought to get us to this point, but it is especially important to recognise that there is still much to do. There are so many issues that it would be important to raise but, in my short contribution today, I cannot do them all justice. However, I want to highlight some of the most pressing.

The first is the need to remember that, while we are lucky to live in a country that does recognise the rights of LGBT+ people in law, to this day, around the world, LGBT+ people face persecution and even the death penalty simply because of their sexuality, gender identity or expression. In some countries, particularly in eastern Europe, in places such as Hungary and Poland, we do seem to be taking a step backwards. So the United Kingdom must remain strong in condemning these abhorrent human rights abuses, and I hope that we can

use our position as the host of that global LGBT+ conference to push that agenda and re-establish that commitment.

We have made great strides in the UK, but far too many LGBT+ people in this country still experience hate crime and discrimination. Since being elected as an MP, I have received a death threat that focused on my sexuality. I had a shocking reminder of that just this week when my gay office manager, Tommy, was spat at and called a "faggot" in the streets. I met members of the LGBT+ community at the Pride reception that the Prime Minister held on Tuesday, where I was sad to hear the story of Josh, who was brutally attacked in Liverpool.

Since 2015, recorded hate crime based on sexual orientation has doubled and hate crime based on gender identity has tripled, but, as we know, so much goes unreported. I know that a review is taking place into hate crime, so I wonder whether the Minister can set out how the review will seek to improve those statistics. No one should feel unsafe to be simply who they are. One way that we can move towards that is by bringing about that all-important ban on LGBT+ conversion therapy in the United Kingdom.

Since being elected as an MP, it has been my privilege, and it has been humbling, to work with colleagues, campaigners and survivors over the past year and a half on trying to bring about that ban and I am delighted that plans to do so were in the Queen's Speech. As I led the Westminster Hall debate on this issue only a few months ago, I do not want to revisit all of the points that I made there and that were very ably made by the hon. Member for Wallasey. But it does bear repeating that these abhorrent practices have not been consigned to the past; they are happening right now, today, in the United Kingdom. People are being forced to go overseas to undergo some truly abhorrent treatment. We owe it to them, after hearing the heartbreaking stories of those survivors, to secure that ban and I hope that it will be this Parliament that secures it.

I know that the Government are issuing a consultation on this prior to legislation. I would be grateful if we could get an update on the steer and scope of that consultation and on timelines, because every single day that we delay there is a chance of another person being subjected to these practices.

Another area in which we need to make much greater strides is, of course, LGBT+ healthcare. The powerful telling of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the TV series "It's a Sin" has brought back into sharp focus how far we have come in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. June 2021 marked 40 years since the first cases of HIV were reported. A lot has changed since then in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. It is no longer a death sentence in the United Kingdom. We are now in a position to end new transmissions by 2030 and the Government have committed to that goal, but it will not be easy to achieve it. The action plan must be worthy of its name. Any update that we can have on the date of the publication of that plan will be very welcome.

Elsewhere in the UK, accessing healthcare can still be very difficult, uncomfortable, and, in some cases, even traumatising for LGBT+ people, particularly for the trans community, who face years and years of waiting lists, no support in that time and, often, when they are eventually through the door, a less than satisfactory

[Elliot Colburn]

service. I hope that we can use this moment here today to take some of the heat out of this debate and discussion, because having an increasingly polarised debate helps no one whatsoever. We need to be leading from the front. Sadly, politics, media and academia have been responsible for a lot of the polarising discussions that we have been having not just in the UK, but across the world. It is our responsibility to try to calm that back down, have a sensible discussion and do what is right by those thousands of people who are just trying to live their lives.

Pride is more than just a four-week period of parties, parades, festivals, and companies changing their logos in the western world, but not in the middle east. Pride is a shared experience, but also a deeply individual one. To me, Pride is about exactly what it says on the tin: it is about pride; about being proud. It is a seemingly simple notion to feel proud in your own skin, to be proud of who you are, but one that, sadly, way too many LGBT+ people in this country and around the world are still unable to feel in themselves. Instead, they live with confusion, anguish, or even fear. It is for this reason—because there are those who live in fear, those who suffer violence simply because of who they are, and those who in the most tragic of circumstances believe that they would be better off dead—that Pride is still so important and still needed to this day.

1.49 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It means a great deal to me to speak in this debate.

If I could give one piece of advice to a young person today, it would be this. Be proud of who you are and who you choose to love. You may have had the frightening realisation that you feel different from the expectations that society has for you. You may be questioning your relationships, your gender or your sexuality. It is frightening. There is good reason to be fearful. Coming out is scary and you might suffer because of it. But what you probably have not been told is that hiding who you are into adulthood will cause you far more suffering anyway.

Just growing up LGBT, with the cumulative effect of the daily denials, the constant fear of being found out and the internalised shame, causes a deep trauma. Despite social progress, and despite many of us never having experienced direct discrimination or abuse, rates of depression, loneliness, substance abuse and suicide among gay men are many, many times higher than across society, each of these in turn causing more shame, more fear and more trauma.

That is what happened to me. It took me a long time to admit that I was struggling with my mental health and alcohol addiction. Actually, it took repeated interventions from the people who really love me. I did not know, or I denied, that I had a problem. I suppressed my emotions, as I had learned to do as a kid, and I told myself things were fine. Only looking back now have I been able to accept that in my 20s I twice nearly lost my life to alcohol; I was saved only by the actions of others. Drinking was destroying my body. It was damaging to me, to my relationships and in so many other ways.

Alcohol addiction is not just about drinking every day or drunkenness. For me, it was about losing who I was over a long period of time. It was desperate isolation.

It was shutting down my personal life using a drug, alcohol, to feel better but ultimately to escape and give up on living. I now know that it has blighted most of my adult life. Fortunately, I have a mother who would protect me at all costs, a father who is the most generous, selfless man I have ever known, a brother who supported me through all this without judgment, and friends who quite literally saved my life.

I am now in the third year of recovery, and I am proud of it. Like so many in the recovery community, I am happy, I am healthy, I love my life, I have a wonderful, loving partner, and I appreciate everything that I have. But it took AA meetings, psychotherapy and counselling to get here, and, honestly, to stay here takes commitment and daily determination. I am in a privileged position. I am all too aware that not everybody makes it. Addiction is fatal if not treated. I have gone from not recognising addiction in myself for so long to seeing it everywhere, and doing its worst damage in the most deprived communities. Addiction is killing more people and ruining more lives than ever. It has killed Members of this House, yet we would still rather hide its ugly reality.

I hope that my openness today can help challenge the stigma that stops so many people asking for help, and nothing would mean more to me than turning the pain I have been through, and that I have put my family and loved ones through, into meaningful change. I know I have to be authentic if I am going to do that. Pride is about celebrating who we are without shame. In the end, it is a simple choice: choose to hide, or choose to live. My advice is to choose to live.

1.56 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What a hugely impressive, moving contribution we have just heard from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden)—a really brave thing to do, but important, because a lot of people outside this place do not think that the people within it address and deal with these issues themselves. It is really important, but it doubles down on a bit of guilt that I personally have, because I feel that I have found it very easy since I came out. That is because of the work and efforts of so many other people, and other people who have heard what the hon. Gentleman has had to say today will have their journeys impacted and made easier by it.

I do not think there is any definitive way to come out, and we must not in any way try to prescribe what people should do. Everybody has to do what is right for them, and they have to make their own decisions, but I have no regrets. I benefited from a loving family, great friends, and the supportive working environment here. There was already a strong cross-party LGBT+ community within Parliament, and it was extremely supportive. Coming out did not seem to stand in the way of what I then regarded as a political career, either, because I was the first openly gay Conservative Cabinet member, and I was hugely honoured when my then Cabinet colleague Justine Greening subsequently said to me that I had been the inspiration for her own coming out.

Only one constituent has raised the issue negatively with me face to face on the doorstep, although I realise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) set out, that is not the same for everyone. However, we do now face the well of

poison that is social media, and I am sad to say that homophobia is a real part of that. I try not to pay too much attention to what is said there: like, I assume, so many people here today, I do not read a lot of what is said about myself, but sometimes we do have to push back. For me, that occasion was when a blogger called “Wings Over Scotland” asserted that gay people should not have children, with particular reference to my older son, who is a Member of the Scottish Parliament. Among others, Kezia Dugdale, the former Labour leader in the Scottish Parliament, spoke up for us, and she, for her support, ended up being sued by the self-same blogger who had put up the article. The matter went to court in a well-documented case in Scotland, but I am pleased to say that he lost. I regard that as a victory, at least in Scotland, for those willing to stand up against homophobia, and I remain particularly grateful to Kez for her support.

As we have heard already, my positive experience is not shared by everyone, and for many it is still hard to come to terms with their identity. Although we have a record number of LGBT+ MPs, I am sure there are others who have chosen not to come out. As I said in my initial remarks, it is always a personal decision, and there is no one approach or right answer as to how to do it. What is not acceptable is that people feel unable to come out because of fear of abuse or discrimination. I think that particularly we as parliamentarians have a duty to ensure that sexuality is never a barrier for people who wish to pursue a career in public office.

Of course, this is not just about MPs or public office; it is our job to stand up for the young people bullied at school, those discriminated against whatever their workplace, and particularly, as the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) very eloquently set out, the trans community, who continue to experience so much discrimination and inequality and have their human rights abused. I strongly believe that education is our most powerful tool to bring about real change—and I particularly welcome this Parliament’s effort in providing more LGBT resources for school students to develop their thinking about LGBTQ+ rights, equality and legislation—but there is much more that needs to be done in that regard.

I acknowledge particular initiatives such as the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—initiative in Scotland, which has done so much to promote the need for LGBT+ education in our schools, and School Diversity Week, which was an initiative of, among others, Paul Brand, the ITV reporter. I particularly want to commend Paul because I think he is a great ambassador for the community, especially in moving into the position where he is now. He once told me that if people were LGBT in the media, it was fine if they were an arts and culture reporter, but they were not allowed to do serious news, but Paul has absolutely demonstrated that that is just not the case.

As I have said, as MPs we have a responsibility to call out discrimination and highlight the injustices that members of the community face, but—this has already been touched on—not just in the UK. I see this as an important part of my role as a member of the executive committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I hope that we will be able to push LGBT+ equality and human rights up the Commonwealth agenda,

delivering better rights for LGBT+ communities around the world. It is absolutely and completely unacceptable that in some Commonwealth countries the death penalty still applies for homosexuality, and that in others LGBT+ people are routinely harassed or arrested by the authorities. As the Terrence Higgins Trust and others have pointed out in relation to combating HIV, the criminalisation of LGBT+ people in many countries is actually one reason why those from the community receive such poor treatment or no treatment for their HIV.

I particularly commend the initiative of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), who, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT rights, many of whose members are participating today, is promoting a scheme that will link Members of this Parliament with groups in countries around the world where the LGBT community is under threat. I look forward to playing a part in that scheme.

I echo much of what the hon. Member for Wallasey and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington said about conversion therapy. The debate that we took part in was totally unsatisfactory; I hope that it was then a catalyst for the action that we have seen from the Government—obviously, that now needs to be followed through. One development since then that I particularly welcome is the appointment of Lord Herbert as the Prime Minister’s envoy. Few people have done more in this place and elsewhere to promote LGBT+ rights around the world than Lord Herbert. I am convinced that he will be a force for good.

I want to finish on a positive note, about this Parliament. I was asked to write an article during history month about the role of parliamentarians and Parliament itself. What I found out was that since I was first elected in 2005, Parliament itself has made great strides to become more inclusive and diverse. The House of Commons and Parliamentary Digital Service have a higher representation of LGBT+ staff—at 5.6%, as of 2020—than the civil service, the UK or London. They have become a really good working environment for those of us in the LGBT+ community. The efforts of Parliament’s LGBT+ workplace equality network, ParliOUT, which recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary, have played a huge role in achieving that. On the back of that, it has been especially encouraging to see so many LGBT+ colleagues elected at the 2019 general election. As is the theme of Pride, I was myself very, very proud to be one of them.

2.8 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) [V]: Where once the UK played a major role in exporting homophobia around the world, over the last decade, I am glad to say, we have actually had a relatively positive story to tell. Previous speakers have talked eloquently of the progress that we have made, but this Pride month it is important for us to take a snapshot of what it is currently like to be LGBTQ in the UK.

As we have already heard, there is evidence today that we are more likely to self-harm, to feel suicidal and to have negative experiences in accessing healthcare. We are more likely to be the victim of a crime, but less likely to feel safe enough to report it to the police, so there is no shortage of areas where we still have work to do. But a trans person is even more likely to experience everything I have just listed—and worse. That is because over the

[Mhairi Black]

last five years there has been an organised and concerted international campaign against the trans community, and the UK is no exception.

Where 40 years ago the media, the religious right, and the institutional powers would spread fear and distrust about homosexuals, today we are witnessing the same tactics being recycled and deployed against the trans community. We know this because the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation published a study just this year looking at the evolution of extremism in the first 100 days of the Biden Administration, and it found that:

“Transphobia has long been one of the most major and ubiquitous narratives around which the far right mobilises... Transphobia should be recognised as a security concern.”

We also know it because the Southern Poverty Law Centre in the US noted an annual right-wing, fundamentalist event called the Values Voter Summit, where transphobia was openly discussed as a tactic to be deployed, because rallying against homosexuals was not working any more. In 2017, one of the far-right panellists said:

“Trans and gender identity are a tough sell, so focus on gender identity to divide and conquer...trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimize them...If you separate the T from the alphabet soup, we’ll have more success”.

Is it not interesting that this was around the same time that we saw a swathe of online Twitter accounts seeking to establish themselves in the UK and purporting to speak for LGB people against trans rights, especially when studies consecutively show that LGB people overwhelmingly support the trans community?

That panellist went on to identify a range of potential allies outside the fundamentalist right who could potentially be most effectively drawn in. The list includes

“women, sexual assault survivors...ethnic minorities who...value modesty, economically challenged children...and...children with anxiety disorders”.

As with all far-right recruitment tactics, a minority has been targeted, and hatred and distrust are stoked against them by preying upon people’s fears—in this instance, by projecting a manipulative and false narrative that there is conflict between trans rights and women’s rights, when the truth is that we are battling the same problems and the same patriarchal beast. Trans people are just as—if not more—likely to experience poverty, crime and sexual violence.

Looking at the UK, we can see what was advised at this right-wing event playing out. We see self-proclaimed organisations and blogs, which have already been mentioned, projecting things that are factually and scientifically incorrect. We see trauma and poverty being treated as a recruitment tool. We see attacks against women’s organisations and rape support crisis centres for daring to be trans inclusive. But worse yet, we see a media in this country that continually platform and project these hateful, disproportionate views, uncritically.

I have always been clear that in order to progress, we have to give people the space to educate themselves and ask the ignorant questions without fear of repercussion, otherwise nobody moves forward, but this has to be done respectfully and on the terms of those who are affected most. That is not what is happening with the trans community, and that alone speaks volumes.

More personally, my office and I have been left in a position for years whereby our workload has been increased not just by world events, but by people—not just my own distressed LGBT constituents, but people from all across the UK—who have contacted me because they are too frightened to contact their own MP. These are constituents of Tory MPs, Labour MPs and, I am ashamed to say, SNP MPs. I have ran out of excuses to give them. There are numerous parliamentary inquiries and reports that make clear the expert legal and medical advice, and explain clearly the lived experience and reality for trans people. It is there for anybody who wants to educate themselves on the matter.

Be in no doubt, we are living within a moral panic right now, and it is being fanned by organised disinformation and online radicalisation. If we as legislators capitulate to it, all we do is send an international message that disinformation works.

My final remarks are to trans and queer people directly. This is an ugly and shameful time for all of us, but that shame is not yours to feel or yours to carry. In the same way that we teach young people about gay history now, and they are horrified when they hear of our past treatment, so, too, will future children be when they find out how trans people were treated today. This will pass and, in the meantime, know that there are allies everywhere that are with you and are fighting for you publicly and behind the scenes, and, as our community is so often having to tell people, we are going absolutely nowhere.

2.15 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): First, I thank the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for his powerful personal contribution to it. I think we were all very touched by his words in this House.

LGBTQ heritage is everywhere in central London in my constituency of the Cities of London and Westminster. It is embedded in the buildings, in the landscapes and all around us, as well as in the significant contribution made by the personalities connected to those landmarks. I feel truly honoured to represent an area with such a rich LGBTQ social and cultural history, from the west end, Covent Garden and Piccadilly Circus to the incredible cultural hub that is Soho. In fact, the first gay bar in Britain in the modern sense was The Cave of the Golden Calf, which opened in 1912 in Heddon Street in the heart of the west end—[*Interruption.*] I think a couple of my fellow Members may have been to the opening.

With Pride Month drawing to a close, I want to put on record how incredibly proud I am of our community for rallying together to celebrate. Despite the great challenges faced by LGBTQ people during covid-19, one thing that the crisis has shown is the value and power of community. I am proud that when I became leader of Westminster City Council, one of the first appointments that I made was to establish a lead member for the LGBTQ community. I am delighted that Councillor Ian Adams, who I appointed, retains that position today.

Owing to his success of championing LGBTQ rights in London, Ian has won the global OUTstanding LGBTQ role model award, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in celebrating that momentous achievement.

Of course, in normal times, we are so fortunate here in London to have such a wealth of celebrations during Pride Month, not least the great London Pride march, which, last time it was held, in 2019, attracted an estimated 1.5 million spectators. I took part in that Pride march. It was my first and by no means my last; I was part of the Westminster City Council parade group. I am not sure if there is one in Parliament, but perhaps if there is not, we should organise a cross-party parliamentary group from both this place and the other place to take part in the next Pride march.

Even without the scale of events we are used to, I remain proud of my constituency's LGBTQ history and how people here have still made sure that we have had a really great Pride Month. It is this fortitude that represents the ultimate triumph of London. After all, although the vibrant festivities remain a key part of our celebrations, what this year has afforded us is the time to reflect, remember and galvanise our efforts to support the LGBTQ community. On this, I wholeheartedly support the Government in their ambitions to ensure that the UK remains one of the most open and tolerant countries in the world. Like other Members, I also welcome the Prime Minister's announcement that the UK will host its first ever LGBTQ conference in June next year, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the first ever London Pride march. It is my hope that here we can bring into sharp focus a fresh discussion on legislative reform to tackle violence and discrimination, and ensure equal access to public services, including health services, for LGBTQ+ people.

I also want to take this opportunity to welcome the Government's landmark ban on conversion therapy. Our special envoy on LGBTQ+ rights, Lord Herbert, is correct when he says:

"It is a cruel practice which has no place in a modern society".—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 19 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 607.]*

Especially in London, this Pride Month is wholly different from previous years, but it still serves as a tribute to all those who have fought for an equal society where people can love freely and live in peace and without inequality. We stand on the shoulders of giants and we thank them for all they faced to get to where we are today. Even in this place, I was shocked to discover, it was only 19 years ago, in 2002, that Sir Alan Duncan became the first sitting Conservative MP to voluntarily announce that he is gay.

I wish everyone a happy Pride Month. May the spirit of love continue throughout the year. As a former member of my constituency, the brilliant Oscar Wilde, once said:

"Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden".

2.21 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I am very pleased to speak in this debate, which was opened so strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for his deeply honest and brave contribution, with its incredibly powerful message.

What drives me and so many others in politics is a determination to make sure that the future will be better than what has gone before. In so many ways, the struggle for LGBT+ rights is one that shows us that things can get better. I do not mean that they have got better for everyone, either in our country or around the world, and progress should never be taken for granted or assumed to be permanent; but as a testament to the power of politics and activism to change things for the better, the LGBT+ rights struggle is one that has given me and many others hope.

In the year I was born, there were no openly LGBT+ MPs. The following year, Chris Smith came out. And 35 years later the most recent general election returned more lesbian, gay and bisexual MPs than any other Parliament around the world. I have spoken to Chris Smith over the years, and I have always been incredibly grateful to him for his personal support and for being one of the giants on whose shoulders I and so many others stand.

So many of the basic rights that we have today—from being able to get married, to being protected from discrimination—were not in our country's law when I first began to understand the problems caused by their absence. Yet a coalition of campaigners, activists, trade unionists and progressive politicians made it possible to change our country for the better. As a teenager, I remember the Labour Government abolishing section 28, which had caused so much harm. When I was in my 20s, we introduced the Equality Act 2010, which made discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex and gender identity illegal. In my 30s, our votes were crucial in winning marriage equality.

By the grace of fortune, my story of coming out as a teenager is one of brilliantly supportive family and friends. My story as a young gay man is one of acceptance in this great city that I was born in and love—from my first London Pride parade, volunteering as an access steward in 2005, to joining the Mayor of London as one of his deputies in leading the parade just over a decade later. And my story as someone in his late 30s is one of representing the area I grew up in, where my partner and I have now made our home.

It is not true, however, to say that I have avoided homophobia in my life—from the more blatant incidents I can remember, to those moments when I was younger when I bit my tongue or did not feel able to call out what someone else had said. Crucially, while we should be thankful to all those who have fought for the progress we have made, the fight for equality for everyone in our country and around the world must continue with urgency and conviction. Far too many young people have families who will refuse to accept who they are if they come out. Members of the trans community suffer some of the worst violence and hate crime in society, and they need our solidarity and support. Around the world, the law in 69 countries still criminalises homosexuality. Hungary shows us how the law can move backward. Here, the abhorrent practice of LGBT+ conversion therapy remains legal.

As we have heard, conversion therapy has no place in modern Britain and should already have been banned. A survey in 2018 found that well over half of the people subject to this practice had suffered mental health issues as a result, with a third having attempted suicide. The Government promised to outlaw conversion therapy

[James Murray]

three years ago. Their prevarication is unjustifiable and it raises deep suspicion among those of us who want a comprehensive and effective ban to be in place without delay. There must be no more excuses.

As an MP, some of the messages from my constituents that I remember most vividly have been from members of the LGBT+ community, particularly young people who have said that my being their MP and talking about being gay encouraged them as they learned to understand their identities. That is an important part of what made me so keen to speak here today. We know that LGBT+ people can face greater mental ill health because of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, as well as difficult experiences of coming out and rejection, and we know that young people can be particularly vulnerable. Almost a quarter of young people at risk of homelessness are LGBT+, usually because their families reject them, and half of LGBT+ young people have said they fear that expressing their identity to family members would lead to them being evicted.

If that promise of politics, a determination to make the future better than what has gone before, is to mean anything, we must continue to fight for LGBT+ equality here and around the world, and particularly to stand up now for the next generation. Pride Month is a moment to be motivated by knowing we can change the world for the better, but not to rest for a moment in making that happen.

2.26 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) [V]: This debate has been marked by incredibly powerful contributions, not least from the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), whom I have the privilege of following in this debate. Even before we began, the statement by Mr Deputy Speaker from the Chair sent its own message about the importance of this debate and the example that this, the mother of Parliaments, can show around the world to other Parliaments about the progress that will be made as human societies become more comfortable with people being able to be themselves; not seeing that as a threat to order in their societies, but as a positive asset in the richness that can be brought to the life of a whole country and a whole nation, as well as the enormous enrichment that then comes from the individual being able to live their life as they wish.

All of us taking part in this debate so far have been on that journey. My experience is similar to my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). That is the reason why both of us are contributing to this debate and making it an important part of our contribution to Parliament as long as we have the privilege of remaining here. It is why Mr Deputy Speaker, in closing the previous debate and teeing this one up, made the statement he did. I am very proud that in Pride Month we all can be so proud of the contribution that this Parliament has made and will make.

It is my pleasure and privilege to chair the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights and to do that with the support of the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), who opened the debate so powerfully. I associate myself with everything she

said. She is quite right to point out how much needs to be done and how, even in the United Kingdom, the atmosphere has not necessarily changed for the better over the last couple of years. I want to look forward. I think this Administration have now started to grip the issue and perhaps, in due course, ground will be made up on one or two things that slid in the last year or so—in particular on the misfired response to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004.

I want to try to focus on the positive elements of what we can do going forward, and particularly on the parliamentary liaison scheme that was referred to so generously by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale. However, the debate has been so dominated by the speech of enormous courage from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). He is right to link the trauma that can be found in the whole process of coming out with, too often, the problematic use of drugs to manage that trauma. Trauma is also associated with the addiction that goes with that to make one feel better. In his case, the drug he turned to was alcohol, and he was brave about the journey he has been on to manage that addiction.

I want to refer to the other issue to which I am principally devoting my time: reform of our drugs policy. There is a link to the trauma that colleagues have been through, because so many people manage trauma by a problematic use of drugs, whether legal ones such as alcohol or illegal ones. Frankly, we are in a real mess with our drugs laws and drugs policy in this country. That is not new—it has been in a process of development for more than 60 years—and perhaps, rather like a frog not noticing the temperature of the water gradually rising around it, the water is now boiling fiercely and thousands of our fellow citizens are dying needlessly as a consequence of our drugs policy. As a consequence, there are a terrifying number of victims of crime who need not be in that position. However—this is important for the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton and the lesson he gave us—there are huge opportunities that we have missed as well.

In our rush—the world's rush—to prohibit drugs that, with evidence, sounded as though they might be dangerous, we have prohibited classes of drugs such as cannabis and the psychedelics with no proper cost-benefit and risk analysis in evidential terms and therefore put science and research back 50 years. There is now really exciting research about treatment for addiction. The psychotherapy through Alcoholics Anonymous and others that the hon. Member referred to can now be reinforced through microdosing treatments including methylenedioxymethamphetamine, lysergic acid diethylamide, dimethyltryptamine and, in particular, psilocybin, which open up the prospect of dealing with addiction, trauma and depression. Millions of people could benefit from that treatment. We are on the verge of a great step forward in mental health treatments if only we get our laws right in this House. I hope the Government will attend to this with due dispatch and open up their stated position to lead in this field, be a bioscience leader and have evidence-based policy.

This debate is obviously about Pride, and I hope that with the development of the parliamentary liaison scheme over the rest of this Parliament, we will be able to have pride in the achievement that we will make in contributing

to the advancement around the world of people having the right to, and being able to, be themselves in their own societies.

This idea is based on an experience I had in 2014, courtesy of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which sponsored a visit for me to Kenya. Other colleagues at the time had dropped out of that visit so I was on my own and able to focus on my priorities, terrifically supported by the British high commission. The Kaleidoscope Trust helped me visit activist groups in Nairobi. They were in pretty interesting parts of Nairobi, it has to be said, because they are not very public in the community there, then or now.

The trip enabled me to meet newly elected Kenyan parliamentarians, who privately were much more sympathetic to advancing LGBT rights than they dared to be publicly because of the control of the public sphere, particularly by the Churches. I was also able to meet the Kenya Human Rights Commission, courtesy of a great conference put on by our high commission, which was trying to advance the position of LGBT people, particularly through campaigns around the treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Bringing all those links together, I was able to quietly enable the activists to be put in touch with those Members of Parliament who were likely to be sympathetic—if not publicly, at least privately—and have those conversations. I also had a conversation with the Speaker of the Kenyan Parliament through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit, partly to request and receive the assurance that the “stone the gays” Bill, which was in the hands of three radical MPs who had been recently elected, was never going to see the light of day and besmirch the reputation of Kenya in quite the same way as had gone on with their neighbours, Uganda, with similar legislation. In those ways, I believe I was able to make a positive contribution, and that was the kernel of the idea that I put to colleagues with the parliamentary liaison scheme.

For however long colleagues serve and the APPG continues to exist and support the parliamentary liaison scheme, one colleague, either in this House or the other place, will take on the responsibility of being a point of liaison for the activist groups in countries overseas and for individual jurisdictions where being LGBT is either criminalised or people are under active oppression. That person can then enable those links between those activist groups who are bravely, heroically, promoting the case for change in those countries, along with the British mission in the country concerned—whether it is a high commission or an embassy—and the parliamentarians. Through that, we can have that conversation directly with our colleagues, and many of us can use our experiences to say that they ought to be on the right side of history and understand that sexuality is not a choice.

As soon as we have achieved that part of the argument, the duties of everyone as a parliamentarian to their constituents are clear, wherever they are in the world—people who have a minority sexuality are just as deserving of their time and of attention to their rights as anyone else.

That simple point, made by one parliamentarian to another, can help open up the conversation with the local representatives in the country about how to face down the press and the Churches, if they are taking the

wrong position, and how to use the law or constitution of those nations, which will often guarantee the freedom of individuals and their rights under international treaties or anything else, to enable the position to be advanced. All that will need a degree of time and resources, but I am so delighted that about 90 colleagues in both Houses have so far volunteered to take part.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) will be replying to this debate—indeed, it may be the first time he has spoken from the Front Bench—and I hope that through the overseas development assistance budget, the Government will enable us to bring that sense of freedom to so many hundreds of millions of people, by getting serious and making a reality of Britain's leadership in the promotion of LGBT+ rights around the world.

One is well aware of the cuts to the ODA budget, and I am delighted that we are going to return to 0.7% at some stage. I am thrilled that last November, the Prime Minister confirmed from the Dispatch Box that in this place we are going to make a reality of being a global leader. Even with a cut budget, that would mean spending in the order of £40 million a year on global LGBT+ rights, and the benefit in terms of the richness of the soul and of the spirit in being able to be oneself is, as many Members present will testify, incalculable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I must ask the hon. Gentleman to bring his remarks to an end fairly shortly. I would like to get everybody in and he has had 15 minutes so far.

Crispin Blunt: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course I will do that. In conclusion—I was about to do this anyway—will my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green confirm that we will deliver as a Government on the commitments undertaken? That will give us the capacity to lead globally on LGBT rights in a way that will also work well with the parliamentary liaison scheme. A decent proportion of that money should be spent through embassies and the missions in-country, because every jurisdiction is difficult and there is a challenge faced by LGBT people globally. In that way, we can make our British missions overseas more effective in advancing the rights of LGBT people globally. Our message will be delivered much more effectively if every ambassador and high commissioner who represents the United Kingdom in countries where people like us are criminalised or actively oppressed, can bring to bear resources in whatever way is appropriate to support local organisations and legal challenges, and to support the shaping of the media debate around achieving the “right to be me”.

2.43 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: I am more than proud to follow the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). I found every minute of his speech fascinating and inspiring, just as I did the powerful and courageous speeches that preceded me in this debate.

“What was important was the liberty of us all to live as we wished to live, to love however we wanted to love”.

Those are the words of the author, historian and journalist Jan Morris, who was an important figure in culture life and to the LGBT community in Wales and internationally. She lived in Llanystumdwy in the constituency I am

[Liz Saville Roberts]

proud to serve. Sadly, Jan passed away last year, but her words serve to remind us of why Pride Month is so important. It is a chance to celebrate, affirm and remind ourselves that despite the progress, LGBT people still face significant barriers.

In Wales, hate crimes based on sexual orientation and trans identity are on the rise, there are long waiting lists to access the Welsh gender service, and LGBT people still face health inequalities. In Westminster, the Government have been slow to act, and I echo the calls made by other Members for the Conservatives to fulfil the promise they made in 2018 to bring forward a legislative ban on so-called conversion therapy. This must include a ban on children being taken out of the UK for conversion therapy abroad and on the advertising and promotion of such abhorrent practices.

I also add my support to the calls for urgent action on reform of the Gender Recognition Act. It is yet another example of the jagged edge of devolution that although trans and non-binary people in Wales should be able to access a streamlined, de-medicalised process based on self-declaration and in line with international best practice, we do not have the levers—the means—necessary to introduce such vital changes in Wales.

Given the broken promises on conversion therapy and meaningful reform of the GRA, it is no surprise that the UK Government are now pushing ahead with breaking their legally binding promise on international aid. The decision has resulted in an 80% cut in funding for vital UN programmes that support people who suffer with AIDS and HIV, condemning people to avoidable deaths and risking decades of progress.

The cut to international aid should be seen in the context of increasing hostility against LGBT people and activists around the globe. A report by Amnesty International shows a global surge in attacks against human rights defenders. Amnesty has documented numerous Pride marches that have been cancelled or at which demonstrators have been vulnerable to attacks or even attacked by counter-protesters, violating their right to peaceful assembly. When will the UK Government publish a comprehensive strategy setting out how they will improve support and protection for human rights around the world and particularly, of course, for LGBT defenders in countries where their sexual or gender identity is still criminalised?

One such country is Senegal, with which I am really proud to say—especially after the hon. Member for Reigate spoke so coherently about this earlier—I have been partnered by the parliamentary liaison scheme run by the APPG on global LGBT+ rights, which I congratulate on all its work in that respect. In Senegal, same-sex sexual activity between adults—referred to in law as an “unnatural” act—is punishable with up to five years in prison. During the 2019 presidential elections, LGBT rights activists voiced concerns about politicians using homophobia—that ugly card—to gain political support.

LGBT people in Senegal face increasing levels of discrimination and stigmatisation. At a rally in the capital Dakar last month, demonstrators called for it to be made illegal to identify as a gay man. In the weeks that have followed, activists say that there has been a

worrying increase in violent attacks on gay men. I urge those at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make representations to their counterparts in Senegal on this matter, and to support and assist co-operation between LGBT activists and members of the Senegalese Government to secure meaningful change.

Finally, I look forward to using my role in Westminster and the theatre that we have through Parliament to make as much difference as possible to people's lives around the world. In that respect, we must do the best we can for our fellow human beings.

2.48 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: It is a privilege to speak in this debate as we mark the end of Pride Month. Yesterday, I was delighted to attend Longfield Academy to meet members of the SMILE group who have produced artwork to mark Pride, alongside Darlington's deputy mayor and our town's LGBT champion.

Pride flags are now a common fixture of almost every organisation in June. That is an important measure of how far we have come as a society, celebrating diversity; embracing acceptance, tolerance and understanding; and recalling the struggles that our LGBT community have had and the battles still to be won, both here and abroad.

Pride marches grew out of the Stonewall riots in New York, and the Stonewall bar in Greenwich Village in New York remains a place of pilgrimage for LGBT visitors. It seems hard to imagine that a fairly small bar could become the catalyst for a worldwide movement that has brought about so much change and freedom around the world.

For some, including me, Pride is something deeply personal: it is a public display of recognition of our worth and dignity as individuals, when for so many years we were criminalised and did not enjoy the same rights and protections as others. Every day I am reminded of the battles and struggles we have overcome. Indeed, my being in this House as an openly gay man, among many others, is an indicator of how far we have come. There is not a gay Conservative who has not had the shame of section 28 thrown at them in debate. Although we cannot forget this party's past, I am proud of how far we have come to now be the party of gay marriage. Section 28 and its impact on our community might now be in the past, but we should be mindful of the steps being taken in Hungary that, sadly, reflect very similar provisions. I was in secondary school in the late 1980s and suffered elements of homophobic bullying, and although the spectre of that Act may have hung over them I have nothing but praise for the supportive pastoral care given to me by teachers such as Dorothy Granville.

This August, I will be celebrating 13 years since my civil partnership, which was an important milestone in my life and a day on which my partner and I fondly reflect. For many there just a short time after the law had changed, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), it was their first attendance at such an event. Since that time, many thousands of couples have celebrated civil partnerships and marriages, with records indicating that there are now already more than 100,000 same-sex marriages.

However, much still remains to be done. I am proud to be part of these diverse Conservative Benches, with many openly gay colleagues in this place doing the job they love, free to love the person they do, and free from the fear that will have been experienced by our predecessors, who lived in fear of being outed. This Conservative Government are tackling the scourge and abuse that is conversion therapy. That such practices still exist in our free and modern society should be a warning to all that dark forces are never far away.

Solidarity with the trans community is important too. The “T” in LGBT is just as important to our family and to my family as the “L”, the “G” and the “B”. As I learned of my nephew Luke’s transition and his coming out as trans, I am reminded of the same journey of fear, acceptance, love and celebration that gay men and women go through. We may live in enlightened times, but there is always more to do. Pride, the rainbow flag, is a celebration of our diversity and a symbol of how far we have come, but it is a challenge to those countries around the world that do not share our love, tolerance and respect for the entire LGBT community.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for appointing Lord Herbert to the position of his special envoy on LGBT rights. He will lead the first ever global LGBT conference next year, here, during Pride Month. We can as a country be rightly proud of how far we have come and what we are doing, but we must not forget that for many, especially those abroad, there is still a very, very long way to go.

2.53 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: Let us consider these words:

“People can’t, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life.”

So wrote the late, great James Baldwin in his much lauded 1956 novel “Giovanni’s Room”, in which the author writes profoundly of the rife gay shame of his time. I am so pleased to have secured this debate with my friend the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). We have heard some wonderful, deeply moving contributions.

For the past month, we have been celebrating Pride. What a contrast Pride is to the shame taught to gay kids for so much of the century in which every one of us here today was born. This shame was much of the source of much of the suffering our LGBT+ communities endured. That enduring stigma forced many lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people into the closet. For many, living a lie, however painful, was safer than living openly with the truth. Decriminalisation in England and Wales in 1967, and in Scotland in 1980, laid the groundwork for change. Even after decriminalisation, many homophobic laws remained on the statute book and homophobic attitudes were commonplace in society, which entrenched the inequality faced by LGBT people.

Since the turn of the millennium, we have seen further progress towards our overall pursuit of equality. My Turing Bill—the Sexual Offences (Pardons Etc) Bill—which sought to pardon all those convicted of sexual offences no longer on the statute book was, sadly, filibustered by a Conservative Minister, despite the Government’s promise

to support it. The SNP Scottish Government, however, picked up my Bill and passed it with all-party support at Holyrood. It is a source of great pride to me and, I think, to the First Minister. This year, too, we have seen a long-awaited law reform. Only two weeks ago, the blood donor ban, which prevented so many men from donating, was finally lifted.

Huge advances have been made at home, but LGBT people live in great peril abroad. Hungary’s recent introduction of its version of clause 28 drags civil rights backwards in the very heart of the European Union. Russia under Putin is a hellish place for gay people to live, and 69 countries round the world still criminalise homosexuality. Half of them are in Africa. On the roll call of shame, Iran and Saudi Arabia still have state-sanctioned murder for consensual gay love.

We must not be complacent at home, however. Older LGBT people are more likely to be socially isolated so, during the pandemic, many have felt that they have nowhere to turn and no one to turn to. We know, too, that young LGBT people bullied at home are more likely to become homeless.

Also, while our legal rights have seemed increasingly enshrined, as other speakers have noted, an onslaught against our trans siblings has been unleashed over the past year by social conservatives, importing the cultural wars from the United States, amplified by social media and whipped up by the right-wing press. The transphobic bullies in the sinister LGB Alliance and elsewhere claim that they represent ordinary voters, but, as we saw in the Scottish elections, when they emerge from behind their keyboards they get trounced at the ballot box: 0.5% percent for the Scottish Family party and, for the Alba party, 1.666%—a significant number, surely.

The future is full of promise. Young people hate intolerance and they hate bigotry. They have gay friends, gay teachers and gay role models. The TIE—or Time for Inclusive Education—campaign does wonderful work in schools. It is a world away from the society in which I grew up in the 1970s. While we on the SNP Benches find much to criticise this Parliament about, I will end on a proud note: my party has more openly elected LGBT members than any other parliamentary party in the world, and our very gayness has made Westminster the second gayest Parliament in the world.

2.58 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to make a short contribution to this debate just after the end of Pride Month, not least—if I do absolutely nothing else—to pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for sharing his experiences and his story in a way that will help other people to make their lives easier. What on earth can be better than that in this place? He has done and will do many great things in this place, but his speech today is a parliamentary life well spent in itself. I thank him.

I want to make a very short contribution, because a lot of hon. Members want to say important things. I thank people for volunteering, campaigning and working in my part of Wales to make other people’s lives easier. First, I pay tribute to the work of LGBT+ groups across Newport East, such as Rainbow Newport, founded by my constituent Adam Smith. I thank him—I know

[Jessica Morden]

he will be watching—for his tireless work and for, this week, becoming the chair of the new Newport County LGBT+ supporters' group. I also thank Stonewall Cymru, Pride Cymru and Bi Cymru for working to make Newport East a friendlier place for all the community.

I am also keen to highlight the work of those at Newport Youth Council, who have been formidable campaigners on LGBT+ issues and who, working alongside Newport City Council, produced new guidance for schools after young people across the city told them that their experience

“wasn't represented correctly—or to the level it should be.”

Their aim is to create the

“inclusive, tolerant and welcoming atmosphere that every young person deserves.”

I very much commend them for that. This is just one of the many things that Newport City Council has done to improve rights across our city. Earlier this week, the council passed a motion to become a diversity and democracy council that commits to ensuring that the council chamber is more representative of the communities it serves, which can only be a good thing. This year the council flew the Progress flag to celebrate Pride. Newport City Council leader Jane Mudd said that this was done to recognise

“the breadth of sexual and gender identities that we welcome”

in Newport. I thank her and Councillor Laura Lacey, LGBT+ champion at the council, as well as former leader Baroness Wilcox, for their leadership and their work on this.

While Pride is a chance to celebrate the progress we have made so far, it is also really important, as many hon. Members have said, to remember that Pride was born out of protest and so must also serve as a chance to reflect on what we still need to do to improve the lives of LGBT people. As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, our recognising that hate crimes are on the rise is just one example.

As a Member for a Welsh constituency, I am really proud of the work that the Welsh Labour Government have undertaken to address inequalities. They have already taken action to push forward curriculum reform and to be the first nation to offer PrEP free on the NHS. Earlier this week, the Welsh Labour Government reaffirmed their commitment to try to become the most LGBT-friendly country in Europe and provided £25,000 of new funding for Pride Cymru, with plans to substantially invest more as well as to establish a Wales-wide Pride fund to support grassroots events. As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd said, they are working to secure the devolution of as many aspects as possible of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and commissioning legal advice on all available powers to introduce a ban on conversion therapy, regardless of UK delays.

Equality cannot simply be about empty gestures and warm words. To echo the comments made earlier this week by the Deputy Minister for Social Partnership, Hannah Blythyn, to whom I pay a big tribute for her leadership and her passion about this in the Senedd, “Progress is never inevitable.” As such, I really urge the UK Government to work with the Welsh Government to create not just a more equal Wales but a more equitable UK.

3.2 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful and thankful for being able to participate in this very important debate and to do so as an open member of the LGBTQ community.

The last time I spoke on issues relating to LGBTQ rights related to our relationship with the Sultanate of Brunei, a Commonwealth state that clearly criminalises the entirety of the LGBTQ community. As I said on the Floor of the House at that time, it is where people of our identity are

“stoned, hanged and murdered”

for

“having sex with someone of the same gender, along with lesbian women, who are...whipped.”—[*Official Report*, 4 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1278.]

We should be under no illusion that our relationship as a state with other Commonwealth nations must be robust and frank on the issue of LGBTQ rights.

Closer to home, I want to pay tribute to colleagues in Georgia who continue to be frustrated in their ability to have equality in the Georgian state, no matter that the constitution itself gives them the right to full equality. I pay tribute to the work that Georgia Pride did in June and continues to do.

It has to be clear that not all members of the LGBT community are pro-LGBTQ rights. For many of us, especially men, including white men who are vocal and who, for example, are in Parliament, because of certain economics or demographics, we need to be clear in challenging our own concepts of what it means to be LGBTQ in this state. We need to hear more voices from women, from young black people and from people from other minority ethnic communities. I say that as co-chair of the all-party group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. The LGBT community there are starting to become a vocal part of representing their culture and history.

I have a short time to speak. I often say that our diversity is our greatest strength. That strength, however, is being torn asunder at the moment by what I would call non-state actors targeting the most vulnerable, specifically our trans brothers and sisters. I stand in solidarity with them today.

As I come to my conclusion, I pay tribute to those in my own community who, over the years, through intolerance and fear, have not been able to get this far, who have taken their own lives, and whose lives have been ended early due to ill health—not receiving the appropriate support—and isolation. I pay tribute to the men and women of West Dunbartonshire who never made it. We need to recognise, as I have said, that diversity is our greatest strength and we should not allow non-state and state actors to undermine that very strength.

3.6 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), whose very presence, bravery and courage in this Chamber have paved the way for so many of us, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) on securing this debate.

The first debate that I recall truly engaging in and feeling like I had a vested interest in was the debate on equal marriage that took place a number of years ago, before I was even in this House. I remember watching that debate. I say this because each one of us today has spoken personally, emotionally and truly movingly. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who rightly spoke up. The first debate I heard was the debate on equal marriage. I heard the rhetoric, I heard the fear and I heard the concern. I respected the religious diversity of opinions, but I heard fear. I was scared for my world, for the future that I could have, and for the life that I could have. I will be honest: I never ever imagined that I would be here myself. I am so grateful that I can be here and be a voice that is diverse, that is different and that celebrates being a woman, openly gay and an SNP MP—something that I truly never thought I would be.

This is now the second year running that, due to covid, Pride celebrations have been cancelled or relegated to being online. Pride is many things to many people. It is a protest, it is a celebration and it is a party. Sometimes it comes with a sense of community. It is an opportunity to bring families together, a moment to reflect and a chance to call for change. But with celebrations being far less visible than usual, it is especially important that we are having this debate today, so do not underestimate your presence in this Chamber and the voice that you have.

I am pleased to take part in this debate. I specifically wanted to be here in person, because I felt that it was important to be that voice. I recognise my privilege to be in this House and I am grateful. We are definitely seeing more acceptance and celebrations of life events such as same-sex marriage and civil partnership. More and more people are starting their own families and there are more routes to parenthood than there used to be, so we are seeing more and more rainbow families. That in itself is something to celebrate and to recognise: in future, there will be many, many more parents who will look different. Perhaps we will not fear this idea that parents can look different, that families can look different and that this House can start to represent the rest of society.

The real reason that I wanted to speak today is that I grew up in a community where, through no fault of their own, I did not get a choice and I was brought up Catholic. It was not a choice I made, but it was a faith that I followed, that I respect and that to some extent I admire, but it was a faith that made me believe that Iusb could never grow up and marry the person I loved, and that I might never have a family. For many years, I felt a deep shame and probably a bit of reticence about celebrating who I was. I am incredibly proud of who I am. I am proud to celebrate Pride, I am proud to be an MP and I am proud to be one of the many SNP MPs who are from the LGBT community.

That is something I can celebrate, but there are so many people in the world who do not get that opportunity. They do not get to celebrate who they are, where they come from or where they are going. That is true for so many people, but particularly for those asylum seekers who come to this country. They seek haven, they seek refuge, they seek our support and they seek a safe place to live. They are rejected because they perhaps do not meet the criteria, even when they clearly state that their sexuality, sexual orientation or, for that matter, sexual

identity might mean—the concept is almost dumbfounding—that they might not maintain their life in their home country. But they cannot come here and they cannot secure citizenship here.

My only call to the Minister today is to look carefully at the Home Office policies. There are so many people who look to the UK as a beacon of light, and we can be that beacon of light. I urge the Minister to liaise with his Home Office colleagues and make this possible. So many people look to us to give them a safe place and a home, and we must make that possible.

3.11 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). Her own testimony highlights the importance of a debate like this. It was a very simple message that everybody should feel comfortable telling people who they are or what they are. It is as simple as that. It tells us quite a lot about the different influences that we have had in this country down the centuries—she touched on the role of the Churches and there are doubtless others—that it should seem remarkable, or something to be celebrated, that we are able to do that.

It is important that we have a debate like this in this House, because people across the country and, indeed, in other parts of the world look to us, as parliamentarians and as people in public life, to give a lead, and it is incumbent on us to take a lead. I would suggest that holding a debate like this is one small way in which we can do that. All of us who are in public life have a responsibility to understand that our words always have consequences. For those who are not here, who are not espousing views of equality and inclusion and who are expressing homophobic views—whether they are parliamentarians, people in public life or just individual citizens—it is not the people who are espousing those views who are responsible necessarily for the homophobic attacks and for the angst of young people who do not feel comfortable coming out. However, we have to understand that, when people in public life espouse those views, they legitimise those who will throw the punches and the kicks. That is why there is a responsibility on us all—in this House, particularly—to send a clear message that nobody in this country should feel constrained in saying who they are or what they are.

We have made significant progress over the years. The ending of section 28 was a significant moment. I was here at the time and led for my party on the creation of civil partnerships and then on the creation of equal marriage. These have all been significant events, and it is right that we should celebrate them. I was absolutely delighted, and genuinely moved, to see just a few weeks ago so many Facebook posts from friends of mine who are gay men and have given blood for the first time. That is in many ways a small and mundane part of everything, but it sends a genuine message of inclusion. To exclude people from making that kind of contribution to their community on the basis of their sexuality was a wrong that was overdue for righting, and I am delighted that it has been done.

Of course, there is still more we can do within our own communities, and as we look around the world, as others have said, we see that there is a lot more to be done. I have to mention in particular the proposals

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

coming from the Hungarian Government at the moment that would create their own version of section 28. I wish they would learn from the experience of those of us in this country of how section 28 operated and the effect it had, especially on vulnerable people who, as a consequence of the operation of that law, did not feel that they were able to be open about and engaged in their sexuality.

Dame Angela Eagle: Will the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the point of section 28, and the point of this Hungarian law, is precisely to stigmatise people for the perceived political advantage of one side of an argument?

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely acknowledge that, and I do more than acknowledge it: I agree with it absolutely, and I think we are right to call that out. To use someone's sexuality against them for a political purpose, or using their skin colour or other defining characteristics—something with which they are born—has to be just about as low as it is possible to go. I remember Albert Lutuli saying in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle that apartheid was the only absolute tyranny, because it discriminated against people for something they had absolutely no power to change, which was the colour of their skin. For all of us, our sexuality is something with which we are born: it is not a choice. I will argue with people in all parts of this House, and possibly even on my party's own Benches, about the choices that we make, but we should not be divided on the basis of things about which we have absolutely no choice.

I do not want to detain the House for too long, but I want to place on record a small piece of Pride history, which is that last weekend, we celebrated a Pride first. We had the most northerly Pride yet in the United Kingdom when we had the Pride festival in Kirkwall in Orkney. It was a joyous occasion—it was obviously curtailed as a consequence of covid regulations, but to see so many Orcadians out there, talking about their pride in who they are, was a truly remarkable moment. Walking around Kirkwall town centre, seeing so many shops and businesses with Pride flags in their window, was a tremendous signal that everybody was valued as part of our community—we have a very strong sense of community in Orkney—and that that inclusion was there for all, regardless of their sexual orientation.

I look forward to having the same first again next year, because we will have the new most northerly Pride in the United Kingdom when Shetland Pride is celebrated next June. A tremendous amount of work and planning is already going into that, and I commend those who are responsible both for Orkney Pride last weekend and for the planning that is going into Shetland Pride for June 2022 for everything they are doing to send a signal that in every community, right across the country, the right of individuals to be included on their own terms is inalienable. It is something that we should celebrate, and something that we do, in fact, celebrate here today.

3.19 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): May I start by congratulating the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) and my hon. Friend

the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle)? Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey, who has been instrumental in bringing forward this important debate, in particular deserves the recognition and gratitude of the House for her tireless pursuit of equality and justice for LGBT+ people: thank you very much. It has been an honour and a privilege to listen to contributions from hon. and right hon. Members today, in particular the moving and inspirational personal account of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden).

Pride Month is a welcome opportunity to reflect on all the hard work being done and the progress that we have made collectively on LGBT+ rights. I praise all the groups the individuals in my Slough constituency that are working to provide advice, services, safe spaces and advocacy for the LGBT+ community. That includes Slough Borough Council, voluntary groups, businesses and public services, and all the people who work hard for equality and human rights.

As we have heard this afternoon, we have made great advances as a society since the dark days of the 1950s and before—the days of homosexuality being classified as an illness, of the threat of blackmail, stigma, social isolation and imprisonment, and of the horrors of electric shock aversion therapy, electroconvulsive therapy and chemical castration.

We all know the story of one of Britain's greatest heroes, Alan Turing—a man whose work, some academics argue, saved 14 million lives and shortened the world war by more than two years. He was a perfectly healthy gay man in his 30s, a brilliant mind and a great patriot, who was forced by the law into sickness and death. Alan Turing is just one of thousands of men and women harassed, arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed by the British state's homophobic laws. We owe each and every one an apology, and their families too.

Let us reflect on progress: the Sexual Offences Act 1967; the abolition of section 28; civil partnerships; same-sex marriages; the securing of LGBT+ rights in law, especially the Equality Act 2010. But we should also reflect that progress does not always travel in a direct line. For every two steps forward, there are those who want us to take one step back—for example, on trans rights.

In each generation, the struggle for rights takes on new forms. I am in particular thinking about the struggle against so-called conversion therapy. The idea that someone's sexuality should be subject to forceable conversion into something different is shockingly insulting. I welcome the Government's commitment in the Queen's Speech to ban so-called conversion therapy, but where is the ban? I say to Ministers, we do not need more consultation; we need action. My great fear is that the Government are dragging their feet ahead of some kind of climbdown on their promises or in order to include exemptions. We must be clear that there can be no acceptance of or acquiescence to the proponents of gay conversion therapy. It must be swept into the gutter, where it belongs.

Let me address the international aspect of the debate. Around the world, there are nations where LGBT+ people live in fear and stigma, where violence and murder are commonplace and equality is outlawed. There are 69 member states of the United Nations where consensual same-sex activity is illegal. There has been some progress. For example, Botswana's high court

ruled in favour of decriminalising homosexuality in 2019; Mozambique and the Seychelles have scrapped anti-gay laws; and in 2018, a court in Trinidad and Tobago ruled that laws banning gay sex were unconstitutional. But unfortunately, Nigeria and Uganda have recently tightened their homophobic laws, and in Europe, as we have heard from other hon. Members, Viktor Orbán's Government in Hungary have intensified their attack on the LGBT+ community. Why should our British Prime Minister be rolling out the red carpet for such an individual?

There are plenty of cities where Pride marches are not celebrations and festivals, not expressions of solidarity and love, but instead subject to bans, violence and hate. We must therefore ensure that the Government outline what they are doing to encourage our friends and allies around the world, especially in the Commonwealth, to repeal homophobic laws and bring in real and lasting equality for all. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

"No one is free until we are all free."

3.24 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. and right hon. Members who have made some really excellent contributions throughout. It is a poignant debate, because we can think about how far we have come, we can think about how far we have to go and we can also remember the importance of solidarity, respect and love across the political divides in the spirit of equality.

In that spirit, I start my remarks by paying tribute to Leeze Lawrence. She was a resident of Stirling, a member of the SNP Stirling branch and the convenor of Out for Independence, and she passed away a couple of weeks ago. She was a force of nature and a force for good, and she achieved in her short life much more than many others will in theirs. She will be very much missed by her friends and her family, and I pass on my deepest sympathies to them.

It is important to remember that Pride was a protest—it still is a protest. Some of that has been lost in the corporatisation of Pride events in some places, but Pride is a protest against injustice, a protest against inequality, a protest against ignorance and a protest against bigotry. It is easy to take the equality we enjoy for granted, and we must not do that. Progress is not guaranteed and rights are reversible.

We have come a long way—we really have—and it is worth acknowledging that. I was the first SNP politician to come out in 2006. I was not the first gay SNP politician, but I was the first to make a song and dance about it. I am proud to say that the SNP is one of the gayest parties in these islands, and contributing to equalities runs through everything that we do. We have come a long way.

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. We have made progress in these islands—we have made progress in Scotland, and we have made progress in the UK—but there are countless millions around the world who do not enjoy that freedom and equality, and who are not in the fortunate position we are. It is incumbent on all of us to protect and promote equality, and to work with allies abroad to secure the equality of others. Homosexuality remains illegal in 69 countries around the world, and some even punish it with death. We really do have a long way to go.

Closer to home, as well, rights are reversible. We have heard already that Hungary's anti-LGBT law is a shame on the European conscience. I am glad that Dr von der Leyen and the European Commission are taking action. I would like to see it happen faster, and I would like us to be vocal in it as well, because it is an utterly counterproductive law coming from bad politics and bad information. It is also a reminder that things can go backwards.

In that spirit, I reaffirm today my complete solidarity with our trans brothers and sisters and I also reaffirm my complete solidarity with women and women's rights. I do not see that those two statements are mutually exclusive or in conflict. I see nothing in trans equality that would diminish women's rights. I see nothing that women have to fear from the trans community. I see plenty of reasons why women should fear abusive men. It is in the debate online particularly that we have seen abusive men—bad actors and false friends spitting hate and poison into the debate—and it is incumbent on all of us to push back on that and fight them with good information, respectful dialogue and mutual understanding. I would never be a part of anything that would diminish women's rights. Women have nothing to fear from trans equality. It is a challenge for all of us to make sure that that debate takes place in the right way and gets the right result.

Pride is a protest and rights are not secure. Rights must be maintained and fought for on a daily basis, but if we all look after each other, we will all win. Pride is not about special pleading. It is about equality for all of us.

3.29 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members who secured this debate today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), and I thank her for her incredibly important contribution today and for all the work she has done and continues to do. We have heard so many powerful speeches, including that of the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), but I am extremely proud to have been in the Chamber today to listen to my great friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). His moving and brave contribution will live long in the memory of everybody here who witnessed it and watched it today.

I worry about the division that we are seeing now in political discourse and everyday life. Division of communities leads to a breakdown of cohesion and the opportunity for hate and fear to flourish. I fear that we can see this graphically and worryingly with the rise in hate crime.

Just in Liverpool over the last few weeks, there have been a number of homophobic attacks in our town centre. The images have shocked the city and last week a demonstration took place saying that hatred and homophobia had no place in Liverpool or any other place. But if we look at events in Hungary, as has been mentioned, the fear grows that this hatred and division among communities is being encouraged and actively sown. Orbán's decision to ban LGBT content in schools and the media is exactly where this direction of travel ends. I was delighted to see the EU's ultimatum to cease and desist these attacks or leave the EU. I wonder whether the PM gave him a similar message when they met last month.

[Ian Byrne]

Education is a huge part of the solution—I know that from personal experience. An education was given to me by the likes of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton, when we worked together on his campaign to ban the abhorrent practice of conversion therapy when we found out that a local church in Anfield was offering these so-called therapies, including ritual starvation. The light that my hon. Friend and the *Liverpool Echo* shone on those practices in our community has increased awareness and facilitated further understanding and education, and galvanised the campaign to end them.

At Fans Supporting Food Banks, an organisation I co-founded, we work closely with the LGBTQ+ supporter groups at both Liverpool and Everton football clubs, to promote tolerance and understanding in football. The use of homophobic language was common in songs at football grounds. About six years ago, I got elected to the Liverpool FC supporters committee and I met a fantastic person in Paul Amann, who educated us all in what a member of the LGBTQ community might feel when hearing those songs in the football ground. It provided a real wake-up call and a genuine education to me personally. We worked on making grounds more inclusive, raising awareness and tackling this kind of language. I am extremely proud that we have made Liverpool football club the first club to explicitly prohibit homophobic language in the ground. It was Paul's patience and bravery on this issue from which I learned so much and for which I admire him so much.

Education and community cohesion go hand in hand, and Pride Month does so much to achieve that. But as recent events have shown, we have so much work to do. I am proud that our party scrapped Thatcher's appalling section 28, but there is lots of work to be done to ensure that we do not go backwards and that we work to defeat the voices of division and hatred in our communities by showing the same tolerance, understanding and education that was shown to me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

3.32 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): You timed that rather well, Madam Deputy Speaker; God is shining on us this afternoon, is he not?

I am grateful to be called in this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and others on securing it. Like others, I commend the actually beautiful speech from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). He will be called brave and all sorts of things from now on, but "beautiful" is the best way to describe what he chose to do this afternoon. Like the whole House, I am sure, I wish him well in whatever he goes on to do next.

As has been mentioned quite a few times in the debate, this is the gayest Parliament in the world. The great irony is that, if we go back to 2015, it was the arrival of so many Scottish National party Members of Parliament that made this place the gayest Parliament in the world. So when we go, as we will eventually, hon. Members will have a job to do in maintaining that status—and in that, of course, we will wish our neighbours well.

It has been said that we have to take account of the progress that we have made—and progress has undoubtedly been made. There are the recent changes to allow men who have sex with men to give blood; I was pleased to play a small part in that as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on blood donation, along with my friend, Paula Sherriff, the former Labour Member of Parliament—she is no longer with us in Parliament, and the House misses her dearly.

There have been all kinds of other progress over the years—marriage, adoption rights and education. A Scot, in the form of Lawrence Chaney, has finally won "RuPaul's Drag Race"—arguably for many people, the best bit of progress that we have made. Of course, it is the case that, as Pride Month becomes more visible and more people attend, the corporations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) has said, will get in on it as well. It is great to see flags on buses and trains, and when we go into shopping centres or down the high street we see rainbow flags everywhere. I say to the corporations, however, that Pride is not just for the month of June; it is not about flying a rainbow flag, taking it down the next day and going back to business as usual. Standing in solidarity with us is about more than just flying those flags. When the corporations release their special Pride products for the month of June next year, how about some of the profits go to help LGBTQ+ charities in this country and elsewhere, rather than cashing in on something that, thankfully, is at least popular for some?

As others have said, Pride has been cancelled/put online for the past 12 months. Last year I hosted a weekly series of online Pride events with various activists in eastern European and central Asian countries. What a learning experience that was. I thank activists in countries such as Georgia, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), and, as Members would expect, I thank activists for the work that goes on in Ukraine, including my friend Maxim Eristavi, who does so much to raise the profile of this issue all around the world but in particular in that region of Europe. My most memorable Pride happened three years ago in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. There was not a single Coca-Cola float or any other big brand. It was a proper shouting protest. And my goodness, the bravery that they show in continuing to do that is an inspiration to us all.

As has been said, the progress made is great but we want to see action on conversion therapy. I had never thought of my own experience as being one of conversion therapy, but it goes back to when I was a teenager and had got mixed up in an evangelical church for a couple of years. I remember the laying of hands on me, trying to pray the gay away, as it were. In fact, I had not even realised at that point that I might be gay. I know that that might be difficult for some people to even consider, but I remember being told at the time that it was bad for me, that God would deliver me from it and that it was a satanic spirit that was doing this to me. The confusion in my mind at the time was incredible, but until a recent discussion with a woman from the Christian church who is against conversion therapy, it had not even occurred to me that that was a form of conversion therapy. It is not always the case that people are sat on a chair in a room and talked at by people in white coats with Bibles or whatever; it is often more discreet, but

equally sinister. The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household is a good man, but I implore the Government to bring this forward without delay.

The last thing I want to mention is the issue of transgender rights and the well of poison that that discussion has become. We do not have a community if we expel one part of it. I refuse to do so, and I know that Members in this House will refuse to let it happen. However, it has become, I am afraid to say, the polite bigotry of the middle classes. Transphobia is acceptable in the good newspapers—*The Times*, the *Telegraph* and the *Glasgow Herald*. It has become entirely acceptable. If some of the things that we read, like the obsessions about girls wearing trousers to school, were written by an imam, people would go tonto—they would go off their nuts—but they are written by these privileged and largely, though not exclusively, white, middle-class people who have become so radicalised on the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and others have mentioned the online discussions. This is radicalisation and there is no other way to describe it. Where does it take us? Last month was the anniversary of the shooting in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Right now on Netflix we can watch a documentary about the Soho bombing that happened just over 20 years ago. We see young people—this was mentioned by the previous speaker—being attacked in the street for who they are. We are heading for something bad if this does not get dealt with, if this is not tackled and if those of us who do stand with trans people do not come out vigorously in their defence.

What gives me hope? Yes, I get discouraged by all that poison. Yes, I get discouraged by the fact that, in this rather perverse debate we now have, Stonewall is now akin to ISIS in some people's view. Rape crisis centres that help or employ trans people are being targeted by bigots and bullies. All that gets me down, but what gives me hope is the young people who do not give up. I get exhausted with it, but I keep going and keep doing what I can. When I see young people involved in Stonewall, the Equality Network and their own political parties coming together and fighting that poisonous disinformation and ensuring that steps always go forward and not backwards, that is what gives me hope.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said that nobody should be restrained in having to be who they are—even Liberal Democrats, I would extend that to. [*Laughter.*] That is so important and all power to their elbow. I will be with them side by side, but it is a fight we need the Government to get onside with too.

3.41 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) who spoke movingly about his personal experiences. It is unbelievable to think that conversion therapy is still lawful in 2021. I hope the Minister will come back with a timetable for banning it here in the UK.

Our Parliament is the best of us when we have these debates. The leadership shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) not just in her introduction to the debate with her speech but more broadly in being solid and wise counsel for so many—not just those within the community—is a beacon for LGBT rights in Parliament. Her work, together with others

across Parliament, has really outshone the Government in many ways, particularly with what has been achieved in the last few years. It has allowed the space in our Parliament so that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) is able to speak about his own experience: how his identity was made clear to him, some of the paths he has taken and issues he has dealt with in coming to terms with his own life, and the strong role models he has had. We all know there are so many young people who have not had those supportive parents or a supportive environment in school and they may still be suffering the discrimination that can go with being LGBTQ.

I want to briefly talk about my concerns about reductions in funding for the inclusive teaching of equalities in our schools. Some of the proactive guidance around the banning of section 28 at that time, which this country led on, has now been watered down to some degree. I worry about where our schools may not be high-performing schools and whether that bullying continues. I fear that it probably does.

I also worry about some of the reductions and cuts in the work that we are doing abroad. For example, there is the excellent work that the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) is doing with parliamentary colleagues across the globe through the liaison scheme between Parliaments to promote equality by visiting LGBT groups during trips abroad or by linking up with networks in other Parliaments. I fear that work of that kind is undermined by some of the reductions, for example, to British Council spending—the British Council is very focused on values and on the soft power of our media. I fear it will also be undermined by reductions in the BBC World Service, where we have really good programming and first-class stories, poetry and music on LGBTQ issues that may be a shining light, which people who do not live in a free and fair democracy might hanker for.

I also want to pay tribute to some of the grassroots groups in the London Borough of Haringey—other Members have paid tribute to groups in their constituencies. We have a terrific group called Wise Thoughts, which is available particularly for black young people and young people from backgrounds where their parents may not be familiar with equalities legislation or be particularly open about the fact that their children are gay. Wise Thoughts is always present at every single job fair or community safety event, quietly flying the flag but also being available to talk to young people. I am also really grateful to our wonderful community choir, which plays and sings at events. Unfortunately, this is the second year in a row that it has been unable to be particularly active, but we did have the spontaneous singing of our community choir underneath a tree in Crouch End in 2016, when the terrifying terror attack on the Pulse nightclub took place. It is just so wonderful to see those grassroots groups coming together to stand up against inequality and, in that case, a terror attack.

I also want to draw attention to the cross-party nature of today's debate. I was really delighted to see that on a British-America Parliamentary Group tour in the US, the Minister was working cross-party with us on questioning the reductions to the HIV/AIDS budget that the former President of the USA was attempting to introduce at the time. It was fantastic to work across Parliament as the British-American Parliamentary Group

[Catherine West]

to make the case for continued funding for HIV programmes abroad. It shows the best of our Parliament when we work together across the piece on those important programmes. In the same spirit, may I encourage the Minister to question whether rolling out the red carpet for Viktor Orbán, as was done by No. 10, is the right tone? I worry that the struggle for equal treatment for LGBTQ communities is being set back in that part of Europe. The hon. Member for Glasgow South described his experience in Kiev. It is a struggle—a day-to-day, hour-by-hour struggle there—and we must never forget that.

In conclusion, I first want to ask the Minister to address in his final remarks what he thinks should be done to support the training of classroom teachers—whether at primary or secondary school level, or in our further education colleges and universities—so that here at home, when young people are questioning and want to talk to people and when they want to come out, we can be sure that there is support for them. We know that recent research has shown that it takes the human brain up to the age of 25 to be fully formed, so people in their early 20s may still need assistance, talking therapy or even just support to know that their feelings, belief and identity are okay. Will the Minister outline whether he believes that there is sufficient inclusive training and support for different groups in our schools?

Secondly, will he outline the progress on the Gender Recognition Act 2004? There is a sort of half debate being had and it would be really good to know the exact timeline on that. Thirdly, I would like to know the exact timeline on the banning of conversion therapy. It has been clear during this afternoon's debate that we all feel we need to urge the Government to get on with that.

Finally, will he outline the Government's role in being a beacon within our region so that we can, with confidence, challenge the policies of countries where it is not right, where people are being treated unfairly and where equalities are not being observed? Will he stand up today and encourage this Government to get it right with countries—even some that are within our region—so that we can be sure that we are sending the right message, not only as a Parliament, but so that that the Government are too?

3.50 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate today and hear so much cross-party consensus. Pride Month is about celebration, activism and commemoration. It is about recognising the progress that we have made since the Stonewall riots, and it is about continuing the fight for equality alongside our LGBTQ+ family and friends. There is so much more to do, and we must not forget that.

Along with so many others today, I find myself once more speaking about a specific inequality that should have been dealt with many years ago: the legality of so-called conversion therapy. Conversion therapy by its very definition is designed to rob LGBTQ+ people of their identity. It is nothing short of medieval. It is not healthcare; it is not ministry; it is abuse, yet it remains legal.

In the 2015 general election campaign, the former Prime Minister pledged to ban conversion therapy. That was more than five years ago. That winter, the Conservative

Government backtracked and there was no ban. Then in 2018, the next Prime Minister pledged to ban conversion therapy, but the Government backtracked again and there was no ban. The current Prime Minister, who campaigned on some promises of progress and change, also pledged to ban conversion therapy. The proposal even made it into the Queen's Speech, but still there is no ban. As far as I am aware, there are no firm plans for a ban. I hope the Minister will be able to correct me on that point.

Instead, we are being told we must wait for a consultation that has not even been scheduled. Why? The only conceivable purpose of this consultation is yet more delay. The consultation can only tell us what we already know and what the Government have apparently believed for five years—that conversion therapy should be completely banned. In these circumstances, it is difficult to accept the continued promises. When will the Government act?

LGBT representatives from every major party, including the Conservative party, have called for an immediate ban. They called the Government's commitments "disappointingly weak, vague and unempathetic".

That was from Members of their own party. This clearly is not good enough. LGBTQ+ people are being let down by this Government.

Last Wednesday, Alan Turing took his rightful place on our £50 note. We easily forget that Turing was forced to receive chemical castration at the hands of the state, all because he was guilty of the crime, as it was then, of loving another man. This chemical castration was meant to suppress his sexual orientation. It was a conversion therapy—one that our Government at the time had made into a legal instrument. We have come a long way since then. Homosexual acts are no longer illegal. Gay marriage is now legal, and I am proud of the Liberal Democrats' role in making that happen, but as long as conversion therapy is legal, using Turing as a figurehead seems to be some form of big hypocrisy.

The NHS, international observers, LGBTQ+ organisations, professional bodies in health and social care, interfaith organisations and senior figures in all major parties are united: we must ban conversion therapy now. As this year's Pride Month draws to a close, I urge colleagues from all parts of the House, including Government Ministers, to make it an urgent priority.

3.54 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): May I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) for securing this debate? We have heard many heartfelt contributions today, but none more so than from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). It took absolute bravery and courage. He is a true inspiration, and it is great to see such representation and such inspirational representation from Liverpool as a whole.

I rise as someone who hopes to be a good ally to LGBTQ+ people in Luton North and across the country and to the brilliant LGBTQ+ colleagues who have spoken in the debate. I pay tribute to my wonderful friend Sue Hackett, a fantastic GMB union activist and equality champion who has been the heart and soul of equalities at GMB London region. Women like her show what a difference a true ally, a true sister and a

true trade unionist can make in workplaces and in our movement. I wish her the happiest retirement, because after 42 years she certainly deserves it.

There was a time in my living memory when a debate such as this, in this place would never have happened—when parties would market themselves as “the straight choice” against gay candidates, when MPs would proudly describe homosexuality as a

“sterile disease-ridden, God-forsaken occupation”

and when Prime Ministers decried children apparently being taught that they had a right to be gay. We can be proud of and hopeful about the progress we have seen over the last 25 years on LGBTQ+ rights. However, I am standing here as a Labour MP because I know there is nothing inevitable about progress. People have to fight for it every day. The fight might be easier on some days than others, but if we let our guard down, we will see that hatred and bigotry can easily rear its ugly head again.

When the last Labour Government repealed section 28, introduced civil partnerships and adoption and, yes, brought in the original Gender Recognition Act, those things did not happen because MPs woke up one day and thought, “Well, that’s a good idea.” It took years of hard work by activists, trade unions and LGBTQ+ people who campaigned and got beaten up in the streets but were still loud and still proud. Since then, we have had gay marriage and, as we have heard many times today, our Parliament has become the gayest in the world. I pay tribute to our fantastic, steely candidate in Batley and Spen, Kim Leadbeater, who I hope after 10 pm will be joining us here on the green Benches.

However, I speak to some LGBTQ+ people and, while there is so much to be proud of, there is sometimes a resurgence of fear. I know, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hate crime, that in the past year the hate crime of homophobia, as with every other protected characteristic, has seen an increase. They are fearful when some Members of this House pander to voices who speak of trans people as a dangerous lobby who want to cause harm to others. They are fearful when parts of the media use terms like “trans Taliban” to describe trans people who just want to get on with their lives. They are fearful when people who call themselves activists acting on behalf of women attack Stonewall, and fearful when so-called charities who oppose banning conversion therapy for trans people try to divide LGB people from trans people.

The new wedge issue politics, culture war campaigning is no feminism, activism or progressive campaigning as I would recognise it, but it exists as a stark reminder that there is nothing inevitable about progress. Over the last few years, it has become increasingly clear that the fight on LGBTQ+ rights is not over. When we allow bigots a free pass to attack trans people and media outlets continue spinning the most vicious bile about trans people and, often, the rest of the LGBT community as well, we need to start seriously asking ourselves who these people are coming for next.

Those who genuinely believe in human rights do not choose which human’s rights they support and which they do not. Anyone who has been attacked for who they are, how they look or what they believe knows what it is to be on the receiving end of abuse, hatred and division. That is exactly why Pride remains a protest—and

I know that sadly we have not had a Pride in person during the pandemic. Pride is a protest because one in five LGBTQ+ people has experienced a hate crime because of who they are or who they love. It is a protest because there are people abroad who are left seeking asylum for their sexuality. It is a protest because more than half of LGBTQ+ young people are still bullied in school because of who they are, and it is a protest because trans women are women, and trans men are men, and their fight is ours. Those should not be controversial statements. The fact that they are shows just how far we have to go to achieve true equality in our country. But true equality is always worth fighting for, because that makes it a safer, fairer and brighter place for everyone to live in.

3.59 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) on securing this important debate, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for his personal and powerful testimony. I thank all those who have contributed this afternoon.

I welcome this debate and the opportunity to wish people a very happy Pride Month, and send my solidarity to LGBTQ+ communities in Liverpool, Riverside, and across the country. Although this debate is an opportunity to celebrate and take pride in the existence, struggles and successes of those communities, we must also recognise the violence and oppression that LGBTQ+ people still suffer. Just last month, hundreds of people marched through Liverpool city centre to protest against a spate of vicious homophobic attacks on our streets in the past few weeks. I pledge my solidarity with the victims of those appalling attacks, which were especially horrific because they happened during Pride Month. I call for justice to be swiftly served, and action taken to ensure that all our communities feel safe on our streets.

The diversity of Liverpool is one of our greatest strengths, and those attacks show that we must do more to ensure that everyone is welcome on our streets, and that violence, hatred and bigotry are not. Although responsibility for the attacks must be borne by the perpetrators, and justice must be served, they did not happen in a vacuum. This year, the Government have waged a culture war against trans rights, attacking leading LGBT organisations such as Stonewall, for its campaigning on trans rights. They have disbanded their own LGBTQ+ advisory panel after a series of resignations over the delay in banning conversion therapy practices.

Despite promising a ban on conversion therapies three years ago, the Government have yet to take action. Instead, they have kicked the can down the road into yet another consultation. Soundings from the Prime Minister, and others, threaten significant loopholes, notably regarding faith-based practices, as well as trans people. We know from the Government’s own national LGBTQ+ survey that 51% of those who have undergone conversion therapy said that it had been conducted by faith groups. I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, which is currently conducting a review of the reform of the Gender Recognition Act. Time and again I have heard evidence of the harrowing impact of

[Kim Johnson]

those practices and their disastrous implications for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Such evidence is not new. Indeed, the Government are well aware of it, given their recent consultation.

Will the Minister set out to the House an exact timetable for legislation to ban conversion therapy? Will he reassure Members that the legislation will include a total ban on those cruel practices? On this Government's watch, waiting times for gender identity clinics have increased to unlawful levels, leaving at risk thousands who are in need of urgent support. Instead of facing up to the scale of the challenge and committing sufficient funding to alleviate pressures on those services and the rising demand, the Government have plans to open a mere three new gender identity clinics. Such plans will leave nearly 10,000 people on waiting lists.

This is a crisis, and I call on the Government to go back to the drawing board and bring forward a properly resourced plan to support trans and non-binary people who are in urgent need of support. They must bring an end to the unlawful and excruciating waiting times for treatment. This Pride Month I call on the Government to refrain from paying hollow lip service to queer solidarity and liberation, and I call instead for practical actions that are fully within their power to support LGBT+ people.

4.4 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, in the excellent company of SNP colleagues and others across the House, particularly the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who made a speech today that will change people's lives. A lot of speakers in this debate have spoken from personal experience, and I cannot say that I do. I rise, however, because it matters that all of us speak up and speak out.

Like the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) I am a feminist, and I see no contradiction between that and my support for LGBT rights and issues. In fact, I believe that all of our rights are imperilled by any attempts to erode the rights of any minority groups. Where things are now feels very much like a tale of two halves; yes, we have much to be positive about, but I have serious concerns, which have been expressed eloquently by others, about issues here and further afield.

I am concerned, for example, about the shameful situation in Hungary, which has been described many times today. While I am on that topic, let me tell UEFA that its decision not to permit the stadium in Munich to be lit up in Pride colours was shocking; its decision was a political one, regardless of how it chose to spin it, and that is not acceptable.

In America under Trump, we saw a deeply damaging rolling back of rights and protections for LGBT citizens. I am glad that a different approach is starting to become evident now, but although that change of tone is welcome, it also demonstrates clearly that we cannot take anything for granted on rights, particularly given the concerted efforts by people who are intent on distributing misinformation, which many Members have clearly described.

It is will be no surprise if I tell the House that I am firmly committed to Scottish independence. I would like us to be independent now—or preferably yesterday. I cannot wait for the referendum, which we will be having soon. I want Scottish independence because I believe we can have a more equal, open country. Crucial to that is being fair. My Scottish National party colleagues will know the following quote, which was popularised by Alasdair Gray and is inscribed on the wall outside the Scottish Parliament:

“Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation”.

That is what I want to see: a better, fairer, more equal, inclusive country, where diversity is celebrated. Scotland has been helping to lead the way on LGBT equality. The SNP Government have a strong record of advancing and championing LGBT rights. They have delivered the most progressive and extensive equal marriage legislation, and the reformed blood donation rules, which we have heard about. It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) about his work on the Turing Bill, which the Scottish Government enacted—and I could go on. The thing is that that all these great strides need to be our incentive to keep on and to do more.

What we have heard about the current climate is why education matters so much. I wish to mention the work of the TIE campaign; the more our young folk are helped and equipped to understand difference in a sensible, positive and inclusive way, the better. I have said to my teenagers before that there were no LGBT people in my school, which they found hard to believe; I went to quite a big school and if I think about that now, I know that that cannot possibly have been true. Yet that was the late 1980s and the days of section 28, and there were apparently no LGBT students. Of course I keep up with a number of school friends and it turns out that that patently was not the case; a number of them are actually gay but they were not able to say that as young people, because goodness knows what would have happened—whatever it was, it would not have been good.

We have come a long way in many respects, which is very welcome. Despite that, I am very aware that things are still not always easy, and education is crucial in making sure that young people know that they are grand, whoever they are, however they are. It is really important that others around them hear that too and that there are visible role models for them, such as the hon. Members here today, and champions such as Christina McKelvie, the Scottish Government Minister for Equalities and Older People, who is a tireless and inspiring advocate for equality, and Out for Independence, the SNP LGBT group. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), our Out for Independence convenor Leeze Lawrence sadly died a couple of weeks ago, and I am sure that people in this Chamber would want to send their sympathies to her family and friends.

One thing I want to be very explicit about today, because it is, sadly, necessary—I am not the only one who has said that—is that I am very aware of the toxic environment in relation to trans people, particularly, but not only, online. It is something that I have had a number of discussions about lately, and I am grateful to people who have given me their time. I want to say very clearly that nobody's identity should ever be up for

debate. There should be no excuse for transphobia or for the othering or monsterring of a group of people who are simply going about their lives—a group of people who may already be facing challenging situations and who are already marginalised.

Trans people should feel safe, secure and welcome; surely that is just the bare minimum that any of us should expect. In reality, I am heartsore at some of the utter bile that I have seen. It is disgraceful, and we need to call it out and step up and deal with it where possible. To be clear: the SNP welcomes trans people. We are glad to have you and we have committed and are committed to making sure that that is a reality. Although it is not always as straightforward as it should be, we will persist. I want to live, and I want my children to live, in a Scotland where everyone is safe and all our LGBT communities are safe, welcome and playing a full part in making our country the best it can be. For that to be possible, people have to be able to be themselves.

I have previously spoken at length about conversion therapy—as have others today—and how abhorrent it is. Nobody needs to be converted from being themselves. We should not accept that that is okay in any way. The harms that have been caused by so-called conversion therapy—because, of course, it is not a therapy—are terrible. We need to see the progress that the UK Government have promised, and we need to see it soon. To be clear: the SNP fully supports a ban. We know that making a ban fully comprehensive involves powers in reserved areas, so we would like the UK Government to get a move on and do what they said they were going to do. If they do not, the Scottish Government will look to move forward with their own legislation, within the powers that sit in the Scottish Parliament.

I conclude where I started: there are challenges, but when I look around the Chamber today I see that there is also much to be positive about, and we should celebrate that. We do, though, need to work on making sure that everyone has the ability to live freely, just as themselves. That really would be something we could all be proud of.

4.12 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate on Pride Month. Indeed, I am exceptionally proud to respond to it on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition as shadow Minister for Women and Equalities and a proud LGBT parliamentarian. After today's by-election in Batley and Spen, I hope that another LGBT MP will join us tomorrow, in Kim Leadbeater.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for securing this essential debate, and specifically to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for bringing it forward.

I pay specific tribute to the moving contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), and I thank the many contributors to this debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (James Murray), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson).

On a personal level, as the Member of Parliament for Warrington North I am particularly pleased that there has been such a strong showing from the north-west, given the attempts by the Conservative party and the media to paint the interests of the so-called red wall and the interests of the LGBT community as somehow at odds with each other. I know that that could not be further from the truth in communities like mine.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North was exactly right when she drew parallels between the hate crime and discrimination faced by other groups and that faced by the LGBT community. We all have more in common than that which divides us, and none of us are equal until we are all equal.

Pride Month is an opportunity to celebrate both who we are and how far we have come, and the giants on whose shoulders we stand, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said. It is also an opportunity to highlight ongoing issues and to challenge the Government and our society to go further to reach full equality for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer people and other groups.

In the years since the Labour Government came to power in 1997, we have seen dramatic action to remove barriers for LGBT people, including the scrapping of the Conservatives' homophobic section 28; the creation of civil partnerships; the introduction of same-sex adoption; and the protections of the Equality Act. And yes, we have subsequently seen the establishment of same-sex marriage, supported by the Labour party. Unfortunately, that progress is now under threat from Members on the Government Benches, who have been described by members of their own LGBT advisory panel as

"creating a hostile environment for LGBT people".

Although this is a year when the pandemic has prevented the Pride marches that we all enjoy—indeed, I lament the fact that my wonderfully supportive mum sashaying down the streets of Manchester in her rainbow feather boa has been again postponed—these changes have made the UK a better country and one where community, corporate, media and political groups will wave the Pride flag this month, rightly recognising and celebrating these advances. I thank them for their visibility, but there is further to go.

Just last week, UEFA gave its logo a Pride makeover while refusing the city of Munich's request to illuminate its stadium with rainbow colours for Germany's match against Viktor Orbán's Hungary, on the grounds that it was "political". Well, I am sorry, but supporting LGBT rights is political. We are not a colourful add-on to brands that do not challenge ongoing homophobia or transphobia. A rainbow does not mean that every storm has ended.

I mention Orbán because he was only the second EU leader that the Prime Minister invited to visit after leaving the EU—rolling out the red carpet for Europe's leading promoter of anti-LGBT ideology and laws. Under Orbán, as has been raised by many hon. Members across the House today, Hungary has banned same-sex adoption, implemented a section 28-style ban on gay people from featuring in school education materials or TV shows for under-18s, and ended legal recognition for gender changes. Actions speak louder than words.

Globally, 72 countries still criminalise same-sex relationships and the death penalty is threatened in eight of them. In more than half of the world, LGBT

[Charlotte Nichols]

people may not be protected from discrimination by workplace law, and most Governments deny trans people the right legally to change their name and gender. What more can Ministers do to change this, particularly in the Commonwealth, where these rights are still criminalised in a majority of countries?

It is all very well for Government Members to laud their “Safe To Be Me” conference, but LGBT people in the UK are not safe to be with them. This is a Government who are actively rowing back on their commitments to LGBT people, from dropping their plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004, to delaying the urgent need to ban so-called conversion therapy, to attacking LGBT charities and pursuing a culture war against so-called woke issues—or, as they are better known, basic human rights.

Here in the UK, we have seen hate crimes against LGBT people surge in recent years. Reported hate crimes have almost tripled, from 6,655 in 2014-15 to 18,465 in 2019-20, and 80% of LGBT people do not report hate crimes. Behind those statistics, there are people hurting now. Although we are privileged in this place, even being an MP does not shield us from this. Since being elected, I have received a number of hateful communications sent to my parliamentary office based on my sexuality, and LGBT MPs receive disgusting abuse online and in person, as has sadly been raised by a number of hon. Members during this debate. The rise in hate crime is deeply concerning, yet the Government seem complacent and would rather spend hundreds of millions of pounds on a royal yacht than use it to crack down on hate crime. What will the Minister promise to do about it?

Trans people face daily discrimination, and it is vital that steps are taken to provide the equality of services and support that people need. Specialist health needs are often best addressed by trans health services offered by the NHS Gender Identity Development Service, but figures obtained by the BBC show that more than 13,500 transgender and non-binary adults are on the NHS GIDS waiting list in England. The average wait for a first appointment is 18 months, according to the national LGBT charity, the LGBT Foundation. That is in breach of patients’ legal entitlement under the NHS constitution to have their first appointment in a specialist service within 18 weeks of referral. The Government have promised to open three new clinics to reduce waiting lists by 1,600 by next year, but that will still leave more than 10,000 people, so what more will the Minister do, or will he blame that on the previous Health Secretary? Instead of taking action to end unlawful wait times and to update the Gender Recognition Act, the Government waste time and resources on stoking division within the LGBT community.

Last month marked 40 years since the first HIV cases were reported and, as we mourn and remember the members of our community who did not make old bones due to the AIDS pandemic, and the many elders whose support and wisdom my generation grew up without, we are all glad of how far we have moved on since then. In the UK, with our medical resources, HIV is no longer a death sentence. That is not yet the case throughout the world, however, and it is another reason why the Government should not cut our aid budget. We

are waiting for Ministers to publish the HIV action plan that would set out action to end new cases of HIV in England by 2030 and specifically what that says about increased testing for HIV and the availability of PrEP.

All those issues lead to disproportionately high levels of poor mental health among LGBT people, with half saying they have experienced depression. That has been an even greater challenge during lockdown, particularly among younger people, who in many cases have been confined with people—sometimes including family—who are unaware of or hostile to their sexual identities. As we heard in the incredibly powerful and courageous speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton, that can manifest itself in many ways, including turning to drugs and alcohol to try to bury the hurt and trauma, as facing up to it without support can be too painful to bear.

Unfortunately, unlike with other equality groups, we do not have enough data to assess the impact of the pandemic on LGBT people. Have Ministers asked those questions, or sought to find out over the past year? What will they now do to reach out to LGBT people to ascertain the facts?

There is also some confusion as to what plan the Government are working on to end LGBT inequality. Will the Minister confirm to the House today whether the LGBT action plan—published in 2018 and endorsed by the Prime Minister during the general election campaign—is still the work plan being followed by the Government Equalities Office? If so, what funding is being committed to achieve those outcomes? If not, what plan is the GEO following?

It is absolutely unacceptable that the Government have failed to bring forward legislative proposals to ban conversion therapies. It was promised under the previous Prime Minister in 2018 and then delayed and delayed and delayed. Now fears are growing that it will not be a comprehensive ban after all. Labour is clear: we will support a ban on all harmful conversion practices for LGBT people. Anything less will be just another broken Tory promise. We must hope that the current Minister has not converted her party away from its previous commitment and we will be scrutinising the legislation closely when it is finally brought forward.

That is not an alarmist view. The Conservatives have made it clear that they are not a party interested in supporting LGBT people. Last November, the Conservatives ended the £4 million funding for anti-LGBT bullying in our schools, in a move that echoes Thatcher’s section 28. This year alone, we have seen their whole LGBT advisory panel disbanded, with members citing a hostile environment for LGBT people. I commend the principles of those advisers but, I am afraid, in this Pride Month, what Ministers should instead feel is shame.

4.23 pm

The Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household (Mike Freer): First, I have to say that I am in something of an invidious position because normally I stand behind the Chair urging Ministers to be short. Now I am in the position of having to try to go long while ignoring the Bench Whips.

I pay tribute to the sponsors of the debate. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and I shared a platform many years ago, probably around 2004, so I

know her commitment on these issues over many years and I commend her passion, although I do not always share her analysis. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) is a co-sponsor. I will touch on some of the technical issues he raised, but he also gave a message about having a supportive family. Despite having a supportive family, I still encountered issues, which shows that, while we have made progress, we still have issues to come. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) made a powerful contribution. Indeed, the contributions from all the SNP Members who took part were particularly powerful and, in many ways, insightful.

The debate has, in the main, been one of good humour on both sides of the House. People may disagree on what still needs to be done, or disagree on the history of what has gone before, but the debate has allowed us to celebrate the achievements of what we have seen over the past few years while focusing on the issues that still remain. The first Pride event in this country was held in July 1972, inspired by the infamous Stonewall riots, and brave and determined people marched through Highbury fields in north London with one message: “We are here.” Today, that message remains the same: “We are here.” It is a simple message, but a powerful one. The importance of visibility cannot be underestimated, because to be seen is to be heard and to be counted, and that is the bedrock of our democratic society. There has been some discussion as to whether Pride is a protest or a celebration. In my view, it can be both.

I shall turn to some of the issues raised during the debate. A number of Members raised the international situation. Despite the changes that we have seen and can celebrate in the UK, globally there remain too many places where being LGBT is a daily struggle, where discrimination and violence are a daily occurrence and where tolerance and acceptance are a far-off dream. Members have commented that there are still 70 countries in the world today where it is illegal to be LGBT, and that in 11 of those, the death penalty remains on the statute book. While that remains the reality for millions of LGBT people around the world, it is important that Pride is seen not just as a month of events but as a global movement of visibility.

I am proud to say that this Government will host “Safe To Be Me”, a global equality conference that will bring together Government representatives, business leaders, civil society and international parliamentarians to address the safety of the LGBT community across the world. The conference is the next step in the UK’s journey towards equality and will focus on decriminalisation, progressing legislative reform, tackling violence and discrimination and ensuring equal access to public services for LGBT people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) made reference to the work that we need to do with the Commonwealth. In 2020, we announced an additional £3.2 million of UK-funded projects to help Commonwealth Governments and civil society groups to reform outdated laws and end the legacy of discrimination and violence that persists today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate and others asked whether the commitment from the Prime Minister would be delivered, and I can say that that commitment

is still sound and will be delivered. I cannot promise the £40 million that my hon. Friend was asking for; nor can I deliver the reform of the drugs laws. Those matters are well outside the brief of today. In addition to the £3.2 million for work in the Commonwealth, we have given an extra £800,000 to support the vital work of civil society organisations through the Commonwealth Equality Network, which works tirelessly to protect the rights of fellow citizens and to ensure that LGBT people live free from discrimination and violence. I was particularly pleased to see the recent appointment of my noble Friend Lord Herbert of South Downs as the UK’s special envoy on LGBT rights. That further highlights this Government’s commitment to LGBT people at home and abroad.

I will turn to one or two of the specific areas that we have covered today, starting with health. Numerous Members have talked about some of the issues facing the community when accessing health services. That is a regular focus of all our discussions in this House, and it is a focus of this Government’s LGBT work. The appointment of Dr Michael Brady as the first national adviser for LGBT health is another example of our commitment to level up outcomes for LGBT people. Appointed in April 2019, Dr Brady has already achieved a great deal: liaising across NHS England, he has worked to ensure that LGBT health inequalities are given consideration in its long-term planning and implementation. He is working on improving data collection on sexual orientation and gender identity; he has held roundtables on LGBT health; and he has hosted the first national NHS LGBT health conference, highlighting issues that LGBT people experience. This is firmly on the agenda of our Health Department and our equalities team.

On education, our manifesto made clear our commitment to helping teachers tackle anti-LGBT bullying, and the Government continue to fund anti-bullying projects. The Department for Education is tendering for a new anti-bullying programme that will include LGBT in its mandates. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) asked some specific questions, and I will make sure that we get back to her with answers to all of them, but in particular, she asked about teacher training. Being married to a teacher, I know that this issue is covered, but I do not know whether it is covered to an extent that would satisfy the hon. Lady. I will ask my colleagues in the Department for Education who are responsible for that particular section of teacher training to make contact with her, so that we can have a proper discussion as to whether there are any gaps in teacher training that need to be filled.

Turning to one of the achievements, let us not forget that it was a Conservative-led Government who introduced same-sex marriage in 2013, and extended it to include couples in Northern Ireland last year. Between 2014 and 2017, 25,000 same-sex couples married in the UK, myself included—in fact, I think I was the first Conservative MP to use the legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) mentioned his 13-year civil partnership: those of us in this House know the strains of being a Member of Parliament, and will know the importance that we place on the support of our partners and our family. It is right to put on record that we pay tribute to our partners and our family for all they do to help us do our job in this place. That legislation on same-sex marriage has enabled tens of thousands to

[Mike Freer]

enjoy the rights, privileges, and joy that marriage can bring. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington, who I know is disappointed about his delayed marriage, that I hope that this time next year, he will take part in this debate as a married man.

Of course, there is more still to do. Immense progress has been made since the first Pride march, but we still have to carry on with our progress to achieve full equality for LGBT people here at home. That is why the Government are committed to levelling up outcomes for LGBT people: as well as the groundbreaking global conference, we are committed to banning conversion therapy, tackling hate crime, and making it easier for trans people to access the support they need.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Freer: Will the hon. Lady give me one moment? I may answer her question, or I may not.

With regard to conversion therapy, as announced in the Queen's Speech, the Government will bring forward legislation to ban that practice. In order to ensure that this legislation places victims at the centre of that work, we will launch a consultation in September this year to ensure we get it right. This will be an important and groundbreaking piece of legislation, and the first action that any UK Government have taken to truly end conversion therapy.

Dame Angela Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that this legislation will be a ban, that it will not talk about ending conversion therapy but about banning it, and that there will not be religious exemptions within it?

Mike Freer: The issue of the role of faith is obviously very difficult. From a personal point of view, representing a very diverse constituency, I realise the challenges that any Government face in getting this ban right. In terms of an outright ban, all I can say is that the Government will work to ensure that the harmful practice of conversion therapy will be banned. It is not a question of whether; it is a question of when. It is not if; it is how we will be doing it. In my view, having led the first debate on banning conversion therapy in 2015, if it was easy, it would have been done by now. It is a complex issue that we need to get right, and I do appreciate the drive and the passion to ban conversion therapy. I share that passion, but equally, I want to ensure that we get it right.

Despite all our progress, people continue to face homophobic, biphobic and transphobic hate crime. The Government remain committed to tackling this and work is under way to improve reporting and recording of LGBT hate crime. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked how we would be improving not just reporting, but the training for our police officers so that they understand the issue and can respond to it better than they have in the past.

The Home Office funds multiple projects to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic hate crime, which includes funding Galop, the nation's leading LGBT anti-violence charity, to deliver the national lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans domestic violence helpline.

I will turn, if I may, to the Gender Recognition Act. The Government are clear that people who are transgender should be able to live their lives as they wish. As

announced in September 2020, after thorough consideration of the evidence and the wide range of views expressed in the previous Administration's consultation, the Government believe that the current provisions of the GRA allow for those who wish to legally change their gender to do so. At the same time, the process of applying for a gender recognition certificate should be as straightforward and dignified as possible.

I will, if I may, turn to a couple of other issues. The hon. Member for Wallasey talked very powerfully about some of the impacts of the covid pandemic on LGBT people, such as homelessness, loneliness and not being in a supportive environment. Concerns have been raised that many LGBT people have been confined in homes with families who are not supportive of their sexual orientation or gender identity and with limited access to their support networks, leaving them feeling isolated. I have to say that I and my colleagues share that concern. The equality hub continues to engage with other Government Departments and organisations in the sector to understand how best to support LGBT people during the pandemic and, hopefully, in the final stages of it.

Charlotte Nichols: On the Minister's point about the experience of LGBT people during the pandemic, will the Government commit to an equality impact assessment so that this can be properly measured and recorded and action can be taken based on the facts?

Mike Freer: I thank the shadow Minister for that question. I can only promise to take that back to my colleagues in the Government Equalities Office. As she knows, I am not a portfolio holder, but I support the equalities team. I will make sure that that issue is taken back and that she gets a full answer to her question.

The shadow of the pandemic hangs over the community and all the changes and the progress that we wish to make for the community. Pride is a moment of visibility. It is a living tradition, and it is obviously made difficult through doing it online, rather than the physical manifestation of walking through the streets.

There was some debate as to which was the gayest Parliament in the world. I fear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we may need to have a gay-off to find out which is the gayest Parliament. To be fair, it is rather a nice thing that the crown of the gayest Parliament rests with either the UK Parliament or the Scottish Parliament. The fact that it rests within these isles is a testament to the progress that we have made.

Before I close, I want to mention a couple of colleagues, who I am not sure are in their places. I have to say to the Opposition Whips that given that the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) was a Pride steward, if he can corral the parade at Pride, I think he has a future in any Whips Office. I would also like to mention the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). I have to say that I found his words humbling, and I can only say that his friends and family, and above all his constituents, will be enormously proud of what he has done. To bare your soul in such place as this, which can be an unforgiving place—but also a very forgiving place—took real courage, and I pay tribute to him for what he did today. I am sure he will find strength from colleagues across the House in the years to come.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the activists who have gone before us. None of us could be here as gay Members of Parliament or allies of the gay community,

none of us could have civil partnerships or get married, and none of us could have access to PEP, PrEP and even possibly HIV treatments without the work that so many activists have done before us. I have to say that I stand in awe of those who have put themselves out there to change society on my behalf. As we emerge from these difficult times, we can all be glad that the value and power of Pride is no less and is not diminished since that first march through Highbury Fields in 1972, and I thank all Members for their contributions today.

4.41 pm

Dame Angela Eagle: Normally one would have two minutes to respond, but I have a maximum of nearly 20 minutes in which to wind up this debate. However, right hon. and hon. Members on all sides of the House would probably like to know that I am not going to use the full allocation, and they may just be able to get out of here fast enough to catch that last tube home.

We have had an extraordinarily powerful debate, with contributions on all sides of the House from the many parliamentarians who are out and proud in what may or may not be the gayest Parliament in the world, but is certainly more of a barrel of laughs than it was when I first got here in 1992. I would like to thank my co-sponsors, the hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), for helping me to persuade the Backbench Business Committee to hold this debate today to recognise Pride 2021 at the end of this month of albeit mainly online celebrations. I have to say that it was not the most difficult job of persuasion I have ever had in my life, because the Backbench Business Committee was more than happy to accede to our wishes, and I think its members knew that we would have an occasion as moving and profound as the one we have had today.

I would like to highlight two speeches in particular. One was by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), talking about her particular struggle being raised north of the border in a very religious environment and coming to terms with her own sexual orientation. Of course, the other speech, which most right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, was that by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). I think he has received and will continue to receive very many virtual hugs for the speech he made, because we are not allowed actual ones at the moment.

I think we all agree that everyone should feel confident and respected in our society, whatever their sexual orientation. We all of us agree that that has often been very far from the case, and that we have had to fight as LGBT people for our community to create the circumstances, political and otherwise, where we could make progress towards that end. I think we would all agree that we have made significant progress towards that end in the last 20 to 25 years, from quite difficult beginnings when I first came into this House.

Remember that I am only the second woman ever to come out as a Member of this House, and the pioneering one who came out, Maureen Colquhoun, was deselected and lost her seat as a result of being outed by the gossip columnist Nigel Dempster in the *Daily Mail* in the most cruel and disgusting circumstances.

Those circumstances, by the way, have an echo in the way that trans people are now being treated in our national newspapers and in the toxic so-called debate

that is happening on social media, which is precisely where we should not be having any debates. We should have debates in a calm atmosphere surrounded by respect rather than in the sewer that often is social media. People should understand, as I think they do in all parts of this House, how toxic that particular so-called debate is at the moment. We have to calm it down and ensure that people work together in respect so that we can go forward together.

I am disappointed—I hope that the Minister will not take this personally—that we did not have an Equalities Minister here today, because it is precisely their commitment, in the new Government post 2019, that we wanted to test. The debate that we had on conversion therapy in March was very disappointing in the way in which it was answered by the Minister for Equalities. Everyone in all parts of the House felt that way and communicated it to the Government after the debate in an unprecedented letter from the LGBT+ organisations in eight of the parties represented in this House. I am a little more reassured by what the Minister has said today. However, we must have, as soon as possible, a Bill that bans conversion therapy without loopholes and without religious exemptions, because religious exemptions or loopholes about trans children merely create the capacity for a coach and horses to be driven through the ban. We have not come this far to preside over the putting on to the statute book of something that is ineffectual and that allows this abuse and torture to continue. I hope that the Minister will take that back with him.

Many of us look forward to some progress on GRA reform. Again, the Minister was rather coy about what that would be or when it would happen. I was hoping that he would be able to give us a bit more information. If he would like to write to me with more information, that would be fantastic.

We need a commitment to getting sex and relationship education done properly in schools so that there is proper respect for all children as they are growing up and all children are equipped to deal with life as happy and healthy adults, which is equally important. That will be a contentious area if the Government do not stamp very quickly on some of the lies and incitements to hatred that are being planned and organised outside our schools.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. I look forward to us making further progress. I also look forward to any kind of letter that the Minister might be able to send me to respond in more detail to some of those points. Happy Pride!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an excellent debate! It is always wonderful when we finish a little early, not because it is about saving time, but because it means that everybody who wished to contribute has done so to the full extent that they wished, which is why there have been such good speeches this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

PETITION

Orchards Academy

4.48 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: I rise, virtually, to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Swanley regarding the rebuilding of Orchards Academy, alongside an online petition on the same topic that has been signed by 1,333 people.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Sevenoaks,

Declares that Orchards Academy in Swanley is in urgent need of a rebuild due to serious structural problems with the school building; further that all children should be given the opportunity to learn in a safe and welcoming environment; further that the children of Swanley and the surrounding area should have access to a safe and modern school fit for the twenty first century.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward measures that will ensure that Orchards Academy is rebuilt.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002671]

Social Housing: Housing Ombudsman

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

4.50 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Housing is by some distance the overwhelming issue brought to me by my constituents. Every Friday at my weekly advice surgery, I meet family after family on the 10,000-strong housing waiting list in Merton. I struggle to offer them any hope that they will soon have a place to call home, given that the demand is so high and the supply so small.

I meet countless hard-working families who are evicted by their private landlords simply because someone else will pay more rent. I meet families on the council's transfer list—families with two, three and even four children in one-bedroom flats who will never, ever get to move to a larger home and whose children will never have the opportunity of a space to do their homework or to bring their friends to.

Far, far too regularly, I meet social housing tenants living in complete disrepair at the end of their tether with the endless hurdles that they face to fix even the smallest problems—residents such as Kwajo Tweneboa. The Minister may be familiar with his case already. In June, Kwajo bravely partnered with “ITV News”, which reported on the simply appalling conditions in which he and his neighbours are living, shining a light on the issue in every MP's postbag.

I make clear right away my gratitude to Kwajo, to Daniel Hewitt and “ITV News”, and to Ann Baldwin and Debra Fryer from the Eastfields Residents Association for their collective commitment and determination in fighting not just their corner, but in support of their neighbours and—perhaps unknowingly—in support of social housing tenants right across our country.

I would like to start by directly addressing the disrepair at the estate as outlined in the report, before highlighting that it is by no means an isolated case. I will then detail the completely ineffective and bureaucratic system of tenants' complaints procedures and so-called regulation, before concluding with the obvious steps that must be urgently taken by the Minister and his Government.

But first, Eastfields: a Clarion-owned housing estate in Mitcham in complete disrepair. My inbox is bursting with Clarion cases to the point that a weekly meeting now takes place between my office and Clarion's to monitor the progress on each individually. But it should never have reached that point. A weekly meeting is no solace for Kwajo. He lives in a property overtaken by mice, cockroaches, damp and mould. Tragically, his father passed away last year from cancer. Kwajo says that he asked for help before he died and nobody listened. The problems have since continued:

“Nobody should have to live needing to heat water in a pot to bathe with because their water doesn't work and their landlord won't fix it. Nobody should be having their kitchen sink and washing machine fill with sewage water. Nobody should watch a ceiling collapse right next to their son, studying during lockdown, after already complaining countless times asking for it to be fixed. This is our reality.”

The problem in Merton is that a significant amount of Clarion's stock is at the end of its life. Some of it is on the waiting list to be redeveloped, but a solution years down the line is no excuse for letting paying residents

wait and live in squalor. Everyone agrees that Eastfields needs to be regenerated and demolished, but that does not solve the disrepair across the other estates that so desperately also need to be redeveloped.

Kwajo's case is no anomaly. Take Ms P of the Phipps Bridge estate. For over 18 months my office has been badgering Clarion about an external leak into her property resulting in damp and mould, damaging her floor and decoration, and causing all manner of electrical concerns. Clarion has been unable to stop the water supply to her block and to her flat. Her flat is so small that she sleeps on the sofa so that her teenage son can have the only bedroom. However, when the damp took over the bedroom, both mum and 17-year-old son were forced to share the living room. She has been forced to take days off work without pay so that the repairs can be done, only to be frustrated when contractors do not turn up or do not complete the job.

Or take Ms N. I contacted Clarion on 11 May to report water pouring from the property above and through her fuse box and electrics—a huge health and safety concern that surely needed an urgent resolution, particularly when the water was leaking further to the flat below. It took a team of surveyors and contractors to discover that the source of the leak was a bath fitted by United Living in the flat above which had not been sealed by mastic. How on earth did this take six weeks to solve? If there is a leak in my house, I phone a plumber and he comes around that day, but if he does not come around, I get another plumber and the problem is solved.

Or take a second Ms P, of Sadler Close. I first raised her case with Clarion in 2014—yes, 2014. There was a catalogue of problems: water pressure, constant leaks, rodent infestation, damp, mould. Her property is in complete disrepair. Ultimately, I contacted the ombudsman in February 2020. I understand that it has been quite a year, but it did not formerly consider her case until April 2021. For the past year and a half, she has been batted between the ombudsman and Clarion and is still waiting for a resolution.

I now turn to the Clarion complaints process. To make a complaint and see it through to its conclusion at Clarion requires the patience of a saint, the tenacity of a five-star general, an endless amount of phone data, a laptop to email, and a post-graduate degree in bureaucracy. The complainant starts by dealing with a call centre where nobody knows their name or where they live, where nobody is responsible for their complaint, and where the call handlers do not have access to the records of the contractors that do the work, such as ENGIE, United Living and ARK.

If people do not get the repairs done, their only option is to go through a two-stage written complaints process. If they ever mention the threat of legal action, they can expect their case to be shut down immediately. Mentioning legal action is a polite way to express the frustration that many people must feel.

Sometimes I feel like I work for Clarion. Prior to lockdown, my process was to complain about a case twice in writing and then I would book a site meeting if it remained unresolved. I intend to go back to that approach when restrictions are lifted. I do not care if it takes hours and hours of my week; I am going to pursue every case, and I am going to run them as ragged as they run some of my constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for her tenacity and strength of character, and for delivering on behalf of her constituents. None of us fails to be impressed by her commitment to them. She is absolutely right to say that it is important to rebalance the relationship between landlords and tenants. If the ombudsman cannot make that happen, I believe that the Minister has to be the person to crack the whip.

Siobhain McDonagh: There is a solution at hand. The Minister knows about it, but it has as yet not been introduced.

I understand the dilemma for housing associations. I have the greatest of respect for them. Before entering the House, when I had a proper job, I worked for Battersea Churches Housing Trust, an organisation that, like so many housing associations, came out of its community in response to the horrors of “Cathy Come Home”. It was led by people of faith who did not always get everything right, but who knew their tenants and their properties. Everything that made housing associations great was undermined by the incoming coalition Government slashing the social housing budget by 50% overnight, reducing it from £9.5 billion to £4.2 billion, slashing capital grants and attempting to make up the difference through the introduction of an unaffordable “affordable” rent, where tenants were to pay a rent of 80% market value.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Siobhain McDonagh: I was just waxing lyrical about the financing structures introduced by the coalition Government, slashing the grants to build houses and trying to make up the difference by introducing an “affordable” rent of 80% market value—attempting to shore up the system on the backs of some of poorest people in the country.

The whole system relied on those housing associations having ever larger borrowing power and equity in their stock, which in turn forced mergers, taking them further away from their community and their tenants. That is an invidious position to say the least. The choice is to either stop providing houses for those in most need in order to retain their integrity and their local commitment, or to grapple with the new funding regime to continue to do the best they could to provide those homes. The coalition Government battered our social housing system from pillar to post. They even completely abolished the Audit Commission and the Housing Inspectorate under the bonfire of the quangos, so that we now need to talk about reinventing the wheel a decade on. The evidence could not be clearer that their belief in self-regulation in reality means no regulation. I will pursue Clarion, but I also pledge to badger the Government because that is where the ultimate blame lies.

On the problem with the housing ombudsman, with my remaining time I would like to consider the options available for Kwajo, or indeed any resident in his shoes, to complain about the performance of his housing association. First, the ombudsman is an authority that looks at the process, not the disrepair. To make a complaint in the first place you have to go through

[Siobhain McDonagh]

Clarion's previously described multi-stage complaints process. When you finally get through the system, and if you have the patience and tenacity left, then you start the ombudsman process from scratch only to find that you need a signed form from a designated person such as an MP or a councillor, or to wait eight whole weeks if you do not—more hurdles, more bureaucracy. And when you eventually reach the burdensome finishing line, the ombudsman is looking not at whether your leak has been fixed, but at whether the process to fix your leak is correct. Oh, and you have to hope that your complaint falls on the right day of the week because they do not take phone calls on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Can the Minister honestly tell me that if he had water dripping through his ceiling electrics that that is a process he would have the patience to follow? I cannot.

The alternative is to take your complaint to the social housing regulator. However, it states:

"By law, our remit does not include proactive monitoring of how a registered provider performs or complies with our consumer standards...By law, we can only take action against a landlord when it has made significant, systemic failure that breaches the standards we have set."

and that

"Although our role is not to resolve individual disputes between tenants and landlords we signpost tenants, or their representatives, who have individual complaints, to the Housing Ombudsman Service."

Back to square one. While the regulator is required to proactively regulate economic standards of housing associations, it can only take action on consumer standards reactively when it finds evidence of "serious detriment" to tenants—hardly helpful. It is no wonder that the regulator concluded that no regulatory action was needed when inspecting Clarion on the back of endless complaints from Tower Hamlets councillors five years ago. It said:

"From the information we considered, we could see there were individual incidents of service failures, including in relation to Clarion's handling of some complaints, but we have not seen evidence of systemic failings by Clarion which would necessitate regulatory action."

However, the regulator did not meet directly with a single tenant or leaseholder as part of the investigation.

To recap, if I was Kwajo, living in disrepair at Eastfields and waiting endlessly for the regeneration to begin, and I had water pouring through my ceiling, the bureaucratic hurdles in my path would include a multi-stage complaints process with my landlord, the securing of the backing of an MP or councillor or an eight-week wait for an ombudsman to analyse whether due process had been followed and a regulator that would signpost me back to the ombudsman. Is it any wonder he is crying out for help? We are asking people to go through a process that I personally would not have the patience to deal with, and we are then surprised at the anger and frustration that pours out.

The Minister will be delighted to hear that the solution is in his hands. I draw to his attention the Government's social housing White Paper, which envisages a thorough strengthening of the regulator's role in consumer issues, of the type abolished by the Government before last. The regulator would be proactive. It would monitor and drive landlords' compliance with improved consumer standards. It would introduce routine inspections for

the largest landlords every four years. It would give the regulator a power to publish a code of practice on consumer standards. It would strengthen the regulator's enforcement power, and it would introduce a new power to arrange emergency repairs if needed, where a survey uncovers evidence of systemic landlord failure. It sounds like a huge step in the right direction, does it not, so what is the problem? Not a single word was given in the Queen's Speech to enacting those solutions into law.

If the legislation is not introduced in this parliamentary Session, Kwajo and his neighbours will wait in excess of five years to get anything done and for the regulatory system to be improved. Are this Government asking them to wait in squalor until that time?

I urge the Minister in the strongest terms to use his authority and call for this legislation to receive the Government time and priority it so obviously needs. While I am certain that a strengthened regulator would be a positive step in the right direction, I am under no illusion that it does not build a single new socially rented home. In Merton alone, there are 9,485 households on the housing waiting list, but just 74 two-beds, 32 three-beds and three four-beds have been available in the past year. It is a national problem. We now have 1.15 million households on social housing waiting lists across the country, but just 6,566 new social homes were built last year, one of the lowest numbers on record. At that rate, it will take 175 years to give everyone on the waiting list a social rented home. Where is the ambition? Where is the political will?

I finish with the words of Ann, who chairs the Eastfields residents association. She said:

"It angers me that it had to take a report by an ITV news journalist to highlight the disgraceful conditions that Clarion are happy for their tenants to live in. These residents had been living in these circumstances for years, having to pay rent to live in substandard housing. The Government need to tighten up regulations, bringing in a similar idea to Ofsted to hold housing associations to account. Because nobody living in the 21st Century should be expected to live this way."

If only there were a White Paper waiting for Government time.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government

(Luke Hall): I congratulate and thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate before the House. I know how important the provision of safe and decent social housing is to her. She has spoken passionately on behalf of Kwajo and so many of her constituents who want to see progress in the area, so I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this important agenda and set out what we are doing to try to improve the lives of social housing tenants.

Hearing the hon. Lady's remarks, and seeing the news reports over recent weeks, has highlighted the plight of some residents of social housing who are struggling with unacceptable conditions and landlord services. These cases have raised critical questions for many people involved in social housing, which is why the White Paper—I will come on to that—is such an important step in addressing some of those questions.

Of the 23 million households in this country, 17% are in the social rented sector, with 2.5 million people renting from a housing association, and 1.6 million people renting from a local authority. People in social housing must be treated with dignity and respect, and have their complaints

handled effectively. The recent cases we have heard about today highlight the fact that some residents are simply not receiving a quality service from their landlord. We heard about the terrible conditions in a Croydon council housing block, and the council has commissioned ARK Consultancy to carry out an independent investigation. ARK's report assesses what went wrong, and sets out the steps that Croydon Council must take to address those failings.

The Regulator of Social Housing has concluded its investigation into the issues in Croydon, and found the council to be in breach of its consumer standards. The regulator is working with the council to ensure that it takes the necessary action to remedy those issues. It is also considering information received from Clarion Housing Association about the Eastfields estate, which we have heard so much about. It will form a view on whether there is evidence of systemic failure that would indicate a breach of regulatory standards.

The Government were appalled to hear and learn about the conditions on the Eastfields estate. Social homes must be safe and decent, and provide security and dignity for residents, who should be treated with respect. If things go wrong, there should be swift redress. In this shocking case those expectations were not met. I understand Ann's anger, and I thank her for the work she is doing on behalf of residents.

A review of decent homes standards has begun, as has work to improve fire and electrical safety, and address harm from carbon monoxide. I understand that Croydon has accepted its failings in full, and the regulator is considering future progress. The Housing Ombudsman has an important role in improving residents' experience of social housing. It experienced a big drop in the number of inquiries and complaints last spring, in 2020, due to the impact of the pandemic, but in recent months the number of complaints has significantly increased. Just over 6,000 complaints and inquiries were made between January and March this year, which is a 73% increase compared with the same quarter last year. Although some of those issues may have been deferred during the pandemic and stored up to be raised now, we cannot accept that this is a new normal. The increase underlines the need of landlords to adhere to the good practice set out in the complaint handling code. It is clear that some landlords have significant work to do to improve the standard of their homes, and the service they provide to their residents.

Croydon has highlighted issues of damp and mould in the Eastfields case, and the ombudsman recently issued a call for evidence to support investigation into that. That was in response to data that suggested a high rate of maladministration in those cases, and the significant impact that had on the lives of so many residents. The investigation will enable the ombudsman to make recommendations to help landlords improve their services. Despite the shocking cases highlighted in Croydon and Eastfields, there are positive signs of broader improvement in standards.

Siobhain McDonagh: How would the Minister resolve problems of damp and mould growth in a one-bedroom flat where there is a mum and four or five children? I do not think any landlord in the country could do that. We are desperate for Eastfields to be regenerated, and we completely support Clarion in its efforts to do that.

That is the only way people on that estate will get to live in houses of the size they need. For those not at Eastfields, there is not the same way out.

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Lady again for that point. I am always happy to discuss that in detail with her, including outside this debate, and I am happy to hear more about the individual cases she has raised that are so shocking and so worrying.

I think, however, that we are seeing some signs of broader improvements. If we look back to 2019, we see that 12% of dwellings in the social rented sector failed to meet the decent homes standard. That is down from 20% in 2010. This is lower than the proportion of the private rented sector and owner-occupied homes that fail the standard, but it is still not good enough. That is why we are reviewing the decent homes standard as a key plank of our "The charter for social housing residents: social housing white paper", which we published in November 2020.

The charter for social housing residents states that every social housing resident in England should be able to expect to be safe in their home, should know that their landlord is performing, should have their complaints dealt with properly and fairly, should be treated with respect, should have their voice heard, should have a good-quality home and neighbourhood to live in, and should be supported to take their first step to ownership. The reforms set out in the White Paper, which underpins the charter, will drive change throughout the social housing sector, as the hon. Lady said, ensuring that everyone working in the sector listens to residents and treats them with courtesy and respect.

We know that many landlords are passionate about putting their residents first and we want to see that approach replicated throughout the sector. That is why our reform package will transform social housing redress and consumer regulation. It will improve the quality and safety of social homes and rebalance the relationship between landlords and tenants. The regulator of social housing will be given stronger powers to proactively monitor and drive compliance with consumer standards, with regular inspections of the largest landlords and new tenant satisfaction measures to help assess landlord performance on issues such as repairs and complaints handling. The White Paper emphasises the importance of the ombudsman service in ensuring that residents can access swift and fair redress when things go wrong. It sets out the range of measures to increase the ombudsman's impact in driving up standards, including through closer working with the regulator of social housing.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Housing Ombudsman Service, which is compulsory for social landlords, and its membership consists of over 2,300 landlords representing over 4.5 million individual households. The White Paper has set out how we have already acted to enable the ombudsman to take decisions more quickly. If we look at the ombudsman's average determination rate for formal investigations in 2019-20, we see that it was below its six-month target at 5.8 months. It is the first time that that target has been achieved, so it is positive news that the performance is better than it has been, and we are trying to speed up access to the ombudsman by removing the democratic filter that the hon. Lady talked about through the building safety Bill. That will allow residents with unresolved complaints to have

[*Luke Hall*]

direct access to the ombudsman rather than having to wait eight weeks or approach an MP, a councillor or a tenant panel for a referral. That is an important point that she and many others have raised many times before.

We have strengthened the ombudsman's powers so that it can take stronger action against landlords and better support residents when things go wrong. There is a very high level of compliance by landlords with compliance orders: 95% within three months and 99% within six months. Landlords were ordered to pay compensation to residents totalling £412,000 across the year, and last year three quarters of residents who sought support with an informal resolution of complaints said that the ombudsman had helped them.

Since the White Paper was published, the Housing Ombudsman, Richard Blakeway, has made further progress in responding to the White Paper agenda, including establishing a 600-strong resident panel that will involve residents in the development of the ombudsman service, in publishing a framework that sets out how the ombudsman will look beyond individual disputes to identify problems that need to be addressed across the sector, and launching that investigation into damp and mould—an issue, again, that I know is very important to many of the hon. Lady's constituents—as well as by publishing determinations in individual cases and the landlord performance data, and issuing complaint handling failure orders when landlords fall short of the standards set out in the complaints handling code that we published last summer.

We know, however, that many of the most egregious complaints never reach the ombudsman, meaning that some residents miss out on the support that could be offered to them. That is why the White Paper sets out plans for a communication campaign to ensure that social housing residents know how to complain when things go wrong and that they have confidence in the process. Earlier this year, we ran a five-week campaign on social media with the slogan “Make Things Right”. That campaign has helped to improve awareness of the

ability to raise these issues and has raised confidence in the process. We are absolutely committed to implementing the reforms that were laid out in our charter for social housing residents. They will deliver transformational change for social residents. We continue to develop our proposals on social housing regulations and want to legislate as soon as is practicable.

Siobhain McDonagh: When? What month? What year?

Luke Hall: Unfortunately, I cannot give the hon. Lady a date at this point, but we want to do it as soon as we are possibly able to, and when the proposals are right and ready. We share her urgency and passion to get this done, but we want to develop our reforms and get them in the right place. We will legislate as soon as we can, but of course we understand the urgency of the issues that she has raised. I know how important this is to the hon. Lady and her constituents, and that there are so many issues that could be addressed. Perhaps I could meet her to talk about some of them in more detail in the coming days and weeks, so that we can hear more about her constituents' concerns. I am very grateful to her.

We want to ensure that the system for handling social housing residents' complaints is fit for purpose and accessible, and that it drives improvements for individual complainants and for the benefit of all the residents in a community. That is why we are taking action to ensure that the social housing sector is better regulated, that residents have better and faster access to redress, and fundamentally to rebalance the relationship between landlords and residents.

The charter for social housing residents sets out what every social housing resident should be able to expect. The measures set out in the White Paper will ensure that those expectations become a reality for all residents.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 July 2021

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Enabling Community Energy

[Relevant documents: Oral and written evidence taken by the Environmental Audit Committee on Technological innovations and climate change: community energy, HC 1208, Session 2019–21; and correspondence between the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Technological innovations and climate change: community energy, HC 1208, Session 2019–21 and HC 421, Session 2021–22.]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

1.30 pm

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): I do not think it is necessary to remind colleagues how we proceed during Westminster Hall debates, but I remind those who are participating virtually that we are watching you all the time, so be on your best behaviour and watch what you are up to. Members who are participating physically should keep their masks on.

There has been just one withdrawal, and Wera Hobhouse is opening the debate and closing it. I will not impose a time limit, but everyone other than the Front Benchers, who have 10 minutes each, should take roughly four minutes each. Please share the time.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered enabling community energy.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir David, and I am looking forward to the Minister's response. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, which I secured with the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). We want to make the case for enabling community energy by removing the blockage that is preventing its huge potential from being realised.

The evidence that the climate crisis threatens to destroy human civilisation and the natural world is increasingly alarming. We must achieve our emissions reduction targets and get to net zero by 2050 at the latest, as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Paris accord. The UK is way off track in doing that, as the Climate Change Committee has made clear. Currently, only 12% of our power comes from renewable sources. The only sector that has made reasonable progress is the production of electricity. In all other sectors—heating, transport, agriculture and heavy industry, let alone shipping and aviation—Britain is failing to reach its own targets.

The two big challenges facing householders are heating and transport. How do we rapidly transition from powering our heating and transport with fossil fuels towards doing so with clean energy? A change of this scale can be achieved only through the active involvement of people, because they will have to pay for it through their energy

bills, the products they buy, and the taxes they pay. People will need to host the new infrastructure in their neighbourhoods and communities, and they will ultimately need to change their routines and practices. If people do not agree to pay for it, host it or do it, progress to net zero will be more costly and more contested, and it will be less inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable. The individual householder or consumer must be at the centre of our transition to net zero, and it seems the Government have not quite understood this; otherwise, they would by now have developed a coherent plan to engage people along the way.

Community energy is one of the few existing tried-and-tested means of engaging people in the energy system. Indeed, the strength of community energy comes from its connection to people and places, because people make community energy. Community energy means smaller-scale, renewable power generation that is owned and run, at least in part, by local community companies or co-operatives. The individual providers might be small or medium-sized, but when taken together, community energy could be done on a very large scale. A 2014 Government report stated that we could have had 3,000 MW of clean community energy generation by 2020. The Environmental Audit Committee's recent community energy inquiry said that

“by 2030 the community energy sector could grow by 12–20 times, powering 2.2 million homes and saving 2.5 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions every year.”

Let us imagine a future in which we can all buy clean electricity directly from a local supply company or co-operative and in which every pound spent powering our homes, workplaces and transport supports local jobs and helps to fund new facilities and services in our communities and in turn contributes to the building of more renewable energy infrastructure. Right now, UK community energy generation is just 319 MW—just 0.5% of our total energy generation. That is a great failure of potential.

The huge potential of community energy is being blocked by our energy market and licensing rules, which are largely unchanged from when they were designed in the 1990s. They make the cost faced by community energy groups insurmountable. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research states that the financial, technical and operational challenges involved in setting up a licensed energy supply company mean that initial costs exceed £1 million.

Let us imagine setting up a microbrewery. We plan to deliver our beers to local pubs, off-licences and homes, but then we are told that we have to pay £1 million in road tax for our delivery van. These businesses would never be started, and the savings in transport costs, greenhouse gas emissions and prices would never be realised. That is the reality that the community energy sector faces.

The 319 MW of installed community energy capacity exists because of the dedicated efforts of the people who make up the UK's few hundred community energy groups—groups such as Bath and West Community Energy, which is in my constituency and which uses its revenues to support energy efficiency in homes, fuel-poverty programmes and low-carbon transport. Often, these groups reach those who are traditionally left behind. They are staffed largely by volunteers, who work hard to survive in an unnecessarily harsh regulatory environment.

[Wera Hobhouse]

Our outdated energy market rules mean that the groups must sell their power to large utilities, which sell it on to customers. That makes it impossible for community energy to scale up. The market structure does not recognise and incentivise the efficiencies and savings that community energy's distributed generation creates by enabling power to be consumed closer to where it is physically generated.

The Government say that there is no problem. In answer to a parliamentary written question on 1 March, they said:

"The right to local energy supply already exists under the Electricity Act 1989. One of Ofgem's key strategic priorities is increasing flexibility across the electricity system to support the delivery of net zero and ensuring that consumers benefit from these innovative changes."

That misses the point: the fact that the right exists does not mean that it is practically possible. In answer to a written question on 2 November 2020, the former Minister of State, who is now Secretary of State, said:

"Ofgem can award supply licences that are restricted to a geographical area and has just consulted on how to use this facility more effectively to bring forward innovation. Ofgem's Licence Lite regime also aims to reduce the cost and complexity of entering and operating in the market for suppliers."

Clearly, neither has been able to achieve the potential of at least 3,000 MW of community energy generation that was identified in the 2014 Government report.

The intention behind Licence Lite was commendable, but it has not delivered what was intended. Its key flaw is the need for local renewable generators to partner with a willing licensed energy utility. None of the existing community energy groups in the UK is licensed to sell its electricity directly to local customers. That is why community energy has hardly grown for more than a decade when it should have been multiplying many times over. The flexibilities and allowances for local supply that Ministers referred to have not delivered. As the call for evidence for the Environmental Audit Committee's recently launched community energy inquiry put it so well,

"the ability of communities to sell the energy produced locally is limited in the UK's centralised regulatory system, meaning that projects often have to sell energy directly to the grid, then buy it back at additional cost."

The solution is a right to local supply that enables community energy schemes to sell their power directly to local customers. That would make it viable to expand existing schemes and to construct many new ones. The Local Electricity Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Waveney in the last Session would do that. Think of it—a surge in clean energy and a surge in public buy-in for climate solutions, because people would see the local economic benefits happening in their own communities.

The Government have said they want to enable community energy. They have agreed in principle with the need for a right to local supply, but they have not agreed to look at the detail of how the true potential of community energy could be unleashed and why there are persistent barriers. Words must now become actions. I therefore ask the Minister to engage with me and other lead Members supporting this reform, and the campaigners and experts behind it. Together, we can get the detail right and implement it quickly and effectively.

The need to get to net zero is becoming more and more urgent. We will not get there without the consent and active engagement of the people who have to pay for it, host any infrastructure and change their habits. Community energy could make a large contribution, not only to produce the clean power we need but to bring people with us in our ambition to get to net zero before it is too late.

1.40 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing and leading this debate and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on his supporting and campaigning work.

On 10 June last year, I introduced the Local Electricity Bill. Unfortunately, due to the pressures on the Parliamentary timetable, the Bill made no further progress. What it did do was vividly illustrate that there is an enormous appetite from all corners of our four nations for an upsurge in community energy projects.

While credit should go to the campaigning work of Power for People, it is abundantly clear that local councils, cities, towns and villages want to play their part in the transition to net zero. This is not a straightforward journey, and we need to use all the tools in the box to ensure that we reach our destination on time and, hopefully, after a smooth ride. This means removing those regulatory barriers that currently prevent community energy from playing its full role.

The main obstacle prohibiting local communities from getting involved is that the current supply licensing regime is highly complicated, national in scope and has onerous credit requirements. It is a one-size-fits-all approach, heavily skewed in favour of the status quo. There is an exemptions regime for supply of less of 5 MW and a Licence Lite supplier licence, but these are not fit for modern purpose.

There have been recent reviews by both Ofgem and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy into the current energy supply licensing arrangements, and there is an acknowledgment that the current regime is opaque and difficult to interpret. However, as yet there is no route map setting out the path to reform. The Government now need to commit to that regulatory reform, reaffirm support for community energy and remove those values. They should start by answering a number of questions, which I will list.

First, what has happened to follow up on Ofgem's derogation policy review and other calls for evidence on aspects of the energy supply market? Does Ofgem intend to progress its consideration of a local licence?

Secondly, as indicated in the energy White Paper, does BEIS intend to ask Ofgem to provide latitude in the supply licensing regime for local suppliers?

Thirdly, as part of its ongoing review of the licensing derogation review, will BEIS consider widening the exemptions regime to enable local supply?

Fourthly, when is Ofgem planning to issue its review of the smart export guarantee and come to a conclusion on potential enhancements to provide a more certain route to market for community providers?

Fifthly and finally, are the Government proposing to consult more generally on community energy and local supply in advance of the net zero strategy?

This is a highly technical and complicated subject. I shall be writing to the Government and asking those questions. It would be easy to put this whole matter into the “too difficult to do” tray, but that would be a dereliction of duty. We would be letting down those thousands of communities who want to play their part and get involved. The Government, parliamentarians and Ofgem need to work together to get over those barriers. I hope that the Minister will indicate a willingness to do so.

1.45 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as always, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on their work on this matter and on securing the debate this afternoon. They have laid out the huge potential of enabling greater community energy across these islands. The hon. Member for Waveney went into some detail on some of the mechanisms that we believe can realise that potential—namely, a right to local supply.

In advance of this afternoon’s debate, I have been contacted by supportive Members from all political parties who were unfortunately unable to attend. They include the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), the hon. Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), for North Down (Stephen Farry), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the hon. Members for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome). This is an issue that enjoys considerable cross-party support.

I was delighted to be one of a cross-party group of some 250 Members who supported the Local Electricity Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Waveney in the previous Session. That Bill proposed a mechanism to implement a right to local supply. As the hon. Member for Waveney mentioned in his remarks, that proposal has quite an impressive and broad coalition of support behind it. There is a national campaign co-ordinated by Power for People, which is a coalition of 76 national non-governmental organisations, charities and trade associations, and 70 local councils. Impressively, three of the six distribution network operators—the companies that own and run the UK’s regional energy grids—publicly support the campaign and back calls for a right to local supply as enunciated in that Bill.

It is worth reiterating that a right to local supply was specifically recommended by the Environmental Audit Committee in its welcome and thorough investigation into how to enable more community energy generation. The possible benefits, although they may sound too

good to be true, are very real. The “Community Energy State of the Sector 2021” report states that the existing community energy groups operating across these islands reduced energy bills by £2.9 million last year and created £3.1 million-worth of community benefit expenditure. We should just imagine what those figures could be if community energy was fully enabled and grew from its current 319 MW to more than 3,000 MW.

In Wales, we have the highest number of community energy organisations per head of population relative to the rest of these islands, but if a right to local supply was established, even more people and communities could become electricity customers of local enterprises—communities such as Cardigan and Ceredigion, which has a budding local energy club and ample local generation of renewable energy, but where local demand is not currently being catered for by local supply. A right to local supply would help connect consumers with locally generated electricity and the knock-on effect would be seen in communities across these islands.

This measure is not just about addressing the climate crisis, as important as that is. It is also about supporting more local skilled jobs, and it is about cheaper energy bills. It is very much a win-win-win. It can be done. While we welcome the Government’s support of the principle, we believe that, if we work together with the Minister and the Department, we can get the detail right and enact a local electricity Bill that enshrines the right to local supply. I hope the Minister will be open to such a meeting.

1.49 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), my near neighbour in Wales and a doughty champion of community energy.

My own interest in community energy originates from growing up at Lake Vyrnwy, where my father ran a hotel, a few miles south of my constituency of Clwyd South, where the mighty Vyrnwy masonry dam, the largest in Europe when it was completed in 1890, contains a hydroelectric unit that used to supply the surrounding valley with electricity until it moved on to the mains in 1960. I strongly believe that we need to return to that model of community energy. Therefore, in Clwyd South, I have been championing the hydroelectric potential of the River Dee in Llangollen with town councillor Stuart Davies. I warmly welcome the recent decision by members of the town council to set up a task and finish group to investigate the feasibility of using the site of decommissioned hydro-units in the town.

Further up the River Dee in my constituency, in Corwen, is the perfect example of a community energy project—the Corwen community hydro scheme. People came together as a community to build a 55 kW high head hydro scheme in the town. It is 100% owned and run by the community, which raised more than £300,000 for the construction with a share offer five years ago, of which 50% was bought by people in and around Corwen. The success of that first project has led to a second larger project in Bonwm, near Corwen, where work is expected to start this autumn on building a 100 kW hydro scheme, which will be completed ahead of the end of the feed-in tariffs in July 2022.

[Simon Baynes]

The Corwen projects have benefited significantly from the support of the local landowner, Lord Newborough, whose Rhug Estate has put sustainability firmly at the heart of its business mission, particularly through its own renewable heat and power generation. That has led to the welcome announcement this week that Rhug has won a net zero award from the North Wales Mersey Dee Business Council.

The Local Electricity Bill lies at the heart of this debate, and I, like many other Members, have put its key points to the UK Government. I know that the Minister and the other BEIS Ministers are keen to take as constructive an approach as possible on what I appreciate is a highly complex issue. While we debate these matters, the Corwen community hydro scheme is actually putting into practice the aims set by the Local Electricity Bill—namely by creating a market between the local generators and the local householders directly. It is doing that by using its electricity to benefit homes in Corwen via the model developed and run by Energy Local, the community interest company that is transforming the electricity market for communities with small-scale renewable generators, which was referenced in the Government's energy White Paper. The Energy Local model enables consumers to benefit from cheaper electricity if they use power when Corwen's hydro is generating. The participants pay only 7.5p per kWh, compared with the average market price of 11p to 15p. Of course, that is facilitated by the arrival of smart meters and Energy Local clubs.

I strongly support community energy schemes, as proposed by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion. I am proud that Corwen is the second Energy Local scheme in the UK. The first was also in Wales—in Bethesda, in north Wales. I wish every success to similar schemes that are in the pipeline in England and elsewhere in the UK.

1.53 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: It is a great pleasure, as others have said, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate, and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who has been diving into the detail of this, as we have observed over a period of time. I praise his impressive cross-party work, which is very good indeed. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) for his cross-party efforts in this area. The list of Members he read out showed that there is a broad feeling that this should happen. It is an idea whose time has come. It is a modern idea, and it needs to happen.

At the moment—I checked before the debate—the UK is using 35 GW of energy, 38% of which is gas. Being June, there is 18% solar and 6% wind; 8% comes from France and 7% comes from Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands. Surely, when only 250 MW of energy is being produced locally, with the potential of 3 GW, it is time to change. That 3 GW would eclipse the 0.5 GW of coal that is being used this afternoon, according to the energy app.

It is vital that we take this step and move forward. Ofgem, as we know, is a bureaucracy. There is no energy market really in the UK; it is a bureaucracy, and it needs

fixing and tinkering with. That is why local energy is an idea whose time has come. In my constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar, it is presumed that energy is transmitted towards London, given Ofgem's bureaucratic models, and then distributed back from somewhere such as London. There is a distortion of reality because of those presumptions.

Stòras Uibhist, a local energy provider in South Uist, has wind farms that generate about 7 MW, and it is quite easy to see in South Uist what is happening, because of the power station at Lochcarnan. In Lochcarnan, it is possible to see when energy is being imported and exported. When energy is being produced in Uist, it is being used in Uist in the main. Some of it is exported, but very little energy is imported, which is why we need to have some sort of change to reflect that. We cannot have the most expensive distribution and transmission charges, when the reality is that we are not transmitting or even receiving energy.

The Scottish Government are trying to do something—they say it will be in the next Parliament—about working with Scottish islands to demonstrate the idea of carbon neutrality within islands. It is possibly already there within Uist and other islands, but it works well in the demonstration at Lochcarnan power station. I hope that this moves forward in the way that has been suggested cross-party. As our islands are 40% closer to the Arctic circle than London is, we have very long days at the moment—17 hours and 46 minutes. Some people in London might be surprised that solar power can be used. The former First Minister Alex Salmond said we are sitting on the “Saudi Arabia of renewables”. Unfortunately with wind, that is particularly true when it comes to ferries and travel, but when it comes to energy, we have huge potential. It is something that we can use, so I would like to see the efforts coming forward.

I would like to see the UK Government accept the reality. They have power over this issue at the moment, and they really should listen to the cross-party voices—from the Conservatives, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and elsewhere—and make the change to enable the potentially huge increase. As I said, 35 GW of energy are being used this afternoon. Three of those gigawatts—10%—could be coming from local energy production, which would also be a stimulus economically for many local communities. With that I will stop, because I do not want to take too much time and I know a lot of Members want to come in.

1.57 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate on an issue that could fundamentally change not just the electricity market, but people's ability to access cheap, sustainable and locally produced energy across the whole of the UK.

I was really pleased to be able to support my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) in his efforts to enact the Local Electricity Bill in the last Session. To my very inexperienced eye, the Bill appeared to be a win-win. It drove the creation of new local electricity markets, lowered prices for consumers and created a path for households and businesses to access renewable and sustainable energy in a new way. A 2014 Department of Energy and Climate Change report on

community renewable energy suggested that by last year—2020—3,000 MW of generating capacity could have been in place. Instead, we generate around 278 MW from community renewable energy.

The scale of the opportunity here is absolutely vast, and we need only look across to our neighbours in Europe to see the prize on offer. In Germany, there are over 1,000 community-based supply companies producing renewable energy. In that country, the four large utilities control only 40% of the market, which drives real consumer choice and consumer benefit. Unleashing community energy would enable local economic resilience in communities across the UK. Bypassing the large utilities would allow them to keep significant value and economic returns within their own economies. It would create skilled local jobs, more viable local businesses and stronger local bonds. I would argue that the necessary reforms are not just about cheaper electricity bills; they are about helping us get to net zero too. To be honest, I see them as a form of levelling up in action.

Last year, I was pleased to visit Hobkin Ground Farm in the Lickle valley in my constituency. Megan and Mark want to run a low-impact, sustainable farm, leaving as little mark on the environment as possible in their farming. In pursuit of that, they have installed a hydro generator. They power their own farm and a couple of cottages, largely removing themselves from the electricity grid. They would like to go further, but the cost of connection is prohibitive for them. Across the valley from them in Broughton-in-Furness is another project, which aims to bring together local residents in a co-operative to buy renewable electricity from a hydro plant at Logan Gill, allowing them to benefit from cleaner air and cheaper energy. Potentially 400 customers could benefit, saving about 20% off their electricity bills.

The model is great, and I praise local residents Jennifer Sanderson, Rob Dunphy and others, Cumbria Action for Sustainability, and Ellergreen Hydro for working together to deliver it. However, for the project to succeed, it is reliant on the benevolence of Octopus Energy, a nationally licensed and huge utility company, to turn the taps and get them going. If we enable the right to local supply, that ceases to be a problem.

Reforming market rules so that local and regional-sized renewable energy generators could sell their electricity direct to local customers would mean that my constituents in Broughton would no longer be reliant on having to choose from a few large national suppliers. They could go local and go sustainable. If we can achieve that, the effect will be to take community energy schemes, such as that one, from being a smattering of projects across the country to thousands. They currently generate only around 0.5% of the UK's electricity, but let us think of the scale we could generate. With a few small changes, a thousand flowers could bloom. That will happen only if local community-owned interests are given a route to market.

I very much hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will see the opportunity in community energy to be a tool in levelling up our local communities. I look forward to hearing her response.

2.1 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate.

The question of energy cannot be separated from the survival of our planet. That is why today's discussion is so vital and why I welcome the broad cross-party support for community energy and the Local Electricity Bill. Energy production and consumption both lie at the heart of our battle to combat climate change. To win the battle we need to meet the targets we have set for cutting carbon emissions. The UK Government have now set in law a cut in emissions of 78% by 2035, bringing us more than three quarters of the way to net zero by 2050. To help us meet the target we need to put the Local Electricity Bill back on the agenda.

The Bill could establish a vital local supply that would give the energy market regulator, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, the legal duty of establishing new market rules that could help community energy growth. The cost of setting up organisations that sell locally generated renewable energy to local people, together with their running costs, should be proportionate to the size of the business. That reform would make local projects financially viable, unleashing the huge potential of community renewable energy. This has been shown to work in other countries. In Germany, there are 1,000 such supply companies, most of which are local community-owned suppliers, and almost all provide renewable energy.

In the UK, the slow but steady growth of the community energy sector has brought tangible results, with local organisations now serving more than 358,000 people. But further growth is blocked because of cost. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research stated that the financial, technical and operational challenges involved in setting up a licensed energy supply company mean that the initial costs exceed £1 million. Most community energy companies cannot afford that. Yet providing community energy organisations with the right financial and legislative support could result in a huge expansion of renewable electricity generation.

The Community Energy 2030 Vision estimates that with such support the growth of the community sector could power more than 2 million homes, create up to 9,000 well-paid and highly skilled jobs, shave millions off the cost of domestic bills, and contribute almost £2 billion to the economy every year. We need to unleash that potential. The Committee on Climate Change states that the UK is way off track to reach its greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets. Renewable energy generation currently accounts for only 11% of all UK energy use. That must change. The extension of community energy production can help us move faster to our goals.

I want to end by supporting the recommendations of the April 2021 Environmental Audit Committee, which outlined a positive way forward: remove the barriers to the development of community energy by passing the Local Electricity Bill into law; support the vital role that community energy plays in achieving net zero carbon emissions; and give practical support to the community organisations that help us achieve our targets.

As COP26 moves ever closer, let us ensure that the UK catches up with our neighbours, such as Germany. Let us help community energy to generate electricity for our children and grandchildren. If we miss our target, we are putting those future generations at grave risk of a climate breakdown.

2.5 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate, and I also recognise the work of the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Ceredigion (Ben Lake); indeed, the hon. Member for Ceredigion allowed a number of interventions during his recent Adjournment debate on this subject.

We know that we face a global climate crisis, which will require significant shifts in how we go about our day-to-day lives. Supporting such changes clearly requires Government direction and support, and many communities recognise the importance of proactively transitioning to green living. I am proud to have examples of that in my constituency of North East Fife.

For instance, Sustainable Cupar is a charity that was set up 10 years ago to focus on the protection of the local environment and on supporting local residents in transitioning to a low-carbon, sustainable and ethical future. Since its formation, it has engaged with the local council and the Scottish Government on programmes for fewer road emissions, better public transport and walking routes, and the building of more sustainable homes, as well as exploring issues around direct heat schemes.

Also in my constituency is the University of Saint Andrews, which is North East Fife's largest employer. The university is led in this regard by its environmental sustainability board, which is chaired by Professor Sir Ian Boyd, previously chief scientific adviser to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and now the professor of biology at the university. The university is taking on the net zero challenge, alongside community organisations and businesses, and I attended the first meeting of the outreach group back in May.

Under complementary environmental, sustainability and carbon management plans, the scope of the group's approach encompasses procurement activities and the travel of international students coming to the university to study. The aim is to reach net zero by 2035. A new biomass plant and a potential onshore wind farm development will deliver energy to meet the university's needs and potentially those of the wider community, too.

Communities are clearly vital in the move to net zero; they are best placed to know what changes work best for them. Where communities are ahead of the Government's policies, which we are hearing today, they should be enabled to act, not blocked from acting.

I look to the success of wind power energy in Denmark and Germany, and I see systems that empower such citizen engagement. It is achieved through the formation of wind guilds in Denmark, which are forms of partnerships or co-operatives that own or part-own wind farms. Indeed, so ingrained is this idea of citizen ownership that there is now a law in Denmark requiring that the local population must be afforded the ability to purchase up to 20% of the value of any new wind installation.

Although no system is without faults, we see that countries such as Germany and Denmark lead the way on clean energy through community energy programmes, while the UK, which arguably was initially an early-market entrant in relation to wind, is sadly being left behind.

We do not have to be left behind. Just this week, I visited Orkney with the Scottish Affairs Committee, as part of our inquiry into renewable energy in Scotland. Orkney has long been home to renewable energy and it is now expanding its scope into marine renewables. It recently became the home of the European Marine Energy Centre's orbital tidal turbine, a prototype that is the world's most powerful marine turbine.

Altogether, Orkney produces 120% of its own energy needs, and again community engagement and collaboration with local authorities are vital. Orkney Islands Council's Responsive Flexibility, or ReFLEX, project is a £28.5 million scheme, aiming to create an integrated energy system for the islands, with the communities in those islands at its heart.

Those developments should be applauded, but on my trip to Orkney we spoke to a local community news outlet that highlighted some of the issues around fuel poverty on the islands. As other Members have already said, it is clear that issues such as transmission charges need to be addressed and that all Governments need to provide a focus on ensuring that such innovative energy sources are used to heat energy-efficient homes. Communities must be put front and centre in the shift to clean energy, and given a stake in this change.

The Government say they are committed to reaching net zero, in order to avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis. This is not the time to be stuck in the old ways of doing things; those ways will not work now. We must embrace new ways of working with and for our communities without delay, and community energy is part of that process.

2.9 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing the debate, and all those who have spoken on this subject not just this afternoon, but on other occasions.

I join the consensus that locally generated energy has huge, partly technical, advantages. We can, if we make use of this method, increase the volume of energy generated and, more importantly, the volume of sustainable and renewable energy generated. If energy has to travel less far from where it is generated to where it is consumed, we lose less in transit, and of course, we know from the examples of community energy that we can already see, that it brings huge broader decarbonisation benefits and educational advantages, too, so there is technically very much to commend it. There are also psychological advantages. As others have said, if we enhance our capacity to generate energy locally, we help people to participate in the combating of climate change, and we make that effort local, rather than distant from them.

Of course, as has already been observed, we have had the right to local energy suppliers for about 20 years, but that is a distinctly theoretical right at the moment. The broader issue that we face is how we go about realising the current unrealised potential of locally generated energy. To do that, we have to address the obstacles. As others have already observed, the entry costs for local energy enterprises are far too high, and their inability to sell directly to local customers is the fundamental problem, which was addressed by the Local Electricity Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous)

so ably introduced in the previous Session. I would not claim—nor, I suspect, would he—that the Bill was perfect, but its fundamental purposes and objects are worth pursuing. I hope that this afternoon, the Government will accept that they will do exactly that.

There is so much growing local enthusiasm to assist the Government in delivering their climate goals. Everybody wants to help, and this is a practical way of doing so. I can think of examples in my constituency, such as the Napton Environmental Action Team, or the Harbury Energy Initiative, which has been in receipt of Government financial assistance in environmental pursuits and is keen to do more. The Government need to help them to help the Government deliver our collective climate goals. The Government can look at tax incentives and at the role of local authorities, and they should look at ways of ensuring access to the cable network at a fair price, but if we cannot ensure that local enterprises producing locally generated energy can sell their product locally, we will still have a fundamental obstacle to the way that we want to deliver locally generated energy.

As I understand it, the Government will produce their net zero strategy refresh this year. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will say that as part of that exercise, the Government will look carefully at how they can deliver the fundamental objects of the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend for Waveney, and make sure that we can assist others to assist us in delivering those climate objectives on time.

2.13 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab) [V]: It is, as usual, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Members who have already spoken.

Whenever there is a debate on community energy, I have the great pleasure of speaking on behalf of some of the innovative and hardworking community energy groups that operate here in Bristol North West. On that note, I ought to declare my interests: I am a founding member of the Bristol Energy Cooperative, and my wife works for the Association for Decentralised Energy.

Any colleagues who drive through my constituency—most probably over the M5 at the mouth of the River Avon—will see that we have a scattering of onshore wind turbines. Soon, we will have one more, and it is primarily that wind turbine that I will talk about. Ambition Lawrence Weston is a community group that works with residents in Lawrence Weston, the area of my constituency where I grew up, to create the best possible community for local people. They have developed and implemented a local neighbourhood plan, they are building affordable sustainable homes for local residents, and they are now investing in community energy projects, too.

Their latest project—the wind turbine—is community-owned and will be built on land owned by Bristol City Council in the industrial estate adjacent to Lawrence Weston. Standing 150 metres tall, it is estimated that this one turbine alone will generate enough low-carbon energy to power 3,500 homes, reducing carbon dioxide emissions associated with the generation of that power by nearly 2,000 tonnes each year.

Lawrence Weston has only 3,200 homes in the area, with many homes of families on lower incomes. Although it is clear that not every home in Lawrence Weston can be powered by only one intermittent source of power, it

is a great shame that local residents cannot benefit from the lower energy costs associated with the low-carbon energy that is generated locally by their local community energy group, especially when those residents know that any surpluses will be reinvested into their local community.

We have already heard today how difficult the process is. It has taken years of hard work to even get to this stage. Ambition Lawrence Weston did not just have to secure the site from the council, it had to bid for financial support from the council, as well as Bristol and Bath Regional Capital and the West of England Combined Authority—funding of £500,000 from the combined authority came from the European regional development fund. That was in addition to other grants required to fund all the detailed groundwork needed in order to get planning permission and, in this case, sign-off and approval from the Secretary of State. That has all been achieved, after years of hard work.

The Minister will know that, as part of our net zero target and the pathways to net zero set out by the Climate Change Committee, we need to double the size of our electricity system. As with heat, we are increasingly talking about the right technology in the right place, with some areas better suited to heat networks or hydrogen pumps more generally. The same is true with electricity. With a more flexible distribution network comes the opportunity for more decentralised, local sources of power; it is a great opportunity for community energy to fulfil that need.

In addition to answering the questions that colleagues have asked already, will the Minister set out how she thinks community energy will play a role in doubling the size of the power sector? Will she also confirm that the shared prosperity fund will replace the funding sources previously available for community energy groups made available through the European regional development fund?

2.17 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank hon. Members for bringing this debate to the Chamber. My nearby colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), has been a real champion for this cause.

There is no doubt that we are world leaders in decarbonising. Our target to go further and faster by cutting carbon emissions by 78% by 2035 is now enshrined in law. To get to that target, we all have to play a part. That is why I support enabling community energy. Giving powers to local communities to play their role is vital for many reasons—we have already heard some of them.

At the top level, we want total buy-in from the community, not just in contributing to decarbonising with innovative and imaginative schemes such as those we have heard about, but also so local communities can create their own income streams by selling green power to the grid. The role is even bigger than that, because I wonder what part they can play in helping to fill the energy gap. Local sourcing and generation can play a significant role—its potential is vast.

I sit on the Environmental Audit Select Committee. Our technological innovations and climate change inquiry has examined the subject, and our report clearly suggests that, with greater public engagement on net zero, more financing, local authority engagement and a reduction of regulatory barriers, community energy has enormous potential for real growth. That enormous potential gives us the opportunity to fill the energy gap.

[*Duncan Baker*]

If we think about the amount of power we will need for the grid to charge electric vehicles in future, for instance, it will be phenomenal. That is why we are already aiming to produce 40 GW of wind power by 2030. The more community energy projects there are, the more we can meet that demand and help stabilise peaks in demand.

My constituents in North Norfolk have local supply constraints: we are rural, fuel poverty is a serious issue, and there are significant problems with a lack of connection to mains gas. On top of that, my community also bears the serious issue that it has the largest concentration of offshore windfarms, whose cable corridors are being chased through the countryside, and from which we have little economic benefit.

If Germany can get community energy schemes to work and the complexity of market obstacles can be overcome, why can we not do that here? The benefits of local employment, greater awareness and a drive to give licensing power to local authorities so that local communities can play their role will all add to the notion that we can continue to drive the cost of production of power down and continue to hit our net zero targets. It is really heartening to see cross-party support for this. I hope the Government can really begin to embrace the situation and bring community energy to the fore.

2.20 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate and the MPs who have led on it.

Hon. Members will be aware that I supported the Local Electricity Bill in the previous Session. I strongly believe in giving power to the people by allowing local communities to have much greater control over the energy that brings them to life.

In March 2019, Bedford Borough Council declared a climate emergency, and it has pledged to become carbon neutral by 2030. I know that many other local authorities have done so too. It has committed:

“To reduce its own carbon emissions by implementing projects and policies and encourage the residents and businesses of the Borough to reduce their carbon emissions so Bedford Borough is seen as the place to grow and has a good quality local Environment.”

It asked me to speak in this debate, as did a number of my constituents, because they recognise that community energy and participation are key to achieving those goals. I agree.

Many of my constituents are deeply concerned about climate change. They want to make a difference, despite how overwhelming the task feels. They can make a difference, however big or small, with initiatives such as community energy projects. The Government must do all they can to support and encourage such projects.

Bedford Borough Council was awarded more than £1.8 million from the South East Midlands local enterprise partnership's Getting Building Fund last year, enabling plans for the all-new Bedford Green Technology and Innovation Park to become a reality. A former landfill site is being transformed into a green energy innovation park, and work is now under way at Elstow in Bedfordshire. Work to cap the closed 30-hectare site with clay began

last year, and the site is soon set to become home to more than 1,800 solar panels, which will generate and supply on-site buildings and local businesses with low-carbon, clean energy.

Plans are also progressing to use the site as an education and training centre. Early support has been pledged by the University of Bedfordshire, Cranfield University and local colleges. It is really exciting to see a former landfill site being transformed into such an innovative energy park, which will provide low-carbon clean energy and green jobs for people and businesses in Bedfordshire. I congratulate everyone who made the project a reality. However, there is so much more that could and should be done. There is a huge swell of support from the public, who are desperate to get involved at a local level with green initiatives. They want a green recovery from the pandemic, not business as usual.

There is a huge consensus of support for initiatives such as solar panels in schools. What better way to show the generation that is most going to have to deal with the consequences of the rampant abuse of fossil fuels that we mean business than to have their schools run on green energy? Although the Government talk the talk on such initiatives, they are not walking the walk. We need urgent and early action, not words.

2.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, Sir David, as always. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on setting the scene and giving us all the opportunity to participate in the debate, and thank her and the hon. Members for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for initiating it. In particular, I want to mention the hon. Member for Ceredigion, whose Adjournment debate had the best turn-out for such a debate that I can recall and saw consensus of support for what he was saying that night. It is good to have the chance to reiterate and underline those points in Westminster Hall today.

I am pleased to say that I added my support for the Local Electricity Bill. Although it does not specifically apply to electricity services in Northern Ireland, I am always interested to learn more on such issues—I believe we should do so—to analyse whether we can avail ourselves of similar strategies. That is what I wish to do in Northern Ireland. We have only two examples of such schemes in Northern Ireland; I wish we had more. There is a challenge for us to try to achieve that.

Community energy paves the way for wider decarbonisation goals and drastic improvements in localised renewable energy, making electricity services more sustainable in our communities. We should be trying to grasp the principle of what we are trying to achieve.

The pandemic had a significant impact on Government funding for community electricity programmes. The United Kingdom has witnessed the emergence of 424 community energy organisations, with England having 290, Scotland 72 and Wales 60, whereas in Northern Ireland we are in the very poor position of having only two. It is not that we do not want to, just that the opportunities have not been there.

The Local Electricity Bill seeks to change the Electricity Act 1989 in England, so that Ofgem is permitted to grant local electricity supply licences to local generators that are not designated in existing legislation. With five local

energy hubs in England, it is clear that they are leading the pack, as they are in football. Reports show that as of 2020, community energy contributed 278 MW of renewable energy. If we take it to what we can do, there is hope that by 2030 2.2 million homes will save over 2 million tonnes of carbon emissions every year. The challenge is there. I believe that the Government are committed to that, and all the regions of the UK should try their best to achieve it.

Let me make a quick comment about Northern Ireland. Communities across the United Kingdom are starting to recognise the increasing popularity of localised energy organisations, including in Northern Ireland, despite there only being two electricity corporations there, and in Strangford in particular. The first, Northern Ireland Community Energy, was the first solar community-owned energy co-operative in Northern Ireland. To finance its recent innovations, £150,000 was raised and this was the first time Northern Ireland was able to buy into a community energy benefit society. Its continuing aim is to increase awareness of community electrical shares in Northern Ireland. The second, Strangford Lough tidal turbine, is the world's first commercial-scale tidal energy project. I am very pleased to say that it is in my home constituency. I have visited the site and seen what it can do, and the possibilities, and I am pleased to see that this wonderful landmark can be used to promote the use of sustainable energy.

I believe we have an opportunity, given that in 2020 358,000 people were engaged with energy and climate change. I would like to think these numbers will be on the increase. I welcome the content of the Local Electricity Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Waveney. I hope that it progresses as it has real potential to succeed. It encourages energy organisations to engage with local authorities as opposed to largely populated and financed firms. The debate is about local communities, and I certainly encourage that.

We must ensure that the funding for these projects is allocated. I call on the Minister and all involved to engage with Members in the Chamber today, along with the members of the community energy organisations. We can do better, and I believe we must.

2.28 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure, Sir David, to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on not only their efforts to secure this debate but their ongoing championing of the issue of reforming the energy market to support community production and distribution. They have consistently demonstrated, and have done so again today, the wide cross-party and cross-country support—I think every nation of these islands has been represented in the debate today, and every party, more or less—

Jim Shannon: Better together.

Patrick Grady: Some might say that. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) might have slightly different views. This is all about devolving and empowering local communities, so I suppose it depends on what level we want to devolve it down to—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend is very sorry that he cannot intervene, but we can see him on the screen.

One of my local communities, which I am sure would quite happily be an independent country if someone would let it, is in Partick, in the west end of Glasgow. It is very supportive of the idea of the community council there; it backed a related Bill in the last Session and wants to see it come back again. Indeed, the Scottish National party as a whole support that; our usual spokesperson on these matters, my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), sends his apologies for not being here today, but we can all be assured of his ongoing support, too.

Very briefly, in order to leave time for the Minister to respond to the debate, I will look at the importance of the principle and the concept of community energy, and at some of the experience that we have had in Scotland. I also have a few questions for the Minister.

One of the best descriptions of the concept of community energy that I have come across came from the Glasgow Community Energy co-operative. Its share offer successfully completed on 18 June; it had over 170 applications and raised £30,000 of financing, which is helping to put solar panels on the roofs of a number of schools in the city. It has said:

“For us ‘community energy’ has a double meaning. Glasgow Community Energy aims to connect and empower local people through community-ownership and democratic involvement in our renewable energy co-operative, as well as by inspiring and sustaining community activism through our Community Benefit Fund.”

So, for the Glasgow Community Energy co-operative, community energy is about not just providing energy for the community but harnessing the energy of the community—that galvanising effect, that psychological effect if you like, which the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) referred to.

Of course, behind that are the long-standing pressures for reform of the electricity market, or the electricity bureaucracy as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar said. There is a need for energy production and supply to be reformed, particularly in the face of rapid climate change. The need to get to net zero, as we heard right at the start of the debate from the hon. Member for Bath, requires low-carbon production and transmission. In the year of COP—the year when the UK is supposed to show global leadership—this is an incredibly important opportunity.

Community energy is also important for other reasons, including for energy security, so that we are not dependent on imported gas or electricity, or any other form of energy from overseas. Increased domestic energy production is safer and better for everyone. It is also important to tackle fuel poverty, which is a growing problem. Community energy also relates to the concept of localism, ownership and democratic control. We heard from a number of the Conservative Members that this process could be seen as part of what is supposed to be the Government's levelling-up agenda—I think the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) said that, and he was quite right to do so. We also heard about international examples; Germany and Denmark were referred to by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). All of that speaks to the economic benefit that can be gained by local energy production companies. Employment opportunities also come with community energy, in installation, management, maintenance and so on. It is a win-win situation.

[Patrick Grady]

The Scottish Government fully back and fully reflect all of those positions, particularly the importance of decarbonising the entire energy system. Their most recent local energy strategy was published in January 2021 and says that the Scottish Government

“recognises that local energy cannot be delivered in isolation. It is not a standalone policy, but one that integrates and aligns with other key policies, including energy efficiency, eradicating fuel poverty, heat decarbonisation, local heat and energy efficiency strategies, and consumer protection. It will develop alongside and within a vibrant national energy network.”

The Scottish Government had a target of 500 MW of community and locally owned energy by 2020; that amount has been exceeded, so now we intend to increase the target to 1 GW for 2020 and 2 GW for 2030. Progress towards these targets has been positive, but changes to some of the UK Government’s subsidies, not least the closure of the feed-in tariff scheme, has undermined that progress. However, we continue to encourage shared ownership models as a means of increasing community-led involvement in commercial projects.

My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar will be very happy to hear—indeed, I am sure he already knows—that the Scottish Government are particularly committed to helping the communities on our islands to become carbon-neutral. Indeed, some of the pioneering work in this area has been done on the Isle of Gigha, with its early adoption of wind power. The SNP manifesto for the recent Scottish election said quite clearly:

“We support Carbon Neutral Islands which would be in the vanguard of reaching net zero emissions targets by 2045. This will include pilots for some islands to run on 100% renewable energy, to create circular economies tackling and processing waste, and exploring more sustainable transport options. We will work with at least 3 islands over this Parliament to enable them to become fully carbon neutral by 2040.”

My hon. Friend has the opportunity to lobby for many of the islands he represents in his archipelago to take part in that pilot.

That brings us to the Government. The short question coming from all hon. Members is, why not? What is the harm? I thought the Tory Government were supposed to believe in the free market, entrepreneurship and the flourishing of local enterprise, so why do they seem to be in hock to the big players? Why are they in hock to the traditional companies, who perhaps have the most to lose?

The simple ask coming from Members today is to let the Local Electricity Bill progress. It has wide cross-party support and a wide range of civil society support, from the Churches through to different manufacturers of the technology that would be used, and more. The Bill provides a very simple framework that would overcome existing barriers to entry into the market.

There are other things the Government could be doing as well. They could look at a replacement for the feed-in tariff that was so important in bringing so much renewable energy to the market in the first place. They could also help to stimulate demand for better local, greener energy by diverting funding away from damaging new nuclear technologies.

At the end of the day, much of this is about a vision—a vision for a fairer, cleaner, greener, locally led energy future. Unfortunately, that seems to be a vision that the UK Government are currently sorely lacking.

2.36 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I was not going to say that it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir David, because everyone has said that already, so please take it as read—well, I have actually said it now, so it is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon. [Laughter.]

We have had a powerful debate this afternoon, put forward by a number of hon. Members who clearly know what they are talking about and who have a substantial dedication to the idea that we should be able to get a substantial part of our energy by local means—by local people, in local areas, providing for their own energy needs and taking part in those arrangements. I am not particularly precious about who is to organise those local arrangements, be they co-operatives, collections of individuals, community enterprises, local authorities acting in partnership with those bodies or, indeed, a variety of bodies coming together and developing that local energy for local purposes.

The benefits of that are pretty self-evident. Not only is there a completely different stream for developing the renewable and low-carbon energy that we need, but that method of providing for our energy future does wonders for the ownership of that low-carbon energy, in terms of the close relationship that it provides between people consuming energy and providing for their energy at the same time. The notion of community energy really does fulfil one of the central things that the Climate Change Committee has been talking about recently, which is the need for behavioural changes as far as low-carbon living is concerned. Surely, an arrangement whereby people are producing, owning and consuming their own low-carbon energy is, or should be, a prime example of that behavioural change in action as far as our climate change targets are concerned.

However, as hon. Members have said this afternoon, that clear vision has tremendous barriers set in front of it. As has been set out this afternoon, those are manifold, and I could add substantially to that list. In essence, we can say that the barriers are threefold. First, in terms of getting any sort of enterprise going locally, there are tremendous issues with funding and the cost of entering the market. Hon. Members this afternoon have mentioned estimates of about £1 million for getting a local licensed arrangement under way, so it is completely out of the reach of the vast majority of people who want to set up such an enterprise at local level.

Secondly, we have the view taken by Ofgem, and I am afraid the Government, on the nature of electricity, which is that electricity consists of electrons that should travel from John O’Groats to Land’s End and back again, and be taxed and charged as if that is what they had done, when in fact local energy completely overturns that model. Electrons in the case of electricity, or the heat that is produced, are produced locally and consumed just down the road, and the whole loop is closed as far as that local energy is concerned. Yet the arrangements that we have in this country, strengthened by Ofgem’s targeted reviews and various other activities recently, mean that we should be charged as though it were entirely a national endeavour. Indeed, the licensing for local energy makes the same assumption. The Minister might mention moves to put geographically situated licences in place, but in general the licence is assumed to be on a national basis. We saw with some local energy

retail companies that the licences they had to operate were as if they were operating on an entirely national basis.

Then we have the central issue that it is not possible in this country simply to produce electricity and sell it to a next-door neighbour, the person down the road or collectively for the local good. We cannot do that at the moment, and this is where the Local Electricity Bill, mentioned by various hon. Members, comes to the fore. I had concerns about the Bill's previous iteration—about the problem that might arise within the arrangements in it for unleashing high-carbon energy into a local environment, rather than the low-carbon energy that we need to produce. So I would not like to see any local energy Bill enable local diesel reciprocating engines to come forward as a local energy supply when what we want is to decarbonise our electricity supply. I am delighted to see that the promoters of the Bill have now put a carbon intensity clause into it, which resolves that problem.

We now have in front of us a Bill that really could cut through the problem of how local energy can be produced, generated, transmitted and consumed locally. It is a Bill that every hon. Member with an interest in this area ought to fully support. Having said that, it really should not be promoted by a group of people hoping to get some traction in Parliament. It has not got support from any of the top 20 people in the private Members' Bills ballot, and is therefore not likely to make progress in Parliament this year. It should be promoted by the Government, who ought to be putting it forward as their plan for community and local energy.

In that context, I continue to be dismayed that there exists no Government community energy strategy. I will not suggest a guessing game for how many mentions of community and local energy were in the recently published energy White Paper, but if anybody were to guess "one", they would be roughly right. There is no community energy strategy, and it does not look like there will be one in the near future, but we have had them before. Historically, this country has had community energy strategies, such as the one in 2014, which projected that by 2020—meaning now—with the removal of the barriers to community and local energy that I have mentioned, and by putting in place other arrangements to support it, we could have had about 3 GW of energy being supplied by local projects. As hon. Members have mentioned, only around a tenth of that is supplied by brave and dedicated local community energy projects, such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), which have defied the odds and pushed forward their projects in hydro, wind and the various other things that are happening locally.

We can no longer be in the position of hoping that some dedicated community activists try to defeat the odds on community and local energy. It needs to be mainstream in Government, with full support and the breaking down of barriers at Government level on the basis of a strategy to really get that community and local energy going for the good of all of us and our communities, as well as for our local energy resources and our low-carbon future overall. I hope the Minister will tell us that the Government intend to start taking that on board and to give local energy the support, promotion and backing that it really needs for the future.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway) [V]:

It is, as always, a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate. I am representing the Department in place of the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth. As I am taking part virtually, I am unable to take any interventions, but I will happily write to people if they have specific questions that are not covered in my remarks.

I reassure the House that this Government absolutely recognise the valuable role that community and local renewable energy projects can and do play in supporting the UK's national net zero targets. I know that all Members will agree that excellent work is already under way in the community energy sector. We have heard about a number of such projects from several hon. Members, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) and for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), and the hon. Members for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain).

We need only look at the recent state of the sector report by Community Energy England, which identified 424 active community energy organisations across the United Kingdom run by 396 volunteers, to note that community energy projects can contribute to achieving net zero, not only by stimulating clean growth, but by acting as catalysts for raising awareness. As the hon. Member for Bath and my hon. Friend for Barrow and Furness pointed out, the promotion of behaviour change and the ability to build communities is a key outcome for us to achieve our 2050 goals.¹

To support community energy projects, the Government currently fund the rural community energy fund. The £10 million scheme supports rural communities in England to develop renewable energy projects, which provide economic and social benefits to the community. Since the fund's launch in 2019, it has received 1,214 inquiries and 188 applications, and it has awarded more than £4.5 million in grants to projects focusing on a variety of technologies, including solar, wind, low-carbon heating and electric vehicle charging.

Many Members spoke about the recent Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into community energy and its several recommendations. As many Members will be aware, the Secretary of State published a response last month—it can be viewed on the EAC website—and stated that we are considering future plans for community energy in the net zero strategy, which will be published later this year. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam mentioned, we will draw on evidence from this country and around the world when assessing the most effective way of meeting our net zero goals.

Many Members also spoke about the Local Electricity Bill and the need to establish a right to local supply, which would allow electricity generators to sell their power directly to local consumers. That Bill sought to establish that right through the creation of a local supply licence and to ensure that the costs and complexities of being a local energy supplier are proportionate to the scale of its operation.

1.[Official Report, 12 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 1MC.]

[Amanda Solloway]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) stated, the Local Electricity Bill was unsuccessful in receiving a Second Reading in the previous Session. While the Government agreed with its broad intentions, we did not support the Bill as a means to enable local energy supply. There is already flexibility in how Ofgem regulates energy supply to allow for local suppliers. Ofgem has powers to award supply licences that are restricted to specified geographies and/or types of premises. However, many Members have observed that, while the right to local supply exists, the costs of becoming a supplier currently act as a barrier to entering the market.

Making more substantial changes to the licensing framework to suit specific business models may create even wider distortion elsewhere in the energy system. Artificially reducing network costs for local energy suppliers, as the Bill appeared to suggest, would be distortive. It would mean higher costs falling on to consumers, with costs increasing as more local suppliers entered the market. It is important that we take a broad view of all consumers when making changes to the energy market, including consumer protection measures, which form an important part of the supply licence.

The Government support the development of new business models to supply energy consumers and to help achieve our net zero ambition. The 2020 energy White Paper committed the Government to review the overall energy retail market regulatory framework. That review will assess the changes that may be needed to ensure that the framework is fit for purpose and allows new business models to come forward. We will engage closely with community energy stakeholders as part of the review, and I welcome the various offers from Members today.

To support the establishment of more local energy schemes, we will also continue to look at a full range of other options to support local involvement in tackling climate change in the net zero strategy, which will set out how we will meet our net zero goals overall. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney raised several additional points, and I look forward to receiving and responding to his letter.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South suggested, I am happy to recognise the role that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland play in taking forward

community energy projects. I was interested to learn from the hon. Member for North East Fife about the community-owned project on Orkney. I note that community energy is a devolved policy, and each nation has different policies and financial support. Indeed, they may use different definitions of community energy. The hon. Member for Bristol North West asked for information on the role of the shared prosperity fund and, again, I will be pleased to write to him in response.

This debate is testament to the fact that there is clear cross-party support and a growing appetite for community energy. I close by reiterating that this Government are supportive of community energy. We absolutely understand that communities are key to the Department's wider efforts to decarbonise the country and create a cleaner, greener future for us all. I thank the hon. Member for Bath once again for securing this important debate.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): I call Wera Hobhouse to sum up. You have until 3 o'clock.

2.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse: I thank everybody for their powerful contributions this afternoon. There is clearly widespread cross-party support for community energy from all corners of the nation and fantastic enthusiasm in our communities. We have put the Local Electricity Bill, which everybody has supported today, at the centre of this debate. While I hear that the Government are in favour of local communities getting involved in projects and local energy supply in principle, it was disappointing not to hear the Government give consent to the principle at the heart of the Bill—the right to local supply.

Sir David, I fear that there will be another Westminster Hall debate, or a bigger debate, because, as someone else said, the Government always say no before they say yes. Let us not give up. Unleashing the potential for community energy and offering support in principle for local supply is where we need to get to in the end. I thank all Members and the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered enabling community energy.

2.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Effect on Retirement Communities

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I am sure that Members are acquainted with the new arrangements, and as we are a small group, I will not read out the whole script that I have here to make you aware of the new arrangements. I will just say this. Those participating virtually must keep their camera on throughout the debate and be present; unfortunately, you are unable to intervene virtually. If Members participating virtually have any technical problems, they should please email westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Could Members participating physically please clean their spaces at the end of the debate? Mr Speaker has also indicated that people should wear masks at all times during the debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on the retirement community housing sector.

It is an absolute pleasure to lead the debate. I asked for it some time ago, and it came through my constituents. Indeed, everything that I say in this House comes through my constituents. That is how we formulate our thoughts when pursuing legislative change and articulating, in Westminster Hall or in the main Chamber, what the issues are. Over the last year, the covid-19 pandemic has been incredibly difficult, particularly for those in retirement communities and residential homes.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place—I look forward to her response—and to see a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), too. We were just talking about languages and accents beforehand, so I hope that I do not talk too fast when expressing myself here in Westminster Hall. I am really pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). She and I have many things in common. One of those is Leicester City football club; we both support Leicester City. When I saw her coming through the door, I said to myself, “I must make a comment about that,” so I will just put it on the record that we have had a good season and we certainly hope that the next one will be equally good.

The reason why we are here today is to talk about the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on retirement communities. I was reading the background information that the House of Commons Library very kindly always puts together. It refers to it as an “Overview of Retirement Communities”. I want to make these comments early on, because the Minister is not responsible for the issues covered by these comments; she is not responsible for housing, for instance. But according to the Associated Retirement Community Operators, there are currently some 70,000 housing-with-care units in the UK. The sector is an emerging one and currently much smaller than the traditional retirement housing sector, which has 440,000 units. The briefing says:

“There is an uneven distribution across market segments, with 66% of UK Retirement Community properties available for affordable...rent.”

The point that I want to make on that is that there are many people in the retirement community who do great work, but there is a lot more that we need to be doing in partnership with those outside the sector as well.

As I said, the last year has been incredibly difficult. It is nobody’s fault. Government responded as circumstances unfolded, and Ministers found themselves having to respond to things that they had never had to deal with in their lives before. The same applied to residential homes and retirement communities. Quite simply, we were not ever in a place to be able to do very much. There was not an experience and there were not other things—examples—that people could refer to.

In a constituency context, there were issues for staff working in residential homes and retirement communities. There were issues to do with families visiting and access to—I will refer to these things later—personal protective equipment material. Early on, I had dealings with staff who worked through the process without PPE material and protection. And sometimes, early on, people were not quite sure what it all really meant. I pay tribute to the people who worked in residential homes and retirement communities, because they put their commitment to the safety of the residents in the homes above their own health.

The covid-19 pandemic has had enormous effects on the everyday lives of almost all individuals since the early days of 2020. Widespread lockdowns and what can only be described as unnatural and oppressive restrictions meant that people became isolated, and even now some remain in that category. The measures affected the world’s economy and limited our access to our families and friends, and especially our access to physical and mental health treatment from our doctors. Life was just completely different from what we were used to. Although the measures may have been necessary to minimise the spread of covid-19, the negative physical, psychological and social effects were evident right through that 15-month period and even today.

As a society, we had to learn to work, socialise and study in a new way by using technology that many of us—and I use myself as the supreme example—were not familiar with. I love meeting people in person, as we all do. There is nothing that elected representatives like more than meeting people, shaking hands and saying hello to them over a cup of coffee, but we could not do that. Meeting people in person suddenly became meeting people on a screen—on a Zoom call, a virtual call, at a distance. There is something—I say this very respectfully—impersonal about that. We did not have the close contact that we had every other day.

That way of carrying out day-to-day activities in the workplace is still in operation. It has become an important way of life, but it is not really what we want. I certainly do not want to do it all the time, and I hope we can come out of it, perhaps in September—we will see how things go. I respect that some welcome that and prefer it, but personally I long for a return to the old-fashioned way of meeting people in person and shaking their hand, or giving people I have not seen in a long time a hug. Those are the things that mean much more to me.

Our elderly population, however, which has been the worst affected by both the virus and the lockdown measures, has seen the fewest benefits from the shift towards these new digital solutions that, in a short time, have become the new way of doing things. Zoom and

[Jim Shannon]

Skype do not and never will replace that all-important hug from a wife, husband, son, daughter or friend. How much we miss those things. We have all read of elderly couples—indeed, there is not one of us here who could not give an example of this—who have been married for decades, and were separated physically because one was kept, and I say this gently, locked inside a care home for endless months, and the other could do little other than wave at them through a window, unable to touch them and provide that vital human touch and physical affection that we as humans simply need to thrive. Is it any wonder that some of those people suffered emotionally, psychologically and ultimately physically? Some of those people probably died of a broken heart—that is a fact. I believe that nothing beats being able to speak and be up close.

From early in the pandemic, studies warned us about an increase in anxiety and depression and how that would affect general society, our youth and our children—especially the clinically vulnerable who were facing extended lockdowns. Every time we thought we were getting rid of it, we suddenly found we were back in it again. I give credit to the Government and the Ministers for all they have done in responding. The vaccine roll-out has been incredibly reassuring and has given us some confidence, but we do not really know what the winter will bring. Even now, we face a slightly uncertain future.

The effects, however, are increased significantly in the elderly population because of the stricter lockdowns, the higher threat of illness to them and their loss of social support. Social support is very important to elderly people, and one thing this pandemic has done is raise awareness of those who are isolated in normal circumstances. I am very fortunate to live on a farm, so I was able to go for a walk every night when I was at home and we were not coming here, but what about people stuck in a small flat or a small home, perhaps without a dog or a cat, who just saw through the window the person who left the stuff at the front door, knocked once, told them it was there and got off site?

I have seen wonderful work by many people in my own constituency who organised food parcels and delivered them to the elderly and vulnerable who could not leave their homes. I was greatly encouraged. It might be my nature, but I always see the positives of things. I see the positives of the good things that people did; I do not dwell on the negatives, which sometimes can distort what has happened.

My office issued several hundred food bank vouchers between April and December 2020. I and my staff on occasion collected bags of groceries from the food bank and delivered them to constituents who were self-isolating because of covid-19 or living alone and without transport. We phoned them up before we arrived, we got out of the car and left the stuff at the front door, got into the car, made sure they collected it, and then we went. Life was very different.

A group of motorcyclists in Northern Ireland formed the Volunteer Bikers Group and organised collection and deliveries of prescription medicines, which was very important for those people who could not leave their homes. That organisation was active in my constituency and across the whole of Northern Ireland. I met the guys at the shop one day—I was in the shop and one of

the boys came over and spoke to me and told me what he was doing. I said, “You don’t mind if we contact you about this?” He said, “Please do, and make it known widely.” We did that. These were volunteers. More often than not they were ex-police or ex-Army, or individuals who had a deep interest in helping—“We’ve got a bike; we can do those deliveries.” They did that and they did it well.

It was not only prescription medicines, but necessities to the elderly and vulnerable. How active church groups were, too—every one of them. People cooked, baked scones and pastries, and delivered them. Our local council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, was incredibly helpful and active in responding with food parcels. People swept into action during those difficult days and did what they saw as their civic duty. I pay tribute to them. The goodness of people always comes to the fore—the positive actions of people shone through. I believe in a practical method of help and assistance, and that is what I was impressed by. There are a lot of good people out there and they want to help, and they do and they did.

The covid-19 pandemic had a huge negative impact on nursing homes and retirement communities with massive outbreaks being reported in care facilities all over the world, affecting not only residents but care workers and visitors. Many people living in retirement communities and independent living facilities were at risk from the virus because it was established that risk increases with age and underlying health conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes or lung disease.

Many of those in residential or retirement homes have complex health issues—it is the nature of life, when we get older. Most people do not have just one issue, but a number. Speaking personally, it is not just my type 2 diabetes—it is also my blood pressure. I am not quite sure what all the tablets are for, but they are probably all related to diabetes. People have complex health conditions.

There was also the higher risk of catching and spreading the virus because of the characteristics of retirement community living, such as daily social activities—which were curtailed—common dining facilities and other communal spaces, community activities and shared transportation. We have a saying back home—I am sure you and others will know it, Mr Efford—that they live cheek by jowl, which they do in residential homes and retirement homes. They live close together, and this virus made that no longer possible.

The more people a resident or worker interacts with and the longer that interaction is, the higher the risk of viral spread. Studies drawn from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and around the world in the past year have shown how the pandemic impacted on retirement communities and, even more significantly, how vulnerable they were to this kind of natural disaster. It is nobody’s fault, and we responded to it in the way that we thought was best, but we learned more and responded more. I ask the Minister whether it is possible to fund research on how we can make retirement villages and extra care homes more effectively pandemic-ready.

There is clearly a shortage of specialist housing for older people. Again, this is not the Minister’s responsibility but that of her colleague. However, the Library briefing outlined three things needed for specialist housing for

older people: sector-specific legislation, which we need to see in place; clarity in the planning system, because it is not about building houses all over the place but about having the right kind of housing in the planning system; and funding options for affordable housing-with-care provision. We need to get those things right, and there is a reason for doing so. It is quite simple: the UK's population is ageing, and people are living longer.

In March 2021, a broad coalition of older people's representatives, policy makers, the private sector and civil society leaders wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister, calling for an increase in the supply of housing-with-care options in the UK. It has been fortunate that a number of people are doing that, and I believe that the Minister for Housing will respond. The questions asked by various Members from the Labour, Conservative and Scottish National parties indicate that there is clearly an issue for us to resolve.

The retirement community market has been steadily growing and is driven by the increase in life expectancy and an older age group who enjoy better health and financial security than previous generations did. As a result, people in that demographic remain active and able to engage in a social lifestyle for much longer. In approximately two weeks' time, on 14 July, my mother will be 90 years old. I am very fortunate that she is able to tell me every day that I have to listen to her and cannot disobey her. No matter what your age may be, your mum is still your mum, and when she tells you what to do, you jump into line. I say that gently, because my mother is fresh in mind and body. She still drives her car and is very active. My mother is of that generation. My father died six years ago, but my mother is an example of someone who is very active and who does not let her age get in the way. She bakes for everybody in the wee group of houses that she lives in. She visits her friends and is very active socially as well.

Whereas the spread of covid-19 in institutional care home settings was more devastating, retirement communities tended to be safer environments during lockdown, because they offered the ability for residents to self-isolate in their own homes. That was the difference from a residential home, where people were sharing with everyone else. That is where the problems were. Although someone in a retirement community or retirement home was mostly on their own, they were able to self-isolate and had access to a network of support, supervision and social interaction, which was not possible in other domestic or care settings.

The challenges for those living in retirement communities during the pandemic were real, and they provide evidence for how we must prepare for similar events in the future in order to protect such communities. Age UK's research among older people shows that depression, loss of hope, low mood, lack of support for meal preparation, deteriorating physical health and, in some cases, increased pain due to untreated health conditions—as we get older, our bodies break down—reflect an issue that we cannot ignore.

We are looking for a response from the Minister about the lessons learned and how we respond in the future. I put that forward in a constructive, positive fashion, because I believe that we all must work together and support the Government as we try to get a strategy and policy that will make the situation better next time

around. If the pundits are right, we will have more pandemics in the future, and we have to be able to respond and learn from where we are.

Six months into the pandemic, Age UK conducted a poll among over-70s that found that one in three felt less motivated to do the things that they enjoyed. Two in three felt less confident taking public transport and two in five felt less confident going to the shops. For many, that wee trip to the shops is a daily outing to speak to someone and see a friendly face. One in four felt less confident spending time with their family. That is not because people did not want to spend time with their families but because they were not sure whether it was the right thing to do health-wise. Families felt the same.

The dreadful pandemic happened at a time when our ageing population is growing. Retirement communities became in many ways isolated communities, but in seeking ways to mitigate risks in future pandemic scenarios, retirement villages show that they can provide a safer and controlled environment for the elderly. That probably needs to be better worded: "provide a safer and controlled environment" almost sends the wrong message. I say this gently, but it almost sounds like, "Let's move them into their own ghettos." I am very conscious that words need to be picked carefully, and the word "control" niggles me a bit.

Food and necessities can be delivered to residents, thus minimising contact. The flow of people in and out of those facilities can be reasonably controlled and exposure to a dangerous contagion thereby greatly reduced. There are ways of doing it. That is why the opportunity to have retirement communities is so important.

However, the risks of having large groups of elderly and possibly unwell people living in close proximity are evident, and it is important to consider now how we can better mitigate them for the future. In Canada, research showed that retirement homes in Ontario impacted by the pandemic were those with more residents—the more residents in the homes, the greater the possibility of being struck down with covid-19—those connected to a nursing home, and those owned by large corporations or offering many on-site services. The study found that retirement homes with more than 100 residents had a more than fivefold increase in the risk of outbreak.

Retirement communities in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can include public housing for low to moderate-income older adults, assisted living homes that do not provide medical services and extra care retirement communities, which have a variety of housing options, including independent living. The residents in those communities depend on social engagement and community and personal activities for their continuing health and mental wellbeing. Those areas of their lives were impacted negatively by covid-19 because social activities were stopped, creating social isolation, communal areas were closed and visits were restricted or completely stopped. That restriction on interaction with other people has been difficult to comprehend.

In England alone, some 75,000 people live in retirement villages and extra care housing schemes, and it is important to understand how their lives were affected. In January 2021, a national survey, the RE-COV research project, was launched, led by the St Monica Trust. The aim of the project was to better understand the experiences of retirement communities and the extra care housing sector during the pandemic, including the effectiveness

[Jim Shannon]

of measures taken to protect the health and wellbeing of residents and staff. I wonder whether the Department has had an opportunity to see that research. I do not think we should ignore stats—they give the data, which help us to forecast a strategy and a way to do better. Has that happened?

Those findings were delivered in April 2021 and this valuable project has, to a great extent, informed us how the retirement village and extra care housing sector responded to the task of managing the protection of the lives of many extremely vulnerable older residents during lockdown. We have learned that operators acted to lock down swiftly before 23 March, residents were asked to remain on site, and spaces and facilities were redesigned where services and communal areas had to be closed down because strict action was needed. Weekly food boxes were delivered to residents and residents were helped with gaining access to digital technology, which changed how social activities and social contact took place. That is critical. Many people in those homes do not have access to modern, digital technology or, like me, do not have an ability with that technology. I am fortunate that I have a number of staff who are all very good at that. Indeed, I have grandchildren who can do it, although their grandad struggles with it.

The pressures on the operators of retirement communities were enormous. The research tells us that lack of access to PPE for staff and the task of identifying those who needed to shield, had increased vulnerabilities and lacked an effective support network were issues that had to be addressed in a fast-moving situation. That is what the Government were doing as well. The Government and Ministers were reacting to an unfolding situation, and trying to learn and do their best. The job of the Opposition is to challenge the Government, so that the Government can learn, but the Government were also on a learning curve as to how to deal with the situation.

Maintaining morale among staff and residents was also a huge task, not to mention maintaining staff. Some staff were falling sick with covid-19 and finding themselves unable to attend work. The mental pressure was incredible. I pay tribute to the staff and operators of retirement communities. Some of them put their commitment to residents above their own personal health.

I am not sure if other hon. Members have noticed when they walk along the Embankment and over Westminster Bridge, towards the Park Plaza hotel, that there are a lot of red hearts on a wall that represent the people who have died due to covid-19 in the past 15 or 16 months. Some of those are staff, so I am ever mindful of their sacrifices. Fewer village and scheme residents died from confirmed covid-19 than expected, some 0.97% compared to 1.09% in the same age-profile people in the general population of England.

It was a massive undertaking and, what is more, the survey tells us that the residents benefited from their communities and from the special support and care provided by the villages and schemes. However, it is clear that their job could have been made easier. Guidelines changed from week to week and access to testing for staff was not quick enough, and perhaps could have been done better. This debate is meant to be positive and not meant to be critical, but the Government must do some self-reflection and consider how better our

leadership through this pandemic could have been. We are all leaders in the community, we have a job to do and we have to set an example. We should be able to look back and learn from the covid-19 pandemic, to improve and do better. I hope that is something that we can all do.

There is no doubt that the covid-19 pandemic has changed our society. Looking at how retirement communities have come through the crisis, there is no doubt that the landscape for retirement communities has been redrawn. Covid-19 has done that. We must now look to the future because future pandemics are a matter of when, not if. What steps will the Minister take to fund later-living accommodation so that it will be secure and residents will be safe? I know that accommodation is not the Minister's responsibility, but how can the Minister and my Government respond in a way that means they can help with those things?

The most important thing for administrators of retirement communities and independent living facilities to do now is plan and prepare. If there were a headline for this debate it would be "Plan and prepare for the future." I know that the Minister will respond very positively to that. No matter the level of transmission in a community, every retirement community and independent living facility should have a plan in place to protect residents, workers, volunteers and visitors from a future pandemic. This should be done in collaboration with local public health departments, local regulatory agencies and other stakeholders. We must focus on the components of the plans that address infectious disease outbreaks.

I want to ask the Minister about the direction of the strategy and the response that came from Westminster to all of us in the regions we represent, in my case Northern Ireland, but Scotland and Wales were the same. What discussions has the Minister had with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies have learnt the lessons regionally? We have all learnt lessons regionally that we can share with each other. That is the wonderful thing about debates here. If all the four regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland come here, we all share our input in the debates and we all have a perspective on something that we have learnt. It is good to be able to learn things and take them back home. It is important that we can improve things across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I will close by suggesting that the impact of covid-19 on retirement communities will be that it will shape how we live later in life—not because I am getting closer to that later in life category, but because it is important in the role that we play here to prepare for the future. More of us are ageing, so more and better models of care will need to be put into place. I probably look back more than others, and I wonder where the past 30 years of my life went. They went so quickly. Now that we have all experienced and have a much better understanding of social isolation, important conversations will need to take place to find ways to support and promote the benefits of living in retirement community settings and how they can be made pandemic-ready for the future. We can then use those to improve care home settings, because that is where the scale of the pandemic was felt the most, and that is why this debate is so important.

3.46 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am trying to remember whether I have done so previously, but I am delighted to do so this afternoon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I will call my hon. Friend from Strangford. I know he was concerned beforehand, but I want to reassure him. I do not know whether it was because of my 19 months in Northern Ireland as Secretary of State or something else, but I understood every single word that he said throughout the whole of his contribution, and I agreed with much that he said.

It is perhaps unusual that I am contributing to a debate introduced by the hon. Member for Strangford, rather than the other way round, but I wanted to contribute because I have a number of retirement villages in my constituency that offer a fantastic service, a real alternative to independent living in later life. I want to talk about how they tackled covid in a way that was as kind as it could be. Let us be clear: there is nothing about the pandemic that I like. I do not particularly like the fact that we are in the Boothroyd Room rather than the Grand Committee Room for a Westminster Hall debate, even though I fought very hard as Chair of the Procedure Committee to get this room opened up because it can host hybrid proceedings.

I do not like not being with my family and friends and not being able to see people freely, and I do not like what has happened to the more elderly in our communities. In my constituency, loneliness and social isolation have been prevalent among the elderly during the pandemic, and I want to talk about the role that retirement villages have played. Also, I want to talk about the role that I think they can play in the future provision of health and social care.

By retirement villages, I mean places with independent living: campus-based community living, but each individual or couple living independently. People have their own home and their own furniture. It is equipped for them to live the way they want to live, but in a communal setting. There are shared communal facilities with club rooms, restaurants, hairdressers, gyms and spas, and sometimes even swimming pools in what we might call the more desirable accommodation. They offer an alternative way of life for those who are post their careers, an alternative that perhaps means they can have a longer independent life than they might have had if they had stayed in their own homes.

As I say, I have a number of retirement villages in Staffordshire Moorlands. We have an older-than-average population, demographically, by which I mean that proportionally, there are more people aged over 55 in my constituency than there are in others. We therefore have an awful lot of traditional retirement homes, traditional care homes, traditional home care services and the housing with care alternative—independent living. One that I have visited on a number of occasions is Bagnall Heights. For people travelling into the moorlands through Light Oaks, Bagnall is the first village that they see after leaving Stoke-on-Trent. In fact, Bagnall Heights could be called the gateway to Staffordshire Moorlands. It is owned by the Vincent family, David and Phil, and run by the fantastic Sue Clarke.

I have had many visits to Bagnall Heights, and I have always been made incredibly welcome. I have also always been incredibly challenged by the residents, who very much enjoy getting a politician in and grilling them. They have had a difficult time during covid, as has everybody. Sue Clarke contacted me thanks to the work of Councillor Sybil Ralphs MBE, who is leader of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council and represents Bagnall at ward level. I will read out what Sue said, because she put it incredibly well and there is no point trying to paraphrase her. She said:

“Here at Bagnall Heights we have done amazingly well as we went in lockdown as soon as we had the information and as we were in a gated complex, we were able to monitor anyone coming in and out. We have always had plenty of PPE available and always done temperature checks on everyone and we have never let our care staff go home in uniforms since we opened.”

That is not just during covid; it is a full-stop thing for Bagnall Heights. She continued:

“We arranged for all residents and staff to have Covid Vaccinations”.

Sue said that residents had both by May and staff had both by April 2021, and she went on:

“We have done shopping for residents to cut the risk of families coming on site and we have managed to keep our residents all safe by working together as a community and with the help of excellent staff working all hours this has worked well.

We only let deliveries come to reception and leave everything with us so we were able to deliver to residents’ homes. The same with milk and papers. We have always had a good relationship with our 84 residents and were able to keep a close eye on everyone and know if they were feeling low and we were there to offer support with care needs or just as a friend. The families and friends of our residents know that they only need to call the manager if they needed to pass anything on or ask our advice on anything.

Here at Bagnall Heights we are set in beautiful gardens”—

I can absolutely vouch for that—

“and were able when restrictions were lifted to organise Sir Lee Pearson”,

who is one of our local celebrities, and a Paralympic gold medallist several times over,

“to come and give us a dressage with his gold medal Olympic winning horse Zion, and a local band playing in the gardens and all the residents were able to sit in the grounds at social distance and have a wonderful afternoon with ice cream van that they went up to one by one to stay safe. We also had meals delivered by local pubs/chip shops and we delivered them to the residents to keep everyone safe.

We also did Quizzes weekly and raffles and exchanged cheques for cash so they did not go short of anything they wanted.

We are registered with the county council to do weekly Lateral flow tests for our residents and twice weekly for staff and staff also have one PCR test a week. Before this we had them delivered and registered with the NHS.

We have now organised 6 residents per day to go in the lounge together for chats and to let us monitor track and trace if we did ever have anyone to test positive. This also lets us do a thorough clean each day. We have always done touch point cleaning 3 times a day on a rota throughout the pandemic. We make the Paramedics and Doctors smile when they come as they say we are the only ones that check their temperatures before letting them enter.

We all work as a team and to get through this we must appreciate that the government have had very hard decisions to make and need us all to help and work with each other. This has been so hard and now we all feel that we must try to get back to some normality.

[Karen Bradley]

It has been my pleasure working with such dedicated and loyal staff in such difficult circumstances, and for a company that cares. Bagnall Heights is more than just a retirement Village that offers care.”

That was Sue Clarke, the estate manager for Bagnall Heights. Once David Vincent found out that this debate was happening, he called to make sure that we heard from him. He made it clear that Bagnall Heights had taken a very proactive approach. He said that if a resident had to attend hospital, for whatever reason, the staff made sure that the resident went into their independent, private home and isolated for the requisite number of days before they went to hospital, and a designated carer moved into their home to isolate with them and look after them. He says they are a well-knit community within a community and felt that everyone was cautious on the whole. To me, that speaks of a real success story in dealing with covid. It has been difficult for everybody, but to hear what the management at Bagnall Heights have done—I can vouch that this is also happening at retirement villages around the country; it is not unique to Bagnall Heights—shows what can be done by a community working together in the way that they have.

That takes me on to my more general points about housing with care facilities—retirement villages. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the statistical evidence is that they have dealt with covid in a safer way than other, comparable facilities. As he said, the St Monica Trust and the Housing Learning and Improvement Network published research in April showing that only 0.97% of housing with care residents died from covid-19 between March and December, compared with 1.09% of those of the same age living in the wider community. That might not sound like a very big number, but when we are only talking about relatively small numbers, percentage-wise, of people dying from covid who contract it anyway, the fact that the number was lower in that cohort indicates real success. The majority of housing with care operators also had no or very few confirmed or strongly suspected covid cases during each month in 2020, with fewer than 1% of residents with covid-19 in any of their properties through to November last year.

I think this is a real model for how care can be provided. I want to be clear: I am not criticising traditional models of care homes or retirement living. There has to be a full suite of facilities available, so that the right facility is available to the right person. It would be absolutely inappropriate for Government, Ministers or an MP to suggest what would be right for any individual, but this is a lifestyle approach for those in later life that I think should be considered more. It is worth noting that only 0.6% of over-65s in the United Kingdom, or one in 200, live in one of these kinds of facilities, whereas in the US, New Zealand and Australia the figure is closer to 5% to 6%, or one in 20. If 10 times as many people proportionately are living in them in other places, we might want to consider why that is.

The hon. Member for Strangford said—this has come from the Associated Retirement Community Operators—that it is partly down to the lack of sector-specific regulation and legislation, but I think it is also down to other things. In part, I think it is because this kind of facility needs to be looked at with a cross-Government

approach. ARCO is calling for a cross-Government taskforce. I would urge the Minister to consider that, because this is not an issue that merely sits within the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government or any other Department. It is a cross-Government issue that needs to be looked at in the round.

Indeed, there is a real opportunity to use this kind of facility to assist with the housing crisis and bring it into the debate about the housing crisis. One of the operators told me that every night there are 20 million spare bedrooms in homes of elderly people who are living in the old family home but have not yet downsized. Twenty million spare bedrooms a night goes a long way to tackling affordable housing needs in certain parts of the country. That has to be part of the agenda and discussion.

There is an opportunity for people to move into housing with care, and the attraction is that care can then be provided at home if needed. Care can, of course, be provided in family homes, but they often have to be adapted at great expense. Perhaps people feel they do not want that to happen in their home and they end up going into care homes unnecessarily, when they would not want to go into a traditional care home and it is not right for them, but it is the only option available at the time. Those in independent living—in housing with care facilities—have that care provided at home. Few of the people living in those facilities end up going into care homes. That has to be part of the answer to the care crisis. I am well aware that it is not the only answer, but it has to be part of it.

I am a big supporter of retirement villages, including those in my constituency, and a big supporter of making sure that they are part of the Government’s approach to dealing with the housing crisis for younger people and the care crisis for the elderly. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and shadow Ministers.

4 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: It is a real honour to make my first contribution to a debate in Westminster Hall, albeit virtually, under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. As hon. Members will know, I am relatively new to this place. My friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, has displayed only kindness and compassion towards me and so it is fitting that I make my first appearance in an important debate that he has secured. I would also like to wish his mother a very happy birthday, when it comes.

I listened to the opening remarks from the hon. Gentleman, and we have agreement. While we may disagree on the constitution, we can agree that those in retired communities deserve as much importance as any other community across the four nations. I also agree that retired communities have given up as much as any other community.

I note the interesting comments made by the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) that retirement villages give older people the opportunity to live in the manner they wish—independently—but are also communal, so there is an opportunity for socialising.

When we discuss the effect of this pandemic on retired communities, it is important that we take a like-minded approach. As the right hon. Lady said, there must be cross-Government support when looking at policy development. I would say that there should also be cross-party support in this place and a joined-up approach between the UK Government and the devolved nations.

During the pandemic, much of the advice from the four nations was that older people should stay at home and limit social contact with others, which meant that those in retirement communities were at increased risk of loneliness and social isolation. Age UK is a key stakeholder in the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. I have joined this place many years after Jo Cox, but I have witnessed at first hand the impact that she had in this House and her legacy in tackling loneliness. A report from the commission was clear: tackling isolation and loneliness is not just the responsibility of the UK Government and their devolved counterparts. Mayors, council leaders, businesses and community groups can all play a vital role. We have seen that. We have seen communities from the Isle of Skye, to my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, to Cornwall, mobilise in order to support and give companionship to people in retired communities.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, many in retired communities began to use technology. They were, so to say, getting down with the kids. Rather than a family Sunday lunch, it was a family Zoom call, with games nights and catch-ups. However, using new technology has been a frightful experience for many. The pandemic has changed many of our interactions and Age UK has found that this rapid pace of change has left a significant number of older people behind. Some older people have been unable to access computer equipment and others are simply not interested in getting online. It is, of course, a personal choice.

Earlier this year, the updated digital strategy developed by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, in consultation with business and the third sector, highlighted a shared commitment to deliver digital public services that are accessible to all and simple to use. That ambition to achieve world-leading levels of digital inclusion is at the heart of plans to equip Scotland for the technological transformation of the post-covid world. I hope that opportunity is given to help those in retired communities to expand their digital literacy if they wish to do so.

As Members will be aware, the population of the UK is ageing, and we need action to fully support retired communities. Over this Parliament, the Scottish Government are increasing social care investment by 25%, which is equivalent to more than £840 million. An independent review has given the Scottish Government a clear road map, including the creation of a national care service and the scrapping of non-residential social care charges. That will build on existing services in Scotland.

The 2014 reform integrated health and social care bodies in Scotland to enable a more joined-up and efficient service. More than £700 million was invested between 2019 and 2020 to support free personal care for older people in Scotland, making Scotland the only country in the UK to provide free personal care. The UK Government should follow Scotland's lead by committing to a national care service for England.

A single line about social care from the Prime Minister in the Queen's Speech is simply not enough. During the pandemic, our retired communities, many of whom live in social care settings, need to see real action. While the UK Government dither and delay, the Scottish National party is taking action to deliver in Scotland a modern social care service that is fit for the 21st century.

May I take this opportunity to note that we also owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our nation's carers, many of whom are involved in retired communities? Their commitment and compassion throughout the pandemic have been admirable. This financial year, the Scottish Government provided £8.8 million of additional funding to integration authorities to deliver the real living wage commitment to ensuring at least £9.30 per hour for social care staff. That is higher than the national minimum wage that applies to social care workers in England and Wales.

For us to fully examine the effect and impact of covid-19 on any community, Governments must hold inquiries into their handling of the pandemic. In the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, the Scottish National party ran on a manifesto commitment to hold an inquiry, but the UK Government have not yet made the same commitment. I say that not to play party politics, but on the basis of accountability and ensuring that lessons from the pandemic are learned not after the fact but now, while they still can help to save lives.

4.8 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate on this important subject, which has, so far, had too little attention during the pandemic. This is a prescient debate because retirement communities, which are sometimes called "housing with care" or "extra care housing", should be an important part of the Government's plans to reform social care—when they finally see the light of day.

Retirement communities enable older people to continue living independently in their own home with properly regulated home care services and other community facilities available on site. We have heard some wonderful examples from Members' constituencies. Around 75,000 people live in such communities in the UK. Around 40% of residents are under 80 years old; almost half are between 80 and 90; and 15% are over 90.

As hon. Members have said, the pandemic has clearly posed real challenges to retirement communities, the people who provide them and the people who live in them. Residents faced increased loneliness and isolation due to the measures being put in place to control the virus' spread, and communal areas and non-essential services have been closed and postponed. Many providers, although not all, struggled to get PPE at the beginning. They faced considerable staff shortages, and staff and residents reported real anxiety and stress. One of the issues raised with me was the lack of specific guidance for housing with care providers. I was told that they had to come up with a lot of that themselves. That is an important point, as we all know that we will have to live with this virus for some time.

Overall, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Strangford and the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), research has shown that

[Liz Kendall]

people living in retirement communities have been remarkably protected, compared with people of a similar age in the rest of the country. A smaller proportion died, and most housing with care providers reported no or very few covid cases in each of the months between March and December last year. Interestingly, some of that is due to the design and layout of retirement communities, and the self-contained nature of individual homes. One of the things we will have to look at in the future is whether capital investment is needed in residential homes to change their layout to make people less susceptible to the virus.

Although it is clear from evidence and research that many retirement communities did very well in protecting residents from the immediate impact of the virus, there are real concerns about the long-term implications of covid-19 on residents. Providers of housing with care fear that some residents may avoid seeking support from the NHS in the future because they are still worried about catching the virus if they go into hospital. The providers are also worried about the longer-term impact on the cognitive functions of older residents if they are cut off from family and friends, despite all the efforts to use Zoom and other technology.

Providers are also worried about older residents' physical abilities, because they have been less mobile during the pandemic. That is part of a much wider issue. We have rightly heard about the huge backlog in operations and treatment in cancer care or acute-based care in the NHS, but we also have to think about the backlog and need in the community. As Age Concern and others have reported, we need to think about the support we provide for older people whose mobility has been reduced. Lots of older people report that they are not able to walk as far or feel less steady on their feet. That can have an impact on falls.

There are also mental health needs. It is not just about not seeing and hugging people—the friends and family they love—but living with the stress of fearing that they will catch this virus and die. As we think about the NHS recovery plan, I urge the Minister—I am sure she has already done this—to think about not just acute services but services in the community.

The benefits for the health of people living in retirement communities have been known about for quite a while. We know that older people in housing with care have higher exercise levels and fewer falls, and are less likely overall to suffer from anxiety and depression. That benefits not just them as individuals but the rest of the health and care system. Research has shown that those living in retirement communities are less likely to go into hospital and have fewer GP and nurse visits than comparable age groups. Indeed, some evidence suggests that the overall use of the NHS is about 30% to 40% less. That is really important not just because the people living there have better health but because there is a better use of taxpayer money. The health benefits of retirement communities are just one of many reasons why Labour is calling for an expansion of housing with care options in the future as part of our wider proposals to transform social care.

We live in the century of ageing. We have all heard about how the number of people aged over 65 will increase by more than 40% by 2040 to over 16 million. Most people

want to stay in their lifelong family home for as long as possible, but having more options between care at home and a care home must be part of our vision for social care and housing in future, so that someone can be in their own home, living independently, but draw down those services and support as and when they need them. As the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands rightly said, other countries are way more advanced than us. Only about 0.5% of over-65s live in housing with care developments in this country, compared with 5% or 6% in New Zealand, Australia and America.

If we are to expand the options, three things need to happen. First, we need a clearly defined category of housing with care in the planning system, as the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and the sector itself, have recommended. It is currently much harder to build housing with care properties than care homes due to a lack of definition in the planning system. It was a real missed opportunity when the Government did not include that specific definition in their "Planning for the Future" White Paper and the legislation. They need to think again.

Secondly, we need—the sector itself is calling for this—sector-specific legislation and regulation for housing with care, to give consumers greater confidence, spelling out residents' rights and the nature of the relationship with care providers. It is also crucial to give investors long-term confidence. The legislation that has been introduced in Australia and New Zealand has really underpinned the development in those countries, which is why we need something similar here.

Thirdly, the Government need to seriously look at how we ensure that housing with care is an option for all older people, regardless of their means or housing wealth—in other words, not just available to those who have a lot of equity in their existing lifelong family home. Currently, around two thirds of housing with care properties are available for affordable and social rent. We are doing well at the moment, but cuts to local authority social care budgets over the past 10 years, including funding for complex services through such things as Supporting People, have meant that the creation of new affordable extra care housing has slowed, and in some cases services have been withdrawn. It is not good for older people, or the taxpayer, if people end up having to use more advanced and expensive care, or end up relying on the NHS.

I hope the Minister will set out what plans the Government have to support this important sector as we continue to live with the virus, and crucially what plans they have to support its expansion, so that all people have the choice, as the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands said, to live the life that they choose in the home that they call home, which will include these options in future.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for his fantastic speech setting out both some of the challenges and the wonderful things that the sector has done during the pandemic, while looking ahead and setting the tone for the conversation about wider housing supply challenges and opportunities. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and

Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) on her first Westminster Hall debate. She was extremely articulate speaking to us remotely.

The pandemic has clearly been a huge challenge across the whole of our society, but the sheltered retirement housing and housing with care sector has faced the challenges of the past 18 months and truly risen to them. Managers, support workers, carers and other staff have gone the extra mile for those they support, and I have heard personally how hard those providers and their staff have worked, supporting the wellbeing of residents during the pandemic. I thank all those organisations and their staff for their amazing work throughout the pandemic.

Sheltered retirement extra care housing provides a home to hundreds of thousands of—often vulnerable—older people across the country. Having the right housing options helps older people stay independent for longer, continuing to live as part of a wider community in their own home, with the care they need close at hand when needed, but still—as so many of us want for as long as we possibly can—living behind their own front door, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) said, with their own furniture, for instance. These things make a difference to someone's quality of life.

During the pandemic, the Government's focus has been on ensuring that those most vulnerable to covid have had help and support to get through these difficult times, including specific help for those living in the residential settings that we are talking about.

The retirement and housing with care sector itself put in place tons of measures to protect the more vulnerable residents and to look after frontline staff, such as closing down communal facilities; suspending activities; restricting access in and out of communities; issuing PPE; restricting in-person visits; and often, regular and increased cleaning.

My right hon. Friend talked about the retirement village in her constituency, Bagnall Heights, which has done a fantastic job of protecting its residents from covid by controlling who came in and out; arranging the PPE they had; extra cleaning; going shopping for residents so they did not have to take the risk of leaving the area; supporting the vaccination effort; lots of testing; and organising some fantastic socially distanced activities to keep up morale, which has been so hard during this time. She says that staff worked all hours to do that. It was clearly a great job by manager Sue Clarke and owner David Vincent, whom she mentioned. I congratulate them and the many others I have heard of who have gone to those lengths to protect residents and to support them through such a difficult time.

As hon. Members mentioned, we have engaged regularly with the retirement housing sector over the past year or so, and all the intelligence we have received, as was particularly mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford, is that infection and death rates related to covid in that housing sector have thankfully been lower than we might have feared considering the relatively older and more vulnerable residents living in the sector. The measures we have put in place have clearly been effective in protecting those more vulnerable residents. However, as we have recognised today, there has also been a downside: the impact on the overall health and wellbeing of older people of, for instance, limits to socialising and communal activities; restrictions on visits; and not being able to get

out and about as usual. In fact, a serious thing that happened, particularly earlier on, was residents sometimes not having access to healthcare or doctors as normal. As the hon. Gentleman said, life was completely different. As we have talked about, retirement housing providers worked really hard to get that balance between protecting their residents from infection, trying to maintain as much of the quality of life of their residents as possible and trying to maintain social contact.

The hon. Gentleman talked about technology being part of that, as did the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts, and about how Zoom calls have replaced visits for some; some people have actually found that they see more of their family via Zoom than when a long trip is required. We all agree that there is no way that a Zoom call actually replaces being physically together with people; it is not the same as coming together for a meal or a cup of tea and having a hug. However, it has been better than nothing. We all want things to get more back to normal, and we welcome the fact that that is happening.

The Government targeted our support at the sector; we have broadly worked hard for the last 18 months to support the social care sector. It is a hugely diverse sector, as hon. Members have talked about today, ranging from care homes and nursing homes to extra care housing, retirement housing, shared lives and shared accommodation. So there is huge diversity in the sector, which we have sought to support in different ways.

The shadow Minister talked about guidance. We have worked to provide guidance for the range of settings in the sector, but it has not always been easy, simply because of the diversity and the different circumstances that exist. Nevertheless, our support has included the provision of testing, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands said was clearly being used regularly by Bagnall Heights, and that was good to hear. There has also been access to PPE and all the particular support to settings that are more like care homes, where residents live in closer proximity and receive more care than in other settings.

Also, this year frontline health and social care workers, including those providing care in retirement communities and extra care housing, were prioritised for the vaccine by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation in cohort 2. We are now in a great place, where the vast majority of people in those settings—both residents and the staff working there—have had not just one vaccination but two.

We continue to listen to and work with the sector, and to work with local authorities as well, on how we can support this part of society as we come through the pandemic. Although life is getting closer to being back to normal, as the shadow Minister rightly said, there have been long-term consequences from the relative isolation that people have lived in, and from their not being able to get out and about to participate in normal activities. We do not know all the consequences yet, but we know that getting back to normal brings its own challenges, too.

I will pick up on a particular question from the hon. Member for Strangford about future pandemic readiness. He made a really good point that we have seen that this kind of accommodation helps people to be protected from the risk of an infectious disease, for example because of separate housing units and that sort of set-up.

[Helen Whately]

Looking ahead, however, we know that there will be opportunities to look back, to reflect upon and to learn the lessons of the whole experience of the pandemic. Of course we learn as we go, but actually taking the time to reflect is something that is still ahead of us. The Prime Minister has committed that there will be an independent inquiry established on a statutory basis, and that will begin its work next spring. I have no doubt that it will lead us to making sure that we are ready for future pandemics, looking across the wide range of settings where people are more vulnerable to infectious diseases.

This debate has also been a really rich conversation about housing provision more broadly for older people and the sort of provision that we want to have across the country. Housing will be part of our social care reform proposals, which, as hon. Members know, we have committed to bringing forward later this year. It is totally right that housing is so much a part of that work. The homes that we live in, and the environments and communities around us, have a huge impact on our health, wellbeing and quality of life. I want people to be able to live in the home of their choosing for as long as possible and as independently as their age and their health condition will allow.

We know that living in a home that is safe, so that it allows someone to keep living independently, not only improves someone's quality of life but helps to prevent them from having an early admission to hospital and helps them to be transferred back out of hospital to go home. For many people, it can mean that they may never need to move into a residential care home setting, or at least delay it. However, we should all be clear that care homes and nursing homes are an important part of the mix of accommodation, and there is absolutely a time and a place when that setting is the right thing for people.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands asked a question, Minister, which I will repeat. How can the health and social care reform work in partnership with the retirement communities, so that they can devise a strategy? I ask that because there are two Departments involved. The right hon. Lady made the point, and I just reiterate and reinforce it, because she and I both want to see that happening.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Member for his point. I completely agree. I will come to that, if he will just bear with me. I will continue, but I will pick up on exactly that.

As a Government, we know that we need to review housing holistically, looking at existing stock, which is clearly the vast majority of the housing in the country, as well as new builds, and looking at the wide range of housing options that we want to be available to meet all the health and care needs of our population—the growing number of people who are living longer and what that means for us. Whether people are living with or without home care support, it is important that we remember that not everyone will want or be able to stay in their current, lifelong home. That means that we need to think very broadly about having the right specialist housing options, including those with extra levels of care and support.

In England, both my Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government provide capital grant subsidy to assist with delivery of specialist and supported housing for older and other more vulnerable people with care and support needs. Speaking for my own Department, we provide funding to build specialised housing, through the care and support specialised housing fund, for older people and adults with learning and physical disabilities and mental ill health, and £71 million has been provided for that fund in 2021-22. Furthermore, 10% of delivery under MHCLG's £11.5 billion affordable homes programme will be used to increase the supply of much-needed specialist and supported housing for a range of people with care needs, including older people.

That is what we are doing now, but I think that we are in agreement in this debate that we need to do more and we need to increase the supply of retirement housing and extra care housing and have a broad range of the kind of housing that helps people to live with their own front door—in their own home—for longer. Therefore I am working with MHCLG Ministers, and my officials are working with those officials, on how we can best achieve that. We are working across Government and also working with stakeholders, with the sector, on how we can achieve it. We are indeed considering the proposal for a taskforce, which was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands. Yes, the partnership approach is absolutely one on the table.

I will come to a conclusion, but I want to say that one highlight of this debate for me has been hearing about the mother of the hon. Member for Strangford. It is a highlight because it is a reminder to all of us that this is about people. It is about real people and about their homes, which matter so much. I have been to brilliant homes; I have been to wonderful specialist retirement communities. I have been to housing and care settings and everything in-between. We need a mix of provision, and we need that mix so that individuals like the hon. Member's mother, family members of all of us, whether it is grans, grandads, mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters, and, in due course, we ourselves have the homes that we need where we can live the best possible life and live our life to the full for as long as we can.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We have until a quarter to 5, but this will be a summing-up, not another speech—[Laughter.] I just point that out gently. I call Jim Shannon.

4.33 pm

Jim Shannon: Mr Efford, I would not stamp on your toes and take advantage of that; I know I could not, but I would not do it anyway. May I first thank everyone for their contribution? I will go through them. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands brought her wealth of knowledge to this debate, and I thank her for coming today and giving us all the opportunity to hear that. Her constituency obviously has a lot of retirement communities. She was right to say that that is a longer part of independent life. That is what we are looking at: people are living longer and they want to have a decent life as well, and that is what retirement communities provide. The right hon. Lady said that retirement communities are an example of what can be done in later life. I think that the Minister and, indeed, every one of us has referred to that. The right hon. Lady asked a question, and the Minister's response was exactly the answer that we wanted. We thank the Minister for that,

because we want there to be that close relationship. If anything can come out of this, that is what we would like to see.

I am very pleased to see the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed). I know that she and I will disagree on the constitutional position, but I hope that her time in Westminster will be a long many years. She is a very talented lady, and I say that with great respect. We have had some conversations in the time that she has been here, and I know that she has a heart for this subject matter. I was very pleased that she was able to attend her first Westminster Hall debate. She told me last week that she would be coming, and I was pleased to hear her contribution. We can learn much from Scotland, as I have said many times. I am always keen to hear about what happens in Scotland's health system, so that we can replicate that in our own constituencies and regions.

The hon. Member for Leicester West made an excellent contribution. It was not just about the issues; it was about the strategy for social care reform going forward. I must say that I was greatly encouraged by that, and I was very pleased that we had the opportunity to hear

those things. She spoke about the expansion of housing with care in the future, social care reform and how the strategy would work. There is the potential for both the Government and the Opposition to have collective responsibility for this issue.

I thank the Minister for her response. It is always good to have the Minister in her place. I look forward to her contributions, because they are always helpful and responsive to the issues that we bring to her attention. Today, she answered the questions that were asked of her. If every debate ended with the Minister giving us a commitment in response to our questions, it would be a better world.

I thank you, Mr Efford, for chairing the debate, and I also thank all the staff—we cannot manage without them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on the retirement community housing sector.

4.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 1 July 2021

CABINET OFFICE

EU Relations: Withdrawal Agreement

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): My noble Friend the Minister of State in the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Lord Frost CMG yesterday made the following written statement:

The Government have been consistently clear that there should be no barriers on the movement of meat products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. In order to avoid any disruption to those movements, the Government proposed to the EU that it would be sensible to extend the grace period agreed at the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee in December, which would otherwise have expired on 1 July, on certain conditions.

Following detailed discussions, the UK and EU have agreed to extend the grace period until 30 September. In line with that agreement, the United Kingdom has today set out a unilateral declaration, of which the EU has taken note, relating to the movement of meat products from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. This sets out the conditions under which meat products otherwise classed as prohibited and restricted goods will move from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. This agreement does not require the rest of the United Kingdom to align with any changes in EU agrifood rules during the grace period—there is no dynamic alignment. The extension ensures that Northern Ireland consumers will continue to be able to buy chilled meat products from Great Britain. This is a positive first step but agreement is still required on a permanent solution, and this further period provides time for those discussions to proceed. This is also only one of a very large number of problems with the way the protocol is currently operating, for which solutions need to be found with the EU to ensure the protocol delivers on its original aims: to protect the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement, safeguard Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, and protect the EU's single market for goods.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-07-01/HCWS144/>.

[HCWS144]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Nissan: Sunderland Plant

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am delighted to announce that Nissan has confirmed a significant investment into their Sunderland plant and a partnership with their battery supplier, Envision AESC, and Sunderland City Council to create a north-east electric vehicle manufacturing hub.

As Nissan's second global electric vehicle manufacturing hub, Sunderland will produce battery electric vehicles at scale from 2024 with projected volumes of 100,000 each year. The site will also be home to the UK's first large scale gigafactory, with Envision AESC supplying batteries for Nissan's electric vehicles. This is a transformational

investment not just for the north-east of England but for the UK, as we move towards a fully electrified future and deliver our net zero ambitions.

Nissan has a long and successful history in the UK and Sunderland is one of the most productive plants in Europe. The north-east of England is renowned for automotive manufacturing and this investment will deliver economic growth in the area and support the levelling up agenda as we build back greener from the pandemic. Nissan's commitment to Sunderland is testament to the strength of the British automotive sector and the quality and skill of our expert UK workforce. This investment will secure Nissan's presence in Sunderland and thousands of highly skilled jobs at the plant. Indeed, as Nissan themselves have recognised, our trade and co-operation agreement with the European Union has brought the automotive industry, and our wider economy, the confidence and certainty needed to invest, employ, and plan ahead.

This north-east EV hub is an important first step in delivering our 10 point plan and manifesto commitment of securing our first large scale gigafactory. In increasing their battery production, initially to supply Nissan, the Envision AESC gigafactory will start to anchor the development of EV supply chains within the UK. This is vital as we start the mass UK manufacture of batteries needed for the next generation of electric vehicles.

The Government are also supporting Sunderland City Council to carry out infrastructure works on the adjacent international advanced manufacturing park, to make space for the gigafactory expansion and to start development of a local energy network supplying renewable energy.

The Government have played a crucial role in securing this major investment decision. Between us the Prime Minister, Lord Grimstone and I have engaged strongly with Nissan and their partners, Envision AESC and Sunderland City Council, to demonstrate our commitment to this opportunity. This investment will deliver the first EV to be manufactured at this scale in the UK and is a monumental step in the transition of the automotive industry to electrification.

The Government are committed to ensuring the UK continues to be one of the best locations in the world for automotive manufacturing, investing hundreds of millions to protect and create jobs, while securing a competitive future for the sector. The strong reputation of British automotive manufacturing is evident with over 80% of the cars produced in the UK being exported overseas.

As part of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, we have already announced £500 million to support the electrification of vehicles and their supply chains, and other strategically important technologies through the automotive transformation fund, over the next four years. This is our approach to industrial policy in action: a strong and active Government within a dynamic enterprise economy, working with industry to secure private investment and new jobs. We will continue to work with investors to secure the UK's position at the forefront of the global green industrial revolution.

The Faraday battery challenge, with a further £317 million of Government support, is creating the research, innovation and commercialisation pathways and ecosystem that are establishing the UK as a battery science superpower, growing innovative companies and

attracting large scale battery manufacturing to the UK. This includes our investment in the UK battery industrialisation centre, a unique open access facility.

Today's announcement shows that Nissan and Envision share our commitment to an automotive sector fit for the future as we transition to electric vehicles. The Government are determined to ensure that the UK continues to be a great place to do business and one of the most competitive locations in the world for automotive and other advanced manufacturing. Nissan's choice of the UK as their first location outside of Japan for such a major investment in electric vehicles underlines the strength of the UK to build such strategic partnerships and deliver our vision.

[HCWS137]

TREASURY

Financial Services Consultation

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are today publishing the "Access to Cash: Consultation" on legislative proposals to protect access to cash. Our society and economy are embracing the transition to a more digital world and as part of this the transition towards digital payments brings many opportunities, including the opportunity for faster and cheaper payments. None the less, cash remains an essential payment mechanism for many people and businesses across the United Kingdom.

The Government therefore committed at March Budget 2020 to bring forward legislation to protect access to cash and ensure that the UK's cash infrastructure is sustainable long term. The Government support and welcome innovation in payments; this is an area where the UK is at the cutting edge globally, and we wish to see that continue. The Government's aim in protecting access to cash is consistent with this approach and seeks to ensure continued choice in payments solutions for all parts of the UK, and for people that rely on more traditional options.

In October 2020, the Treasury published a call for evidence, which sought views on the key considerations associated with cash access. The responses demonstrated strong and broad support for Government intervention to protect access to cash, and the Treasury is publishing a summary of responses to the call for evidence today.

Furthermore, the Government took action to make legislative changes to support the widespread offering of cashback without a purchase by shops and other businesses as part of the Financial Services Act 2021. Cashback has the potential to be a valuable facility to cash users, and play an important role in the evolution of the UK's cash infrastructure.

The access to cash consultation is the next step to progress our commitment to legislate to protect access to cash.

The consultation sets out proposals for legislation to ensure that people and businesses can continue to make cash withdrawals and deposits within a reasonable distance. This will help to ensure that the cash system continues

to meet the needs of businesses and consumers and that the UK's cash infrastructure is sustainable in the long term.

To achieve this, the consultation seeks views in three key areas:

Geographic access requirements for providing access to cash withdrawals and deposits

Designation of firms to meet requirements to provide access

Regulatory oversight, including proposals to ensure the FCA has appropriate powers and responsibilities to hold firms to account to meet requirements

The Government's proposals for consultation seek to ensure a stable and resilient solution for cash access in the long term, where large current account providers are obliged to ensure their customers can access key cash services alongside new and convenient digital payments solutions. The decline in cash usage is a trend that is occurring in many countries across the world. The Government's proposed approach is in line with international precedent. For example, Sweden, is one of the most advanced countries in terms of declining cash usage and it has placed legislative geographic access requirements for deposit and withdrawal facilities on its largest banks.

The consultation will be published on gov.uk <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/access-to-cash-consultation> and will run for 12 weeks, closing on 23 September 2021.

Today's publication helps to ensure that the financial system supports the real economy and delivers for businesses and consumers. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out at Mansion House today, the Government are taking action to deliver on our vision for a world-leading financial services sector, which includes this consultation. It is important that our financial services sector is open, green, technologically advanced and globally competitive and acts in the interests of our communities and citizens, creating jobs, supporting businesses, and powering growth across all of the UK.

[HCWS146]

Publication of UK Government Green Financing Framework

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In November 2020, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), announced plans for the UK to issue its inaugural sovereign green bond (or "Green Gilt"). Green financing products like these are a form of Government borrowing to finance projects with clearly defined environmental benefits.

Since then, the Government have set out their intention to issue a series of green gilts to meet growing investor demand. Budget 2021 confirmed the following ambitious commitments, including that:

the UK will conduct at least two green gilt issuances in 2021; Green gilt issuances in the 2021-22 financial year will total a minimum of £15 billion;

the UK will also issue retail green savings bonds via NS&I, the first standalone retail product tied to a sovereign green bond; and

in another first for comparable sovereign issuers, the UK will report on social co-benefits of expenditures financed by the green gilt and retail green savings bonds, such as job creation, access to affordable infrastructure and socioeconomic advancement.

Green financing will be a multi-year programme, and HM Treasury will announce future years' green financing targets as part of its usual approach to debt management.

In May 2021, the UK Debt Management Office (DMO) announced that the first green gilt will be issued in September 2021, subject to demand and market conditions.

NS&I today announced that green savings bonds will go on sale later in the year, with full details available on the NS&I website.

Ahead of this, HM Treasury and the DMO yesterday published the UK Government green financing framework. This document sets out the Government's ambitious climate and environmental agenda and their vision for enhancing the UK's leadership as the world's preeminent green financial centre. The framework also details how the proceeds from the green gilt and retail green savings bonds will finance expenditures to help tackle climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental challenges, while creating green jobs across the UK.

As part of this, the framework lists the six types of green expenditures that will be financed across the UK by the green gilt and retail green savings bonds:

- Clean transportation
- Renewable energy
- Energy efficiency
- Pollution prevention and control
- Living and natural resources
- Climate change adaptation.

The framework also stipulates that funds raised from each offering must be allocated to Government expenditures occurring no earlier than 12 months before and no later than two budget years after that offering. At least 50% of funds will be allocated to current and future expenditure rather than refinancing past expenditures, matching the strongest commitments of other major sovereigns.

Finally, this document commits the Government to annual allocation reporting and at least biennial reporting of metrics on environmental impacts and social co-benefits, ensuring transparency for retail and institutional investors and other interested parties.

Two independent reports assessing the framework and the eligible Government expenditure were published alongside the framework on 30 June 2021:

In line with market best practice, V.E, part of Moody's ESG Solutions, has provided a second party opinion on the sustainability credentials of the Government of the United Kingdom's green financing framework, which assesses the alignment of the framework with the green bond principles 2021 published by the International Capital Market Association. V.E expressed a "robust" level of assurance on the contribution of the UK's framework to sustainable development, which is the same positive assessment achieved by major sovereign issuers. V.E also assessed the UK's environmental, social and governance performance as "advanced", the highest level on V.E's four-point scale;

the Carbon Trust has produced a pre-issuance impact report on the UK Government green financing programme, which reviews the Government's intended allocation of proceeds under the framework and the proposed impact metrics. They found that the allocations "align sensibly" with the Climate Change Committee's recommended climate targets for the UK (known as its "Sixth Carbon Budget") and they are "confident that the programme will contribute to achieving net zero by 2050". This is the first report of its kind among

sovereign issuers and provides additional evidence of the coherence of the Government's green financing programme with its wider environmental agenda.

Copies of the framework, second party opinion, and pre-issuance impact assessment have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and are published on www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-government-green-financing. Further information can also be found on the DMO and NS&I websites.

[HCWS138]

DEFENCE

Atomic Weapons Establishment

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

On 2 November 2020 I announced to the House [HCWS544] that on 1 July 2021 AWE plc, the company operating the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), would become a non-departmental public body, wholly owned by the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

I can confirm that from today, following a constructive and effective transition period, we welcome AWE plc as the newest arms-length body of the MOD.

The change in operating model will further strengthen the relationship between the MOD and AWE plc, enhancing the management of the UK's nuclear warhead programme while also delivering on core MOD objectives and value for money to the taxpayer. AWE plc is part of the Defence Nuclear Enterprise, which is responsible for sustaining and renewing the UK's nuclear deterrent.

[HCWS142]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

EU-UK Personal Data Transfers

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):

Following just over a year of constructive discussions, the European Union has rightly recognised the UK's high data protection standards by formally adopting adequacy decisions for the UK. The completion of this process allows for the continued free flow of personal data between the EU and the UK. These decisions will minimise burdens for businesses and support continued co-operation between the EU and the UK, including helping our law enforcement authorities to keep our citizens safe.

We will approach our data relationship with the EU, as in other areas of our new relationship, as sovereign equals. This will include a full UK assessment of the EU under our own independent international transfer regime to ensure that it remains a safe destination for UK personal data. We will continue to engage with the EU as appropriate with a view to ensuring our reciprocal arrangements for free flow of personal data can remain in place on an ongoing basis.

We will do so while operating a fully independent UK framework. Rapid technological change in data-intensive sectors and three years' experience of implementing GDPR have prompted lively debates about the future of data protection, including within the EU. We want our data protection law to remain fit for purpose, and to support the future objectives of the UK.

Maintaining personal data flows is important: people and organisations are now sharing more personal data more regularly and in greater quantities than ever. Data has allowed businesses to grow and transform, hospitals to help patients, scientists to accelerate groundbreaking research, and law enforcement authorities to keep the public safe. The covid-19 pandemic has shown that the use of data has never been more crucial in making vital decisions in public life.

The Government are committed to ensuring the UK can use data to drive innovation, the economy, trade, better government and more effective law enforcement and protection of public safety, without compromising security or privacy. We will design and operate a data regime that maintains high data protection standards while enabling transformative, creative, innovative and responsible data use to ensure that the benefits of the data revolution are felt by all people, in all places.

Maximising the opportunities from innovative use of data will also depend on better flow of data between international partners. Independent of the EU, the UK will promote the free flow of personal data across borders, including through ambitious new trade deals; new data adequacy agreements with some of the fastest growing economies; and more innovative transfer mechanisms, while ensuring that this data will be properly protected, including through effective regulatory co-operation. We will also explore wider global opportunities on data, seeking to increase the availability of data and minimise burdens on organisations seeking to tackle some of the most pressing international questions of our time, including climate change and prevention of disease.

With our progressive legal system, robust protection of individual rights, and an influential regulator, the UK is in a strong starting position. Our approach towards data in future will be forward thinking and innovative but, above all, it will be founded upon the democratic values of the rule of law and transparency to maintain our public trust and confidence.

I look forward to engaging with interested colleagues across the House on maximising the potential benefits of data use for the whole of the UK.

[HCWS143]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Reducing Demand for Water

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): In 2019 the Government carried out a consultation on measures to reduce personal water consumption. Today I wish to announce measures that the Government will take following our consultation.

Context

The Government's 25-year environment plan sets out our ambition for achieving clean and plentiful water. The Environment Agency's national framework set out that an additional 25% of the current daily volume put into our public water supply will be needed in England by 2050 to meet future pressures on public supply¹.

Water demand reduction is essential to support the delivery of our commitment. Water companies need to reduce the leakage from their network infrastructure and we need to support households and businesses (including charities and the public sector) to use less water.

Leakage

Ofwat has set companies a performance commitment to reduce leakage by 16% by 2025 and water companies have gone further and committed to delivering a 50% reduction in leakage from 2017-18 levels by 2050, which is predicted to save up to 1,400 megalitres of water per day². The Government expect this to be met and have required water companies to plan on this basis.

Business water use

Businesses use 20% of the total water put into our public supply. Water companies and retailers have worked with the Government, regulators, the market operator and Waterwise to produce an action plan to sustainably reduce businesses' water use. This includes understanding how businesses use their water; greater collaboration in water resource planning; identifying and addressing regulatory and other relevant barriers to the delivery of business water efficiency; and supporting businesses to save water through information awareness.

Water meters

The Government will make no changes to existing rules around when people can be charged for their water use through water meters.

Water companies in seriously water stressed areas may implement wider water metering programmes where it is shown within their water resources management plans that there is customer support and it is cost-effective to do so. Using the latest evidence, the Environment Agency has published its recommendation that additional areas in the south, east and the midlands should be designated as in serious water stress.

Metering programmes must nevertheless be justified by water companies and achieve customer support. This strikes the right balance between the need to protect water supplies and importance of water companies reducing leakage before expanding the use of water meters. This protects unmetered family homes from unexpected large increases in bills.

Water efficient homes

Today I am announcing measures that the Government will take forward to support water efficiency in homes. We will:

Ask water companies to develop a consistent approach to address leakage on customers' own pipes, as, over the last 10 years around 25% of total leakage has been from customer supply pipes;

Make regulations to introduce a mandatory water efficiency label to inform consumers and encourage the purchase of more water efficient products for both domestic and business use. We will consider the potential to achieve energy savings, as well as further water savings, and explore how these can be achieved in a way that minimises the impact on consumers;

Write to local authorities to encourage them to adopt the optional minimum building standard of 110 litres per person per day in all new builds where there is a clear local need, such as in water stressed areas; and

In 2022 develop a road map towards greater water efficiency in new developments and retrofits, including the exploration of revised building regulations and how the development of

new technologies can contribute to meeting these standards. We will ensure that the underlying legislation can, where appropriate, accommodate any potential future expansion of rainwater harvesting, water reuse and storage options.

Conclusion

These measures, along with the actions of water companies, will support the delivery of the ambitions set out in the national framework to reduce personal water consumption to 110 litres per person per day by 2050, without affecting the quality of life and the enjoyment of water used by households.

Waterwise has agreed to chair a group of industry experts, reporting to me regularly, that will track delivery of these stretching commitments.

This work will support the measures set out in the Environment Bill to further help us secure long-term, resilient water and wastewater services, making sure that we have a cleaner, greener and more resilient country for the next generation.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/873100/National_Framework_for_water_resources_summary.pdf.

² <https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/NIC-Preparing-for-a-Drier-Future-26-April-2018.pdf>.

[HCWS140]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Children and Family Weight Management Services: Final Funding Allocations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): On 23 March this year I confirmed the Government were dedicating £34.9 million of new funding to support the expansion of local authority weight management services for adults, children and families in 2021-22. These funds will be allocated via two ring-fenced grants under section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003.

The first grant distributed £30.5 million among all local authorities in England to commission adult behavioural weight management services and draft allocations were published in late March. Since publication 149 local authorities have accepted funding awards.

At the same time, I launched the application process for local authorities to apply for funding through a second grant distributing £4.4 million to test the expansion of behavioural weight management services for children and families and pilot an intervention to improve access to local services for children identified as living with overweight or obesity through the national child measurement programme.

I am pleased to announce that eight applicants representing 11 local authorities will be awarded funding through the child and family weight management grant (No. 31/5627). A full list of awardees will be published on gov.uk and all applicants will be notified of the outcome of the application process in writing.

[HCWS147]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Revitalising High Streets and Town Centres

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): As part of our ongoing measures to improve the planning system, increase housing supply on brownfield land, stimulate investment in urban areas and sustain jobs, we have in recent years introduced new permitted development rights which allow the change of use to residential without the need for a full planning application. I am pleased that, through these measures, we have made a significant additional contribution to our housing supply by utilising already developed brownfield land. We have also legislated to ensure new homes delivered via permitted development rights provide adequate daylight and meet national space standards. Our most recent reforms introduced a new right to allow change of use from commercial, business and service use to residential. This will breathe new life into commercial areas and high streets by bringing vacant buildings back into use as new high street homes, all the more important as a result of the economic disruption caused by the covid-19 pandemic.

In very specific circumstances, local authorities can make article 4 directions to suspend individual permitted development rights, when justified by robust evidence.

This written ministerial statement sets out measures I am taking to ensure that our policy on article 4 directions is used in a highly targeted way to protect the thriving core of historic high street areas, but does not unnecessarily restrict the ability to deliver much needed housing through national permitted development rights. Our new policy will apply to all article 4 directions.

We recently consulted on revised policy on article 4 directions in our consultation on the “National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design Code: consultation proposals”, which ran from 30 January to 27 March 2021. I have reviewed our national policy in the light of the helpful responses to that consultation.

As a result, I intend to make changes to the national planning policy framework later this year, but ahead of that I wanted to announce our new policy, so that local authorities and communities can take it into account from today when they consider bringing in any new article 4 directions.

The new paragraph 53 of the national planning policy framework will read:

“The use of article 4 directions to remove national permitted development rights should:

where they relate to change from non-residential use to residential use, be limited to situations where an article 4 direction is necessary to avoid wholly unacceptable adverse impacts (this could include the loss of the essential core of a primary shopping area which would seriously undermine its vitality and viability, but would be very unlikely to extend to the whole of a town centre);

in other cases, be limited to situations where an article 4 direction is necessary to protect local amenity or the well-being of the area (this could include the use of article 4 directions to require planning permission for the demolition of local facilities);

in all cases, be based on robust evidence, and apply to the smallest geographical area possible.”

Our aim is to support high streets and by ensuring a higher threshold for making article 4 directions relating to change of use to residential we will maximise the potential for underused buildings to be converted to an alternative use. Councils should recognise the value to housing supply and increasing resident town centre footfall from supporting “flats above shops”; for example, councils can consider applying different policies to residential conversions above ground floor level. This is important to support mixed and flexible high streets, to deliver additional homes more easily, and to support jobs in the construction industry, while increasing demand for local high street services through new high street homes. This change only applies to changes from non-residential to residential use. This change does not apply to changes between different residential uses, which will enable local authorities to continue to restrict change of use from a family home to a house of multiple occupancy where that is necessary to protect local amenity or the wellbeing of an area.

Article 4 directions should be very carefully targeted, applying only to those locations where they are necessary to avoid wholly unacceptable adverse impacts. For that reason, I want to make clear that the geographical coverage of all article 4 directions should be the smallest area possible to achieve the aim of the article 4 direction. In respect of historic high streets and town centres, this is likely to be the irreducible core of a primary shopping area. It is very unlikely to be applicable to a broad area, and is not expected to be applied to an entire local authority area. Local authorities will need to have robust evidence to justify the article 4 direction and the area it covers.

In advance of the publication of the revised national planning policy framework, I want local authorities to follow this new policy when they consider making new article 4 directions so that they can assure themselves and their communities that the article 4 direction is necessary and meets the higher threshold. Local authorities are required to notify me about new article 4 directions. I will instruct my officials to look closely at all new article 4 directions to check that they comply with the new policy, and I will consider exercising my power to intervene if they do not.

[HCWS145]

WORK AND PENSIONS

BPDTS Tailored Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (the Baroness Stedman-Scott) has made the following written statement.

On 29 September 2020 the outcome of the BPDTS tailored review was published. The review recommended the creation of a single departmental digital function for DWP—concluding that the strategic context and challenges which BPDTS was designed to address had fundamentally altered since its creation in 2016.

Action has now been taken to implement the recommendations and all BPDTS staff and functions will transfer to DWP on 1 July 2021.

From 1 July activities in BPDTS will focus on the closure of the company and the publication of final annual reports and accounts, with formal closure anticipated in early 2022.

[HCWS141]

In-Work Progression Commission: Report Launch

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): In March 2020, I established the In-Work Progression Commission and appointed Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith to lead an independent review into the barriers that prevent people from progressing in work and increasing pay.

Her report, “Supporting progression out of low pay: a call to action”, which sets out the Commission’s findings is being published today. This timely and important report will help increase the evidence base about the nature of the barriers holding people back and how Government and employers could improve progression opportunities. I would like to thank the Baroness for leading the review, as well as her advisory panel for their considered contributions. I will place a copy of the report in the Library of the House.

The Commission’s review shows we all have a role to play. The report highlights examples of great employers around the country who are leading the way and who other employers should look to learn from. It also makes recommendations for the Government, which we will carefully consider and respond to in due course.

Since the Commission started its review, covid-19 has had a significant impact on the labour market and created challenges for workers and businesses throughout the country. The Government have provided an unprecedented package of support for workers and businesses throughout the pandemic and our multi-billion-pound plan for jobs will ensure jobseekers of all ages get the support they need to build additional skills and find work.

Building back fairer from the pandemic means better opportunities for people across the country to move into decent jobs, climb the career ladder and raise their earnings. With Government and employers working together, we will achieve our ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to work.

[HCWS139]

Petition

Thursday 1 July 2021

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Voter ID

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current statistics on voter fraud show that it is incredibly rare and that this is no widespread problem across the UK, thus voter ID requirements are a solution in search of a problem; further that the only type of fraud that photographic voter IDs could prevent is voter impersonation, which is even more rare each year; further that this legislation has been described as draconian, archaic and anti-democratic as it puts a qualification on the franchise; further that the real consequence of this legislation will be this Government suppressing voting among lower income, ethnic minority, and younger people, all of whom are less likely to vote for the party now in Government; further that, in contrast to this archaic Government, the SNP Government in Holyrood is focused on measures to extend the franchise and encourage turnout; further that the SNP has already introduced votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, refugees, and foreign nationals with leave to remain; and further that voting should be made as easy as possible with no barrier to contributing to democracy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to dismiss any plans to implement legislation that enforces voter IDs.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 26 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 482.]

[P002666]

Observations from the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith):

Voter identification is part of the Government's body of work to strengthen the integrity and security of our elections. We will not remove voter identification requirements from the Elections Bill.

The Government were elected on a manifesto that committed to protecting the integrity of our democracy, by introducing identification to vote at polling stations. The Government have since announced that these measures are being brought forward as part of a wider initiative to tackle electoral fraud and give voters confidence in our elections.

Voter fraud is a crime that we cannot allow room for, so the Government are stamping out any potential for it to take place in our elections. Strengthening the integrity of our electoral system will give the public confidence that our elections will remain secure well into the future. Showing identification to prove who you are is something people of all walks of life already do every day. It is a reasonable and proportionate approach to extend this practice to voting and to give the public confidence in a core principle of our democracy—that their vote is theirs, and theirs alone.

An independent review of electoral fraud conducted by Lord Pickles highlighted the events of cases such as Tower Hamlets—in which the 2014 mayoral election was declared void by corrupt and illegal practices—as evidence of vulnerabilities in our system which must be addressed. Personation—assuming the identity of another person with the intention to deceive—is very difficult to prove and prosecute: by definition, it is a crime of deception. However, it is by no means a victimless crime. There are frequent anecdotal reports of personation, including most recently during the 2021 local elections. Often, it only comes to light if and when the real voter tries to vote later after the crime has been committed.

That is why voter identification is so important, as it virtually eliminates the risk of personation occurring in the first place, and why the Government will not be dismissing plans to implement these measures.

Even the perception that our electoral system is vulnerable to fraud is damaging for public confidence. Data from our pilot evaluations in 2018 and 2019 show that the requirement to show identification increased voter confidence in the voting process. Both rounds of voter identification pilots also demonstrated our ability to collaborate very successfully with local authorities and support them in delivering voter identification that works for voters.

Voters in Northern Ireland have been required by law to show paper identification since 1985, and the Labour Government introduced photographic identification at polling stations across Northern Ireland in 2003. The experience in Northern Ireland illustrates that, once the requirement has become established and is part and parcel of the voting process, the vast majority of voters complete the voting process after turning up at the polling station. This is also the case in many countries around the world, where voter identification works with ease.

To that end, voters will be required to show an approved form of photographic identification before collecting their ballot paper to vote at a polling station in a UK parliamentary election in Great Britain and at local elections in England, and at police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales.

The list of approved photographic identification will not be limited to passports and driving licences. A broad range of documents will be accepted, including, for example, various concessionary travel passes, proof of age standards scheme (PASS) cards and photocard parking permits issued as part of the Blue Badge scheme. In addition, expired photographic identification will be accepted as long as the photograph is of a good enough likeness to allow polling station staff to confirm the identity of the holder.

Everyone who is eligible to vote will continue to be able to do so.

New research published by the Government shows that 98% of voters already own a photographic document that is on the list of acceptable types of identification under this policy. The figure was between 96% to 99% across all age groups and regions, and the research found that 99% of people from ethnic minorities owned an accepted form of photographic identification, as did 99% of those aged 18 to 29. This research can be found at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9187/>

Where a voter does not have one of the approved forms of photo identification, local authorities will be required, by law, to provide a voter card free of charge. The Electoral Commission will deliver a comprehensive and targeted communications campaign to raise awareness

for the changes to the requirements at the polling station, and we will continue to work with the Electoral Commission and other stakeholders, including charities and civil society organisations, to make sure that voter identification works for all voters.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 1 July 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	393	DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Court Cases: Media Comment.....	393	Digital Connectivity: Rural Areas.....	387
Criminal Justice System Recovery: Covid-19.....	394	Electronic Communications Code.....	386
End-to-End Rape Review.....	398	Important Historical Documents.....	386
Royal Albert Hall: Charity Tribunal.....	394	National Lottery Licence: Procurement.....	389
Serious Fraud Office: Economic Crime.....	397	Paralympic Games.....	388
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	381	Topical Questions.....	390
Channel 4.....	383	Tourism Industry: Covid-19.....	381
Cultural and Sporting Sectors: Covid-19.....	389	Tourism Recovery Plan.....	387

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 1 July 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	23WS
STRATEGY	15WS	Children and Family Weight Management	
Nissan: Sunderland Plant.....	15WS	Services: Final Funding Allocations.....	23WS
CABINET OFFICE	15WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL	
EU Relations: Withdrawal Agreement.....	15WS	GOVERNMENT	24WS
DEFENCE	20WS	Revitalising High Streets and Town Centres.....	24WS
Atomic Weapons Establishment.....	20WS	TREASURY	17WS
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	20WS	Financial Services Consultation.....	17WS
EU-UK Personal Data Transfers.....	20WS	Publication of UK Government Green Financing	
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	21WS	Framework.....	18WS
Reducing Demand for Water.....	21WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	25WS
		BPDTS Tailored Review.....	25WS
		In-Work Progression Commission: Report	
		Launch.....	26WS

PETITION

Thursday 1 July 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	1P
Voter ID.....	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 8 July 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 1 July 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 381] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Attorney General

Business of the House [Col. 401]

Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill [Col. 418]

Read a Second and Third time, and passed

Backbench Business

Windrush Day 2021 [Col. 419]

Motion—(Helen Hayes)—agreed to

Pride Month [Col. 450]

Motion—(Dame Angela Eagle)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 499]

Social Housing: Housing Ombudsman [Col. 500]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Enabling Community Energy [Col. 123WH]

Covid-19: Effect on Retirement Communities [Col. 147WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]

Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
