

**Monday
19 July 2021**

**Volume 699
No. 36**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 19 July 2021

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The House met at half-past Two 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.]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a short statement about working safely on the parliamentary estate and the wearing of face coverings. With the increase in infection levels in the community and with people having to isolate, I strongly advise that everyone on the estate should wear face coverings when moving around, accessing catering venues and areas they consider crowded, including the Chamber. We have four sitting days before the House rises and I really want us to behave safely and responsibly during those few days. None of us wants to risk taking covid back to our families, staff or constituents, and I am sure we want everyone working on the estate to feel safe and secure and to ensure that the business of this House continues. We certainly have a large number of people who have been contacted, so I am worrying about the outcome. With four days to go, I want us all to have a good break and enjoy our holidays, so I hope we will take this seriously and not push the limits for the sake of it.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2021.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rough Sleeping

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): With reference to the Government's commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024, whether he has plans to update the rough sleeping strategy to set out how that commitment will be met. [902850]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): Our focus in the last year has rightly been on managing the response to the pandemic and supporting tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people across our society. During the pandemic, we took unprecedented

action to protect people sleeping rough or at risk of doing so. This saved lives and achieved huge reductions in the number of people sleeping rough: a 37% decrease in the latest statistics. Our ambition to end rough sleeping within this Parliament still stands. We are taking into account the lessons learned from our ongoing pandemic response, including Everyone In and the Protect programme, to inform our long-term plans.

Layla Moran [V]: The Everyone In scheme has undoubtedly been a success and led to incredible stories of lives being turned around in a housing-first approach that has support from all sides of the House. However, several councils have reported that the Government have instructed them, through the terms of the rough sleeping initiative funding allocations, to end the use of emergency accommodation for those sleeping rough, so signalling the end of the Everyone In scheme. To make matters worse, the rough sleeping strategy is still in need of updating following the pandemic. Were local authorities instructed to end Everyone In? If so, have charitable and third-sector groups been made aware so that they can fill in the gaps? When can we expect to see the updated rough sleeping strategy and, indeed, the promised review of the Vagrancy Act 1824?

Eddie Hughes: As is so often the case, the Lib Dems are more focused on two things: making plans—rather than taking action—and scaremongering. It is categorically not the case that either charities or local councils have been instructed as the hon. Member suggested. Indeed, funding through the rough sleeping initiative continues to fund people in emergency accommodation. More importantly, we should note that that is a temporary form of accommodation and it is incredibly important that we get people moved on to more permanent forms of accommodation. That should be the objective of all of us.

Somerset: Unitary Local Government

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): How many people who responded to the Government's consultation on unitary local government in Somerset supported (a) One Somerset and (b) Stronger Somerset. [902851]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall) [V]: The Secretary of State expects to announce his decisions on the unitary proposals before the summer recess. Alongside those decisions, he will publish a summary of the consultation responses. I assure my hon. Friend that that will include all the detail he seeks and much more alongside it.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the one and only Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Liddell-Grainger [V]: That is the most pathetic answer I think I have heard in 20 years. The Government's consultation for the unitary was finished months ago. I have asked parliamentary questions and written to the Minister—I have tried everything. If on 13 December 2019 the returning officer in Thornbury and Yate had stood up to announce that a total of 52,000 votes had been cast but refused to declare the winner, there would have been outrage. Why will the Government not come

clean over this? Why are they holding it back? Why on earth has this become an issue? Let us just hear who won the Government's consultation. Please tell us now and tell the House.

Mr Speaker: Let me remind the Member that I am not responsible for the answer, and I am certainly not taking the blame for Bridgwater and Somerset. Minister, please pick that one up.

Luke Hall: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There is no broken commitment. We always said that we would publish the outcome before the summer recess, and we are absolutely on track to do that. We received more than 5,500 responses to the consultation on local government reorganisation in Somerset and, when we publish the information, which will be on schedule, as promised, we will show the proportion of respondents who supported the different proposals, together with a summary of their expressed views. I assure him that we are on track to publish before the summer recess.

Rough Sleeping

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of rough sleepers. [902852]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): I am proud that my Department is leading a cross-Government drive to eliminate rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament. We are spending £750 million over the next year to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. That includes the largest ever investment in long-term move-on accommodation, with 6,000 homes pledged in this Parliament. Our efforts are paying off: recent data shows that rough sleeping has fallen by 43% under this Administration, with a 37% fall in the last year alone.

Sir David Amess [V]: And now for something completely different: Southend. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Southend on reducing the level of rough sleeping by nearly 90% since November 2017, which is well above the national average? Local organisations such as HARP and Off the Streets have done a magnificent job under really difficult circumstances, so I urge him and his Department to continue to support local charities with this important and valuable work.

Eddie Hughes: I am delighted to commend my hon. Friend and the local teams and providers who have worked incredibly hard in Southend to achieve the figures that he described. They have worked tirelessly to achieve such a brilliant result and continue to work towards seeing an end to rough sleeping in his area. It is particularly heartening to hear him championing the cause of organisations such as HARP and Off the Streets, which have redoubled their efforts to support local people—vulnerable people—during the pandemic.

HGV Driver Shortages: Waste Collections

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect on local authority waste collections of HGV driver shortages. [902853]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall) [V]: We are working across Government and with the waste sector to better understand the issues facing waste-collection vehicle staffing levels. We are working with the industry and have already taken action on HGV driver shortages, including by ramping up vocational test capacity and funding apprenticeships.

Greg Clark: The Minister was good enough to meet me to discuss the poor performance of Urbaser, the company that has the contract for waste with Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling. Will he update my constituents on what action he has taken since our meeting so that we can see a rapid improvement to their service?

Luke Hall: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising his concerns again about the performance of Urbaser and for taking the time to meet me to explain in detail the concerning situation that his constituents face. It is something that we take extremely seriously. Following our meeting, I have written to Urbaser to ask how it intends to address the concerns that he has relayed. I certainly urge it to use every tool at its disposal to meet its contractual commitments and I look forward to working with him to continue to monitor this important situation.

Planning System Modernisation

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the planning system in England. [902854]

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the planning system in England. [902864]

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the planning system in England. [902876]

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the planning system in England. [902877]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): We will modernise the planning system, ensuring a simpler, faster and more predictable system that delivers more homes, more infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, and honours our commitment to net zero and the environment. Our reforms will also make the planning system more accessible through digital plan making, ensuring more local people—more than the 1% who currently engage with the planning system—can get involved. We are taking power out of the hands of the big developers and giving it back to local communities and small builders so that, together, we can build back better.

Dean Russell: I thank my right hon. Friend and Ministers for their engagement and correspondence over the last year. As he will know, I have asked what mechanisms exist to challenge the housing targets for my constituency. As such, will he confirm my new understanding that the local authority housing needs target is not set in stone and is a starting point for negotiation, and that it is the local authority's responsibility to challenge the housing target as part of its local plan?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about that on a number of occasions—as have I with you, Mr Speaker. He will appreciate that I am unable to comment on the specific local plans because of my quasi-judicial role. However, he is right to say that housing targets are only a starting point. All local plans are subject to an independent examination. Following consultation with the local community, anyone who wants to make representations to change a plan must be heard by the inspector. That process will take into account local land constraints such as the green belt, sites of special scientific interest, national parks and so on in coming to a sensible and credible way forward.

Rob Butler: My right hon. Friend is right that planning reform is overdue, but in Buckinghamshire there are serious concerns that the voices of local people will not be heard. For example, we know that in Aylesbury many thousands more houses will be built in the coming years, but the town is already merging into nearby villages and infrastructure is at breaking point. What reassurance can he provide that when residents raise legitimate concerns, they will be listened to?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and he is right to say that significant housing delivery is occurring at the moment in Aylesbury. There are two principal things that the Government seek to do to support his constituents. The first is to ensure that more infrastructure accompanies that housing; we will do that principally through our infrastructure levy, which will capture more of the land value uplift and put more money at the service of his excellent local council in Buckinghamshire. Secondly, we will ensure that more local people can be involved in the planning system by digitising it so that, at the touch of a smartphone, people can access and understand a plan and comment on or even object to a planning application. By doing so, we expect that we can boost the number of people who engage in our system and drive a truly localist approach.

Chris Clarkson: There is a great deal of concern in my Heywood and Middleton constituency and across Greater Manchester about the amount of green belt approved for release by the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, as part of his Greater Manchester spatial framework. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me about protection of the green belt as part of his Department's new planning reforms?

Robert Jenrick: This Government made a manifesto commitment not just to protect the green belt, but to enhance it. At the moment, planning policy is clear that building on the green belt should be contemplated only in the most exceptional circumstances, and we intend to continue that through our modernised planning system. I appreciate the pressure that my hon. Friend and his constituents are under as a result of the proposed Greater Manchester spatial framework, which does not seem to accord with the wishes of local residents. I hope that as we come out of the pandemic, Manchester City Council and others with a good record of house building and regeneration will find opportunities for imaginative building on brownfield sites and around the city centre.

Laura Trott: I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend's earlier answer, but does he agree that in any future planning reforms we must increase protection for

our green belt? In Sevenoaks and Swanley, we are 93% green belt, yet we are constantly inundated by speculative planning applications such as that at Broke Hill, which worry the local community. The message should be clear: if it is green belt, it is protected, and if a planning application is put in for the green belt, the answer will be no.

Robert Jenrick: The point that my hon. Friend touches on is that the current planning system is not well regarded and is not producing the kinds of outcomes that we want; that is precisely why we want to reform and modernise it. We want to ensure that protections such as the green belt have the weight that they deserve in the planning system and that we can cut out speculative development unless it is approved by democratically elected local councillors at their sole discretion. The system that we are bringing forward does exactly that. Local authorities will need to have a plan; if they have a plan that is allocated land, there will be no need for issues such as speculative development and the five-year land supply.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The anti-corruption campaign Transparency International says that the Conservative party has become overly dependent on donations from developers. It is particularly concerned that Ministers failed to report the details of what they talked about to developers in over 300 meetings about which they simply disclosed generalisations such as “housing” or “planning”; it fears that that could amount to what it calls aggregate corruption. Will the Secretary of State now publish the full minutes of all those meetings so that the public can see exactly what Ministers agreed to do for their developer paymasters?

Robert Jenrick: As the hon. Gentleman knows, all meetings that Ministers have are correctly identified on the register of interests, but I have to say that he has been on quite a journey. One adviser who worked with him as leader of Lambeth Council has been left bemused: is this the same Champagne Steve he remembers meeting with developers? It is not just him who has invited charges of shameless hypocrisy; the Leader of the Opposition has received thousands of pounds of donations from developers, and the deputy leader of the Labour party caused a splash in the papers the other day for accepting £10,000 from developers for her leadership campaign.

Mr Speaker: Order. Could the right hon. Gentleman withdraw the word “hypocrisy”? Hon. Members would never be hypocritical.

Robert Jenrick: I will certainly withdraw that, at your request, Mr Speaker. We can only imagine how much the deputy leader of the Labour party will be asking for when it comes to her impending leadership campaign.

Steve Reed: It is not surprising that the Secretary of State is refusing to be transparent, because we all know who benefits the most from their developers' charter. Just weeks ago, this House passed Labour's motion to guarantee residents' right to a say over local planning applications in their own neighbourhoods. This week, councillors of all parties—including the right hon. Gentleman's—in Medway and Richmond passed similar

motions. How many more councils will need to do the same before he ditches the developers' charter and his plan to pay back developers by selling out communities?

Robert Jenrick: I am sure that Conservative councillors the length and breadth of the country were over the moon to receive the hon. Gentleman's letter. I can see the scene now over the summer recess, when the gate rattles or there is a knock at the door and he rushes to check what the post has brought in, but like a jilted lover or a pen pal who assumes his letters got lost in the mail, he finds nothing there except just another letter from Croydon Council telling him that the bills are going up as a result of the terrible mistakes and mismanagement that his friends and cronies are making over at Croydon. He has taken an avowedly anti-house building approach. This is a far cry from the Labour party of Attlee and Bevan, who said that this was a social service and a moral mission. This Government are going to keep on building houses, but we will build them sensitively. We will build beautiful homes, we will protect the environment and we will help young people and those on lower incomes to enjoy all the security and prosperity that comes with owning a home of their own.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: I hope that the Secretary of State has seen the Select Committee's report into the planning reforms. We were supportive of a number of aspects, including the need to strengthen local plans and how they are drawn up. Could I ask him two things in relation to our recommendations? We need to recognise the serious change in moving to a zonal system and the importance of getting the details right, and I wonder if he might consider the recommendation to move, at the next stage, to a draft Bill, so that we could give it serious pre-legislative scrutiny as to what it would mean in practice. Secondly, will he have another look at the distribution of housing under his latest proposals? Under the proposals, large areas of the north outside the major cities will see their housing numbers fall, which seems to be in contradiction to the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and the members of the Select Committee for their interesting report, which we have considered carefully as part of the broader work that we have done to listen to the views of colleagues here in Parliament on both sides of the House and in the country before preparing our response to the White Paper in the autumn. I will of course bear in mind his suggestion about pre-legislative scrutiny, which may be a good way forward. On his second point, I must respectfully disagree, because I think levelling up involves ensuring that our big cities of the midlands and the north build more homes. That is the way we will ensure a brownfield-first approach. That is also the way we will ensure inspired regeneration and get aspirational middle-class families back into some of those great cities, and ensure that councils have the revenues they need to invest and to prosper; and of course it is the way to protect the countryside from unnecessary development.

Social Housing

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): What progress he has made on the Government's new deal for social housing since the publication of the social housing Green Paper in 2018. [902855]

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What progress he has made on the Government's new deal for social housing since the publication of the social housing Green Paper in 2018. [902863]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): We listened to thousands of residents in 2018 and acted decisively, publishing the social housing White Paper last November. We have strengthened the housing ombudsman service, run a complaints awareness campaign and taken important steps to improve safety and decency, including launching the review of the decent homes standard, reviewing electrical safety and consulting on smoke alarms and carbon monoxide measures. We are putting residents first and ensuring that they live in safe, decent homes and are treated with respect and courtesy.

Mick Whitley [V]: Every day, millions of people across the country grapple with the realities of the housing crisis, from overcrowded and unsanitary housing, to rip-off rents and negligent landlords. Our country is calling out for a new generation of high-quality, sustainable social housing, but the much-delayed social housing White Paper has failed to deliver on promises made by the then Housing Secretary in 2017, while the Government's planning reforms could remove the main remaining route to social house building by abolishing section 106. So will the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to build the social housing that people up and down the country so desperately need?

Eddie Hughes: First, and perhaps most importantly, it might be helpful if Labour-run councils such as Croydon were providing high-quality social housing—that would be incredibly helpful. We do not need Government legislation for them to be able to do that. We do not need to wait for Government legislation; I have already convened a meeting of the social housing White Paper challenge panel, with representatives from across the sector and, more importantly, tenants' representatives, to hear what they need. As we have heard earlier, this Government are also investing £11.5 billion in building new affordable homes, so we are increasing the number of properties that are available and we are also working with the sector to ensure that the housing we have at the moment is all of an acceptable standard.

Liz Twist: Too many families spent lockdown in overcrowded homes. Housing and health go hand in hand, as we know; overcrowding not only increases the risk of catching covid-19, but puts a strain on mental health. Building back better must mean building good-quality, affordable housing. What plans does the Minister have to reverse the trend whereby we are losing more social homes than we are building?

Eddie Hughes: I think the simple answer to that is that since 2010 we have delivered 365,800 affordable homes for rent, of which 148,000 are for social rent.

Local Government Finance Settlement

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans he has to review the local government finance settlement. [902856]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government

(Luke Hall) [V]: The local government finance settlement this year was another excellent outcome for councils. We made available an increase in core spending power from £49 billion last year to £51.3 billion this year—an increase in cash terms of 4.6%. There are no plans to review this positive outcome for councils, which was unopposed by this House.

Christian Matheson: The prevailing problem for local councils is, of course, the massive cuts from central Government funding, but may I ask the Minister to reflect on another issue—the patchwork of funding and the short-term basis of that funding? Would it be possible to have a settlement, of perhaps three years, that gave councils more time to plan with the less money that they have?

Luke Hall: First, I would not accept that there are cuts for local government spending in the finance settlement; there was a huge increase this year. If the hon. Gentleman felt it was an unacceptable settlement, he had the chance to oppose it. His local council saw a 4.1% increase in funding this year and it has £150 million sat in reserves, so I do not accept that argument at all. On biddable pots of funding, that is exactly why we have provided capacity funding to councils in the top priority status for the levelling-up fund and community renewal fund, to help them with that work to build good business cases and bids, and submit them to central Government—and to build strong relationships with us as well. I do not accept his overall point about funding, but we are absolutely supporting councils with the capacity funding that they need, and helping them to build that through the support we provide through the Local Government Association as well.

Health Inequalities: Levelling-up Fund

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the (a) Chancellor of the Exchequer and (b) Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on tackling health inequalities through the levelling-up fund. [902857]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government

(Luke Hall) [V]: The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life in our country. It is a core part of our levelling-up agenda, and I regularly speak to my ministerial colleagues about the fund. These discussions will inform our levelling-up White Paper, which we intend to publish later this year.

Catherine McKinnell [V]: Health inequalities are a clear and persistent indicator of the growing gap between and within regions. Swim England forecasts that, because of the impact of the pandemic, by 2026 just 35% of children in the most deprived areas will meet the required national swimming standard when they leave primary school, compared with 77% in the most affluent areas. More than 400 leisure centres—including West Denton swimming pool in my constituency—have already closed and many more are under threat. Will the Minister give assurances that he and the Chancellor will use the levelling-up fund to address such glaring inequalities? They could make a great start by backing Newcastle's levelling-up fund bid to develop a new swimming and leisure development in the outer west of Newcastle.

Luke Hall: I know that the hon. Lady is hugely passionate about this project in her constituency and has raised it with the Prime Minister directly. We certainly welcome her enthusiasm for the fund and the bid, which is exactly why we are providing councils such as hers with the £125,000 of capacity funding that I have mentioned previously. I am sure she will appreciate that I cannot comment on the specific nature of the bid, but we are supporting projects throughout the country, through mechanisms such as the towns fund, to support positive health and wellbeing implications. I will keep the hon. Lady updated as we move through the process. We expect to announce the outcome of the competition in the autumn this year.

Leaseholders: Protection from Unfair Practices

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help protect leaseholders from unfair practices. [902858]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes):

Unfair practices have no place in our housing market and the Government are committed to ending them. In January, we announced a package of reforms that will result in substantial savings to leaseholders, and we are currently legislating to restrict ground rents to zero for future leases. The legislation is currently with their lordships and will come to this House in the autumn.

We have asked the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate potential mis-selling in the leaseholder sector. In September last year, the CMA began enforcement action against a number of developers and investors. I was particularly pleased to hear that both Persimmon and Aviva have already agreed to amend their practices as a result.

Mark Logan [V]: This is my first time shooting the breeze with the Minister in his new role—I offer him big congratulations. Will he clarify whether the Building Safety Bill will protect leaseholders in cases in which the property developer has failed to complete its work diligently, even if the company in question becomes insolvent because of its own malpractice?

Eddie Hughes: It is a pleasure to shoot the breeze with my hon. Friend. It is fundamental that industry contributes for having compromised public safety, which is why the Building Safety Bill introduces a new levy on high-rise residential buildings. Clause 124 of the Bill also provides legal requirements for building owners to explore alternative ways to meet remediation costs and provide evidence. If that does not happen, leaseholders will be able to challenge costs in court. In addition, we have announced more than £5 billion towards remediation work on buildings of 18 metres and above and a generous finance scheme for remediation work on buildings of 11 to 18 metres.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): There is, finally, much in the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill for many people to welcome going forward, but people like Tracy in my constituency, and many millions of existing leaseholders, remain trapped, with unjust and feudal charges. Will the Minister commit to supporting Labour's

amendment, which is to be considered in the other place tomorrow, to extend the ban to the many leaseholders and not just the new?

Eddie Hughes: It is important that we take the opportunity to be proportionate about the situation we are in: 96% of the high-rise buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding identified at the start of last year are now remediated or have work under way. The Government are already taking action to help people who are in a difficult position. As I said, the new Building Safety Bill will provide legal requirements for building owners to explore alternative ways to meet future remediation costs.

Planning System Reform

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the planning system. [R] [902860]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): We are transforming the planning system through not only the recently announced changes but our proposals for ambitious long-term reforms. The planning Bill announced in the Gracious Speech will modernise our planning system, with simpler processes and a digital transformation. We have also published changes to the way local housing need is calculated, to enable more homes to come forward in our largest cities, where we need them most, and a national model design code, which will drive up the quality of new development.

Rachel Hopkins [V]: I have just heard the Secretary of State talk about building beautiful homes. However, the Government's new permitted development rights will see more commercial buildings converted into small cramped flats in inappropriate locations, such as Unity House in Luton South, which, although sited on a four-lane ring road, bypassed important air quality regulations as it was converted under PDR. The Government must wake up to the reality that they are creating the slums of the future. Will the Minister adopt measures set out in my ten-minute rule Bill last week that would allow local planning authorities to impose design standards on PDR applications to protect communities' health and wellbeing?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady, but design codes will apply, including to PDRs. She might note that 72,000 additional homes have been created in the past several years thanks to PDR. That is about double the number of homes that the Mayor of London has managed to build in an equivalent time. We have stipulated that those homes going forward must be of a good design quality, must be of a reasonable space standard and must have light in all habitable rooms. We are building homes for people who need them on the brownfield sites where they need to be built, and she should support our reforms, not oppose them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Councillor Martin Tett, the Conservative leader of Buckinghamshire County Council, said that planned changes to permitted development will create "open season for developers to break up"—

the high street. He has said that article 4 directions are vital in enabling local planning authorities to protect town centres such as the medieval streets of High Wycombe and that councils need time to implement article 4 directions to protect their high streets. Therefore, will the Minister agree to Councillor Tett's request to pause these changes? What does he have to say to Councillor Tett and any other council leaders of all parties who oppose these highly unpopular planning reforms?

Christopher Pincher: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is a little behind the times, because we have already announced our proposals for article 4 directions. We are keeping article 4s as a tool in the armoury of local authorities should they wish to use them. We have also made it very clear that, with permitted development rights, there must be prior approvals in place that local authorities can use to determine whether a planning application should go forward with a PDR, looking, for example, at the height of a building, the aspect of it, and whether there is an aerodrome within 2 kms of a taller-rise building. We made appropriate changes to ensure that we can build brownfield development where it needs to be developed in order to bring forward the homes of the future that people need.

Regeneration of Towns and High Streets

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to regenerate towns and high streets. [902861]

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps he is taking to regenerate towns and high streets. [902866]

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to regenerate towns and high streets. [902869]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to regenerate towns and high streets. [902872]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): As we build back better from the pandemic, we are transforming our high streets into the kind of places that people want to call home for generations to come. Last week, the Prime Minister announced the last 15 of our 101 town deals worth £2.4 billion, alongside launching our £150 million community ownership fund and our high streets strategy. That set out a vision for cleaner and more vibrant high streets where entrepreneurs can thrive and local businesses are supported, with permanent al fresco dining and where derelict eyesores are transformed into quality homes.

Lee Anderson: Now then, Ashfield has benefited from more than £70 million from the towns fund and the future high streets fund, which is welcome news to our struggling high streets, but the independent traders in Kirby-in-Ashfield are up in arms at Ashfield District Council's decision to double car parking charges on a four-hour stay. This is after it has increased its own allowances by £55,000 a year. Will my right hon. Friend please remind the politicians at Ashfield District Council that, while they are taking Government cash to help regenerate our high streets, they, too, could help by not doubling car parking charges, which hurt our shoppers, our shopworkers and our high streets?

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituency has received that £70 million to deliver exciting regeneration projects across his local area. He is right to say that it would be perverse if the Government are doing so much, with his help, to support the people of Ashfield for his council not to play its part as well. We want high streets to be as accessible as possible, whether that is by car, walking or cycling, and to be attractive places for local people to visit, to live in and to shop.

Aaron Bell: I thank the Secretary of State for coming to visit me in Newcastle-under-Lyme earlier this month. Newcastle-under-Lyme is benefiting from more than £34 million of investment through the towns deal and the future high streets fund. He knows the town very well and will know that the Ryecroft site, in particular, has been an eyesore for a long time, along with the derelict former Sainsburys site and the former civic offices. Does he therefore welcome, as I do, the fact that we now have a Conservative council under the leadership of Simon Tagg that has a proposal for the site, with the demolition of the old offices, and that with our future high streets funding we will see that developed in the next couple of years?

Robert Jenrick: It was a pleasure to visit Newcastle-under-Lyme once again with my hon. Friend—a town that I have known for more than a decade. It was heartening to see that a good Conservative council very ably led by Simon Tagg has a real 10 or 20-year plan for the town centre backed by tens of millions of pounds of Government investment. That is exactly what we want to see replicated on high streets across the country.

Simon Jupp: I am backing an exciting multi-million-pound bid put forward by Devon County Council and East Devon District Council to help regenerate East Devon's largest town, Exmouth. If the bid is successful, the planned Dinan Way extension will improve journeys into Exmouth and cut congestion, and will also see the town centre spruced up around the train station. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to make sure that every corner of the country, including the south-west, sees the full benefits of levelling up?

Robert Jenrick: We have already committed over £430 million of investment in the south-west alone through the getting building fund, the future high streets fund and the towns fund. My hon. Friend and I have spoken many times about Exmouth and I visited the town with him a year or so ago. It is exactly the kind of place that these funds were designed to support. I very much look forward to reviewing the advice from my officials with regard to the bid for the levelling-up fund, and, if it is a successful bid, to seeing positive change for his constituents in the months and years ahead.

Alexander Stafford [V]: It is great to be able to announce that after a long campaign including my parliamentary petition and an Adjournment debate in this House, a bid for the levelling-up fund has been submitted by Rotherham Council to improve Dinnington high street. However, I am greatly disappointed that Rotherham Council has not submitted a bid for other high streets across Rother Valley such as Maltby, Thurcroft and Swallownest. What can this Government do to ensure that Rotherham Council has plans for and improves all our high streets across Rother Valley?

Robert Jenrick: I wish my hon. Friend a happy birthday. I am delighted that the council put in a bid for Dinnington high street, where he and I met for the first time in 2019. He asks a very important question about what the Government will do for smaller towns across the country, particularly those in ex-mining and ex-steel communities—places that I know well in north Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire. That is one reason that we brought forward the levelling-up fund, which I hope his constituency will benefit from. It does require councils such as Rotherham to step up and develop with their local Member of Parliament high-quality bids, so I hope it will do so in the years ahead for the other towns in his constituency.

Levelling-up Agenda

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with devolved Administrations on delivering the Government's levelling-up agenda. [902862]

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with devolved Administrations on delivering the Government's levelling-up agenda. [902880]

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall) [V]: Levelling up all areas of the country remains at the centre of our agenda, empowering our regions by devolving money, resources and control away from Westminster. In March the Secretary of State and I met Ministers from each of the devolved Administrations to discuss UK-wide funding programmes. My officials will continue to hold discussions with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations as we continue to develop this important investment.

Kirsten Oswald [V]: The Prime Minister has previously said that a pound spent in Croydon is of much more value than a pound spent in Strathclyde. How can anyone in Scotland, or even anyone outside London, really trust the Prime Minister on his levelling-up agenda, which his own MPs seem somewhat uncertain of the meaning of, given his clear record of supporting investment in London ahead of investment in the rest of the UK?

Luke Hall: I am afraid that the hon. Lady's question overlooks the facts. We are prioritising funding in the devolved Administrations by delivering £125,000 capacity funding for every single council in Scotland to help them work up strong bids for the UK community renewal fund, and to build a strong, lasting relationship with central Government so that we bond our precious Union together and help deliver the kind of infrastructure in Scotland that people want to see in every area. We are putting our money where our mouth is and putting that investment straight with the Scottish councils.

Joanna Cherry [V]: Communities such as Wester Hailes in my constituency are best placed to identify their priorities for improving their quality of life, and they have been doing that through a number of grassroots projects, so can the Minister tell me why UK Government Ministers with no remit for devolved matters, such as housing, communities and local government, should get to dictate the support that my constituents receive? Why do they not leave it to the Scottish Parliament and

City of Edinburgh Council, who were elected to do so in terms of the devolved settlement? If there is extra funding to be allocated, why not do so through the proper channels?

Luke Hall: The point of delivering the funding in the way we are is that it is localism in its truest form. We are asking local areas to come up with solutions to the problems that they are telling us they face. We certainly do not believe that the Scottish Government have a monopoly on good ideas for improving Scottish communities. That is why we have asked them to come forward with us, and of course we want to work closely with communities in Scotland and build that long-lasting, strong relationship so that we can bind together our precious Union for many, many years to come.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): In his speech last week on levelling up, the Prime Minister made a plea to the public to email him with ideas for how to flesh out his so far very vague concept of levelling up. Can the Minister tell us how many emails the Prime Minister has received so far and whether any of them contained a plan with any more substance than the Government's?

Luke Hall: Considering the lack of ideas from the Labour party in opposition, I am loth to suggest that that question was ultimately predictable. If Members look at the work we are already doing on levelling up, they will see the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund for regenerating town centres and high streets and upgrading local transport networks. They will see the UK shared prosperity fund, which will start from next year. They will see the £220 million of new investment through the UK community renewal fund. They will see the 101 town deals that the Prime Minister announced last week. They will see us progressing towards delivering 300,000 new homes a year by the middle of the decade. They will see the £3 billion we are investing in the city and growth deals, the devolution programme and the freeports we are delivering. In contrast, we see a Labour party with no ideas for levelling up anywhere in the country. All it has is a struggle to reconcile itself to the fact that it is this Conservative Government who are spending money to support the communities that it neglected for so many years.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): If each local authority in the UK submits only one bid for the maximum of £20 million of levelling-up funding, that will amount to £7.4 billion, which far exceeds the current fund. Given that 300 applications have already been received in the first round, how will the UK Government ensure that sufficient funding is available for later rounds?

Luke Hall: First, Members have to look at the volume of funds that we are delivering over the course of the Parliament that are designed to address the different challenges that communities face. We will also ensure that we have attached priority rankings to councils that need that extra support to invest in their communities, whether that is to regenerate high streets or town centres, to upgrade transport infrastructure, or to support cultural and heritage assets. Scotland has a disproportionately high number of those communities, so the hon. Member

should be welcoming the fact that we are ensuring that the funding will be targeted at the communities that need it most. Again, we are providing every local authority in Scotland with the capacity funding to ensure that they can put in strong bids to make sure they can level up and build these new relationships with central Government.

Topical Questions

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): [902910] If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): As the Prime Minister said last Thursday in his speech on levelling up, the Government's vital mission is about raising living standards, spreading opportunity, improving our public services and restoring people's sense of pride in their community. That is why I was delighted to launch last week the Government's new high streets strategy. It is why I was pleased to launch our £150 million community ownership fund and the final details of our multibillion-pound towns fund. Last year, my Department introduced changes to make it quicker, easier and cheaper for restaurants, pubs and caf  s to set up outdoor sitting and street stalls to serve food and drink, sparking, for the first time in my lifetime, a real pavement caf   culture. I am delighted that the Government have announced that we are making these changes permanent—something I think we can all drink to as we enjoy a truly great British summer.

Chris Loder [V]: Good afternoon from West Dorset, Mr Speaker. Dorset Council has done a huge amount of effective work to protect vulnerable people by tackling domestic violence, and there is no doubt in my mind that the extra funding given by my right hon. Friend's Department will help substantially. However, this funding is ring-fenced for reactive responses to domestic violence. Can I ask my right hon. Friend to look at providing non-ringfenced funding for new burdens under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, so that Dorset Council can continue its vital work in preventing domestic abuse, not just reacting to it when it happens?

Robert Jenrick: Domestic abuse is a terrible crime, and I, like Members on both sides of the House, was pleased that we passed the landmark Domestic Abuse Act earlier this year, and that the Government are fully funding the duties on local authorities with £125 million. I have written to all local authorities in England, asking them to use that money for its intended purpose, and to ensure that money goes to refuges, which are not the only thing we should be supporting but are a very important part of the answer in protecting victims of domestic abuse. I will take his comments with respect to Dorset Council seriously. I have heard that it is taking a number of important steps, including, for example, spending £650,000 to tackle this issue.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State lobby the Chancellor to ensure that any legislation introduced after the current consultation on access to cash will include a statutory obligation on banks to provide adequate access to cash withdrawals free at the point of use and that meet the needs of our high streets and our communities?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an important point, particularly for rural communities and those that are harder to serve. The pandemic has had a profound impact on access to cash, with many stores—perhaps the vast majority—moving to a cashless society, but we must not forget those people who are left behind by that, so I will take her comments back to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor as he prepares to respond.

[902911] **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con) [V]: My constituency has seen massive housing development over the past couple of decades, and that growth has put enormous pressure on our local infrastructure and resulted in a shortage of school places, increased traffic congestion and one of the highest patient-to-doctor ratios in the country. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is put in place to solve those problems, and what will he do to ensure that no further housing developments take place in my constituency unless and until the correct infrastructure is put in place first?

Robert Jenrick: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that it is vitally important that new housing development is supported by commensurate infrastructure—both physical and social infrastructure—and affordable housing. Of course, it is also true that the majority of that infrastructure today is funded by developer contributions from new housing, but we need to ensure that developers pay their fair share. That is the idea behind the infrastructure levy, whereby local areas can themselves set the rate of taxation they require to capture more land value to put at the service of local communities. I think that if we can secure that passage—I hope we will get cross-party support for this—it will make a big difference, particularly in those parts of the country where planning is particularly challenging at the moment.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see the Secretary of State here, having survived yet another thankless broadcast stint on behalf of those in No. 10—sent out to defend the indefensible, only for them to U-turn as soon as he finished on air.

The Big Issue warned this week:

“More people are at risk of homelessness now than at any time in living memory.”

So can the Secretary of State tell us what assessment he has made of the number of evictions that will happen as a result of covid, and how much will the resultant homelessness cost local councils in temporary accommodation? In March 2020 he said that

“nobody should lose their home”

as a result of the pandemic. Can he confirm that this promise has now been abandoned, and if not, how is he fulfilling it?

Robert Jenrick: This Government took exceptional steps early in the pandemic, with cross-party support, and they were the right things to do. We legislated and, for example, we increased the notice periods for people with tenancies under section 21. That protected many thousands of people in a very difficult period for this country. They were also a product of a time when the housing market was closed as a matter of law, so it was impossible to move house. The position today is different—

people are able to move house and the housing market is very open and active—but we still want to protect the most vulnerable people in society. We are doing that with longer notice periods and further support through the benefits system and local housing need, and of course we will keep this under review. However, I pay tribute to councils across the country for the phenomenal achievement of our Everyone In programme, which has seen rates of people sleeping rough on our streets reduced by almost 40%, and we must keep that going.

[902913] **Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: In Wolverhampton, green space has been put forward for housing development by the city council. I am sure that the council would welcome reassurance from the Secretary of State that there can be discussions with his Department about the accuracy and reasonableness of those numbers going forward. Does he agree that city centre living is key, and that councils must be imaginative when incorporating housing into retail and leisure developments? I am thinking specifically of the Westside development in Wolverhampton, which could be reviewed. That is key to supporting a city centre economy—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Robert Jenrick: As a son of Wolverhampton, I know the city well and I wish it well. It is absolutely right that we need to build more homes in our town and city centres, and that is what the Government are doing. That is why we brought forward changes to permitted development, why we created the right to demolish and rebuild a building, and why we are bringing forward reforms to modernise the planning system. That is the way we protect the green belt for future generations. From Wolverhampton and the Black Country, one has to drive only a few miles into the most beautiful countryside of Shropshire and south Staffordshire. I want to preserve that, which is exactly what our planning reforms will do.

[902912] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): I was enthused to hear recently that a positive discussion is ongoing with the Welsh Government about a freeport in Wales. Does the Secretary of State agree that a freeport would be massively beneficial, particularly if it spreads the entire length of north Wales, taking into account its borders at the port of Holyhead, as well as manufacturing centres in Wrexham, Deeside and Delyn, to drive forward economic benefits for our entire region?

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall) [V]: Yes, we want to establish at least one freeport in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and negotiations with the devolved Administrations are ongoing. Freeports will benefit and regenerate communities across the country. They act as national hubs for international trade, innovation and commerce, bringing together ports, local authorities, businesses, stakeholders and the community, to boost prosperity and opportunity for the region. We want to see progress, and it is in the interests of Welsh businesses and communities to benefit from that policy as quickly as possible.

[902915] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con) [V]: Local post offices play a vital part in keeping our high streets vibrant and our communities thriving. That is why I am

deeply disappointed that, without undertaking a prior consultation, the Post Office served notice on Mr Ahmed, who runs Haworth post office in my constituency. Will the Minister meet me, alongside ministerial colleagues from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, urgently to review the Post Office's intention, and aim to save our Haworth post office?

Luke Hall: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the role that post offices play across our country. They have a vital role in supporting high streets, and keeping them a social and vibrant place in which to live, shop and work, and I thank him for bringing that case to my attention. The management of the post office is the responsibility of Post Office Ltd. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues from BEIS, raise the issue with the Post Office directly, and discuss the matter in more detail.

[902914] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Many of the buildings in my constituency that have been found to have cladding defects, including Norfolk House, St Peters Gardens and Leeward Court, are under 18 metres and therefore ineligible for the building safety fund. The only offer made to impacted leaseholders is a loan scheme, with no clarity about how it will work and when it will be made available. When will the Secretary of State's Department finally step up and extend funding to those blocks under 18 metres that are in need of remediation?

Robert Jenrick: In terms of buildings with the most dangerous form of cladding, there are five that I am aware of in Lewisham. One has completed work and is awaiting building control sign-off, three have had their unsafe aluminium composite material cladding removed altogether, and the other one has works under way, so we are making good progress there, as we are elsewhere in the country. On buildings below 18 metres, we need to take a more proportionate approach. There are leaseholders who are being asked to pay bills for those buildings that are unconscionable and likely to be unnecessary. I am working intensively with lenders, insurers and building safety experts to change that, because we have to adopt a more proportionate and sensible regime than the one we are experiencing right now.

[902919] **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con) [V]: Darlington Borough Council has provided 169 authorised pitches for members of the Gypsy, Romany, Traveller community, and planning for a further 25 is currently being assessed. That is a leading example of how local authorities should be providing for their Gypsy, Romany, Traveller communities. Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps his Department is taking to encourage other local authorities to provide sufficient and adequate legal sites?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): I praise Darlington for its work in supporting the Gypsy, Romany, Traveller community. The Government consider that local councils are best placed to make decisions about the number and location of sites locally, as they know their local area best. We encourage local authorities with social housing providers to bid for funding through the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme, which includes funding for permanent Traveller and transit sites.

However, I appreciate that the present system is not working as well as it should. We often see corrosive cases of retrospective planning permission. My Department is actively considering options to increase local council enforcement powers through the planning Bill, and we will announce steps in due course.

[902916] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab) [V]: The last year saw a record rise in council tax arrears of £1.5 billion, as families struggled under the weight of the pandemic. With tens of thousands more people likely to receive a call or a knock on the door from a bailiff in the months and years ahead, will the Secretary of State look at proposals from the Centre for Social Justice for an enforcement conduct authority, developed through a historic coming-together of bailiffs and the debt advice sector?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to look at those proposals. I have already seen them, but perhaps the hon. Lady and I can meet to discuss them in further detail.

[902920] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, there are building safety issues other than cladding, including missing firebreaks. Will he therefore tell me what advice I can give to my constituents who are currently unable to sell or let properties that they bought in good faith a matter of only a few years ago?

Robert Jenrick: Shoddy workmanship of that kind is disgraceful, and developers should step up and pay for any works that are required. We are changing the law through the Building Safety Bill to give homeowners a longer period of redress to take action against developers and builders who build poorly. As I said in answer to an earlier question, it is also important that our response is proportionate, because some of the works relating to that kind of non-cladding issue—not all, but some—that leaseholders are being asked to pay for are unnecessary. We will be saying more about that soon.

[902918] **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): During the recent by-election campaign in my home constituency of Batley and Spen, fellow residents raised with me their concerns regarding proposals to build a large Amazon warehouse in Scholes. The Government are proposing to shift power away from residents and towards developers, so will the Secretary of State assure me that the rights of local people to be fully informed and have their objections taken seriously will always be respected?

Robert Jenrick: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place in this House. As a former by-election winner, I know what it is like to enter in a class of one. I am sure she will thrive, as others have done, including several members of the Opposition Front Bench.

We are seeing an increase in the number of applications across the country for logistics sites, born of the pandemic experience of increased online shopping. It is an issue that other local authorities are experiencing and we are alive to it. Of course, any reforms we make to the planning system will continue to have the hon. Lady's constituents at their heart. They will continue to be able to allocate sites in the plan making process, including commercial sites, and to object to planning applications if they wish.

[902926] **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): Although I would have loved Hyndburn and Haslingden to be a beneficiary of the towns deal, my understanding is that those decisions were made in October 2019, before I was elected, and I wish that those in charge in Hyndburn and Haslingden had done more to secure one. However, we are now in a position to bid for the levelling-up fund, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that an announcement will be made soon on the second round so that we can put forward our case for the well-deserved investment?

Robert Jenrick: It is disappointing that proposals have not been brought forward so far, but we want to work with my hon. Friend and her local council. I saw from Accrington when she and I visited just how much potential it has. It is a very beautiful town centre, but in need of investment. We will bring forward proposals shortly for the second round and I or my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set that out later in the year.

[902921] **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Rather than create a developers' opportunity to provide slum living accommodation through the relaxation of permitted development rights, why does the Secretary of State not force developers who have planning permission for 1.1 million homes, according to the Local Government Association, to bring forward those plans and also the planning applications for the 1 million homes that can be built on the sites that have been designated for housing?

Robert Jenrick: The good news for the hon. Gentleman is that that is exactly what we are going to do, so I hope he will be an enthusiastic champion of the planning Bill when it reaches the House. He is right to say that there is an issue with developers not building the homes they have got permission for. Successive studies suggest that

it is overstated, but none the less, it is an important issue, its time has come and we as a Parliament should tackle it. The planning Bill will include such proposals and I hope that we can work on a cross-party basis to achieve them.

[902928] **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I listened to the Secretary of State's earlier answers and it seems to me that the dream of home ownership is something that this party still supports and has always supported. The fact that young people have not been able to buy houses at the same rate as in the past is a matter of intergenerational unfairness. May I therefore welcome the Government's proposals, the consultation they will conduct and the fact that we are doing something about it while the Opposition do not appear to have any policies on the matter?

Robert Jenrick: The Conservative party has always been the party of home ownership, which is a fundamental tenet of what we seek to achieve. We want to extend opportunity to all. We are bringing forward the Bill to help the next generation of young people on to the ladder. Of course, we are also doing brilliant things such as First Homes, whereby we offer discounts of up to 30% to 50% to local first-time buyers throughout the country. I was pleased to unveil the next site for those near my hon. Friend's constituency in Cannock the other day.

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

3.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

NOMINATION OF A TEMPORARY DEPUTY SPEAKER

3.40 pm

Mr Speaker: I need to advise the House that Dame Rosie Winterton has been contacted by the NHS covid-19 app and advised to self-isolate. It is therefore necessary to appoint a temporary Deputy Speaker to serve for the remainder of this week. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) for being prepared to take on this role at short notice.

Ordered,

That Judith Cummins shall act as Deputy Speaker to serve in place of Dame Rosie Winterton until the rise of the House on Thursday 22 July; and that she shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.—
(*Mr Rees-Mogg.*)

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Speaker: It is not often we give much to Yorkshire.

International Travel Rules

3.41 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, if he will make a statement on changes to international travel rules.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): After a hugely challenging 16 months for the aviation industry, I am delighted that new rules allowing fully vaccinated people to travel to nearly all amber list countries, without isolating upon return, came into effect this morning, although people will still need to comply with necessary testing requirements. This coincides with a change in our advice, meaning that the do-not-travel rules for amber countries have now been relaxed, which will be a huge boost to our aviation and travel sectors ahead of the vital summer season.

Also from today, children under the age of 18 will not have to self-isolate when returning to England, making family reunions and holidays far more accessible. Children aged four and under will continue to be exempt from any travel testing, while children aged five to 10 will only need to do a day two PCR. Eleven to 18-year-olds will need to take both a pre-departure test and a day two PCR, as is the case for arrivals from green list countries.

I must reiterate that public health remains our priority, and with our measures on international travel we are safeguarding the gains made by our successful domestic vaccine programme. That is why, on Friday, the Government took the decision to exempt France from the new arrangements for fully vaccinated people returning to England. This decision was taken after concerns were raised by the Joint Biosecurity Centre over the persistent presence of cases in France of the beta variant, which was first identified in South Africa. I understand that the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), will be able to answer questions on the data and the concerns raised by the JBC in a statement shortly.

I can also confirm to the House that, since 4 am this morning, there have been changes to the countries in the traffic-light system. Bulgaria, Croatia, Hong Kong and Taiwan have been added to the Government's green list; Croatia and Taiwan have also been added to the green watchlist, signalling to passengers that these countries are potentially at risk of moving from green to amber at short notice should swift action be required to protect public health in England.

The Balearic islands and the British Virgin Islands have been added to the amber list and, unfortunately, Cuba, Indonesia, Myanmar and Sierra Leone have been added to the red list.

We keep all these measures under constant review to ensure that they remain necessary and proportionate. The system we have designed is adaptable to the evolving epidemiological picture, and the UK Government are prepared to take action at any time to protect public health.

Jim McMahon: I would like to know whether the Transport Secretary, as a genuine pilot, has been forced to self-isolate today. He should be here, he should have made the statement to the House, but that courtesy was not provided.

Again, the Government's travel rules have been thrown into chaos and confusion. The British people, the travel industry and Members of this House are running out of patience. The Government have been all over the place from the start. Let us remember that the UK was one of the last countries in the world to introduce restrictions on incoming passengers. By the time such restrictions were introduced, 22 million passengers had arrived in the UK. Then, came a blunt intervention with a total lockdown, but without the financial support for aviation.

When the traffic light system was introduced, we were promised full publication of the data and the criteria. That did not happen. It is little wonder—it is as clear as day—that the delay in adding India to the red list was all about the Prime Minister's vanity and not about the national interest or public health.

We now see even more confusion, with changes being made for travellers coming in from France, but we have also seen reports that the high rates of the beta variant are in fact not in mainland France, but on the Indian ocean island of Réunion, 6,000 miles away. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Why have a traffic light system, if there are different rules for countries that happen to be in the same category? The Transport Secretary told this House that a country-by-country assessment was published: Mr Speaker, that was not the case. Even the most recent update has only 10 countries listed, and France does not even get a mention. When will the Secretary of State ensure that the full data for every country being assessed is published?

Will the Minister comment on reports over the weekend that travellers from Spain and Greece may well be subjected to the same restrictions as travellers from France? It is remarkable that a major airline CEO commented over the weekend that the Government are “making it up as they go along and causing confusion and uncertainty”.

The travel industry was promised a rescue deal, but it never arrived. It was promised air corridors and air bridges, but they did not happen either. Now, it is vital that the Government take the action needed, get their house in order and give this important industry the support that it needs.

Robert Courts: I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman on confusion and uncertainty. The irony of the Labour party calling our position uncertain and confusing will not, I am sure, be lost on the House.

This is the party that supported hotel quarantine, but then said that quarantine should be on a case-by-case basis. This is the party that said no one should be travelling, but then called for more places to be added to the green list. This is the party that supports using covid certification, while at the same time saying that all amber countries should be red and off limits to everyone.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about confusion, before coming to the House maybe he should sit down with the shadow Home Secretary and decide what their position is first. The Opposition party tells us to be cautious and to follow the evidence—that is precisely what we have done with France. That may explain why the hon. Gentleman's Labour colleagues in the Welsh Government have followed our action precisely.

Through our approach, we are helping to get international travel back on its feet. Fully vaccinated people are now able to travel without isolation to the

vast majority of countries in the world. However, we will never hesitate to take action quickly where it is necessary to protect our vaccine roll-out.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I welcome the fact that it is now possible to travel to amber list countries without the need to quarantine, at last, but that is not the case for France. Many travellers, whether for business or leisure purposes, will have their lives disrupted as a result. Will my hon. Friend the Minister publish the data on which this unexpected decision was made? Since we now know it is possible to change initial decisions, will he commit to review this one before waiting three weeks to do so? While he is there, will he also reassure us that there will be no further problems for travellers from this country who have been vaccinated with the AstraZeneca vaccine produced in India being denied entry to any European Union country?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the disruption that is undoubtedly being caused to his constituents and others. I entirely recognise that concern, and he is right to raise it. I know he will understand, however, that the action we have taken is to protect public health, which is, of course, the first duty of any Government in these circumstances and is what I think people would expect us to do. All this policy is kept under constant review in any event. As my hon. Friend will know, there is an assessment of the country listing every three weeks, and there is of course the policy listing as well, which comes up at the end of this month. If he was referring to the concern that existed over Malta's accepting AstraZeneca vaccinations, my understanding is that that confusion has been resolved.

Mr Speaker: Let us now go to the SNP's spokesperson, Gavin Newlands.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: As it happens, Mr Speaker, I am joining you from Glasgow airport, where I have just been updated on the latest developments.

I have spoken many times about the impact of the pandemic, with more than 3,000 aviation-related jobs in and around the airport having already gone. Notwithstanding the UK Government's criminal dither and delay over the decision relating to travel from India and the importation of the delta variant, we do take a four-nations approach to international travel, so may I ask whether the Government gave the devolved Administrations notice of the decision on travel from France so that they could prepare?

However, whether we are talking about the decision about France or the fact that, owing to the delta variant, international travel is increasingly not in our gift—for example, Bulgaria added us to its red list just as we put it on our green list—the Minister must surely see the need for a specific package of support for the entire sector. The UK Government's support does not even compare well domestically, let alone with that of the UK's international aviation competitors. Is the Treasury not listening, or are the Minister and his colleagues just not shouting loudly enough?

Robert Courts: The Government have at all times an ongoing programme of engagement with all interested parties, including those in the devolved Administrations, and, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, the Scottish

[Robert Courts]

Government have followed our action in this case. We continue to talk to them, as we talk to all our international partners—that, I think, is the answer to the second part of his question—and he will of course be aware that, most importantly, we continue to talk to all parts of the sector to understand how they may best be assisted at this time.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Apart from a rapid roll-out of vaccines, there are only three ways to control this situation: lockdown, which is unthinkable, the rubbish “pingdemic” test and trace, which we should abolish as soon as possible, or and being tough on foreign travel. May I urge my hon. Friend to be honest with the British people and say, “Our advice is going to change constantly. We cannot foresee this disease. Don’t go abroad this summer, but if you do go abroad, you go entirely at your own risk”?

Robert Courts: The approach that the Government take is a balanced one. It is important that people are able to travel: it is important to people who have friends and family abroad whom they have not seen for a long time, and to those who need to be able to sustain their businesses, as well as the businesses in the travel sector itself. What we are doing, however, is opening international travel in a way that is robust and sustainable and protects public health. I think that that balance is achievable, and I think it is what we have set out.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I have a constituent who is currently in Russia caring for a sick relative. She cannot be vaccinated where she is, and will need to return to the UK to get a vaccine that is recognised here, which, given the severity of her relative’s illness, is very difficult to manage. This highlights the difficulties of the status of vaccines for those undertaking international travel. This needs to be managed properly, so may I ask what steps the Government are taking towards developing a mutual recognition of vaccines, particularly in view of the need to secure the longer-term future of the inbound tourism industry?

Robert Courts: I am sorry to hear about the case of the hon. Lady’s constituent. If there is any assistance that I can offer, I will offer it. The hon. Lady is, of course, right to point to the fact that so many of the solutions here are international, and we continue to work bilaterally with international partners in, for instance, the World Health Organisation, and also with the International Civil Aviation Organisation, to ensure that we find that international solution as soon as we can.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Constituents across Hyndburn and Haslingden have been in touch with me because they have booked holidays and are due to depart soon, but have unfortunately been “pinged” and forced into isolation after close contacts. Most of these people are double-jabbed. Can the Minister confirm that discussions between his Department and the Department of Health and Social Care are ongoing to resolve this, and to do so before 16 August? It is causing huge numbers of holiday cancellations, and huge disappointment to many families across the country.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise her constituents’ concerns. I accept that this is a very difficult situation for her constituents, and for others all

across the country and in all parts of the industry. I can confirm that across Government we continue to discuss the next steps we may be able to take. When we are able to, we will come back to the House and update people.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Owing to our proximity to both, a large number of my constituents work at Manchester airport and Liverpool John Lennon airport, or otherwise rely on them for their livelihoods, and that includes our local taxi trade. The business rates relief for airports and ground handlers in England was welcomed by the sector and is a much needed boost for everyone, as is the Chancellor’s extension for a further six months. However, those payments, capped at £8 million last year and £4 million this year, barely touched the sides for some airports, yet the Minister repeatedly assures us that the Government are helping the sector. When will the Minister step up and provide real assurances that our aviation industry will be given the support it needs?

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady is quite right to draw the attention of the House to the importance of Manchester and Liverpool airports. I visited Liverpool airport not long ago, so I understand how important it is for her area. I am grateful to her for acknowledging that the airport and ground operations support scheme was welcomed and has been of assistance in relation to fixed costs, in particular business rates, to airports around the country. The most important thing we should all be doing is looking to find a way to enable people to get flying again. That is the way we will best be able to support our airlines and airports, which are so important in many different ways to all our constituents across the country.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I think the Minister is as confused as I am by the Opposition’s position. They spent many weeks criticising a non-existent delay in action on the Indian variant and now they criticise prompt action on France.

It is absolutely right that we make the most of our fantastic vaccine roll-out to restore the freedoms we have had to sacrifice. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging everyone who has not yet had the jab to get it, whether they live in Thornley, Hurworth, Newton Aycliffe or anywhere else in the UK, so that airports like Teesside International airport can take off again?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to enable airports like Teesside to take off again. We are seeking to lay in place a system that enables a robust, cautious and sustainable return to international travel in particular. He is absolutely right that the vaccination programme is a great national triumph. I encourage everybody to get their jab when it is open to them to be able to do so. It will help to protect them, their friends, their family and the people they work with. It will also help, as he quite rightly points out, with travel.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I know that he wants to help and assist. I know that that is his purpose. I have been contacted by constituents who have loved ones who have died in Poland, and who are having difficulty travelling. There are those who want to travel from Morocco to visit elderly dying relatives and are also having difficulty travelling. My staff spent 35 minutes on the phone this

morning on just one of those issues. I am not being critical, Minister, but it really is an issue. Given the fluidity of travel arrangements, where tourists are already on holiday and restrictions change while they are there, will the Minister make allowances to those who were not expecting to quarantine on arrival back in the UK, as there have been reports of a lack of medication and basic daily needs?

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right that the Government wish to see travel restart, provided it is in a safe and sustainable way. He draws attention to the reason for that: often it is not just about people going on holidays, important though that is because of the jobs the industry sustains, but because people have not seen relatives who may be ill. It is important that we do that in a globally connected country, and we will continue to do that in a safe sustainable way. If there is anything I can do to assist any particular constituents, such as those he mentions, I hope he will not hesitate to contact me and I will see if there is anything I can do to assist.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is unarguable that the effect of imposing quarantine on travellers to France will be significantly to reduce the numbers of those wanting to travel. With that in mind, does my hon. Friend agree that the imposition of Operation Brock on the M20 in Kent, which is designed to cope with long queues at Dover or the tunnel, was a trifle premature, and that Operation Brock should therefore be removed as soon as is humanly possible?

Robert Courts: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that question. I know that it matters a great deal to his constituents and that he has been a leading voice in campaigning on it. I recognise the disruption to his constituents. At the weekend, the Kent Resilience Forum put in place the moveable barrier between junctions 8 and 9 of the M20 that enables Operation Brock to be implemented. That is a precautionary decision by the KRF in advance of the summer holidays. The KRF will keep the decision under review and will deploy Operation Brock for as short a period as possible. I entirely recognise the strength of feeling on this matter. I know that the Minister for Kent will be arranging a meeting between the KRF, my right hon. Friend and other interested MPs as soon as possible.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: Constituents attempting to return from abroad have contacted me in desperation because official Government advice is not to take a PCR test if they have had covid-19 in the last 90 days, yet testing is a requirement both to return to the country and as part of the test and release scheme. Can the Minister offer some much needed clarity for my constituents and say how testing requirements for people returning to the UK apply to those who have recently had a positive PCR test abroad?

Robert Courts: The guidance on testing is laid out on the Government website. I know there has been a change as of today, which is worth bearing in mind. I am happy to write to the hon. Member to give her that precise clarity so that she can pass that on to her constituents and indeed to others who may need to refer to it.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am looking forward to my holiday in the English countryside this summer—and may I invite my SNP colleagues to join me in enjoying the beautiful English countryside? For those who would like to journey abroad, will my hon. Friend provide greater clarification on how his Department will examine the travel corridors and on his further commitment to the aviation sector in the months to come?

Robert Courts: The aviation sector is vital to hon. and right hon. Members across the House for the connectivity and employment that it brings and for our place in the world. The Government are committed to continuing to review the measures we have in place and to building a restart of international travel that protects public health and is safe, robust and sustainable. To that end, we review the country allocation regularly, and there are checkpoints at the end of July and in October when we will review the overall policy. I of course commit to keeping that under review.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It feels a little like groundhog day: I stand before the Minister to ask for sector-specific support for aviation and he reels off figures that bear no relation to the reality of what aviation workers and the sector actually need. UK airports, compared with those in other countries, have had an absolute pittance from the Government. Will there be specific support for aviation to get it through a second summer of reduced travel, before it is too late?

Robert Courts: I recognise how important this is to the hon. Member, to her constituency and to her constituents who are employed in the sector, and I recognise that this is a difficult time for the sector. As she knows—she recognises the figures—we have provided about £7 billion of support through the cross-economy schemes as well as the AGOSS scheme, to which I referred earlier. We will keep all those things under review. We are really trying to enable the sector to restart in a safe, sustainable way that protects public health. By doing that, we help Luton airport, the airlines that operate from it, and all her constituents.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Nearly seven in 10 British adults have now received two doses of the vaccine. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should use the long-term protections that the vaccines provide to restore some of the freedoms that we have lost in the past year, including the ability to travel abroad?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is quite right that the vaccines have been a major national success story and we are looking at ways to capitalise on that to restore freedom and the ability to travel. Of course, the measures that come into effect today are a major part of that. We will continue to examine ways in which we can take the next step.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The Association of Independent Tour Operators says that the changes to travel to France have “squashed” consumer confidence. Of course the SNP upholds the rule that public health must come first, but the continued tumult of international restrictions and rules will deny the travel sector a full recovery any time soon. Businesses such as Travel Your

[*Dave Doogan*]

World in Forfar in my Angus constituency desperately need dedicated support, so will the Minister finally accept that and commit to new financial support for the travel sector for as long as this international chaos persists?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that point. I recognise that these are challenging times for his constituents who work in the sector. I am also grateful for his acknowledgment that he supports the principle, as the Scottish Government have done; I think that people would expect us always to protect public health, and I know that he accepts that. As I have said to other right hon. and hon. Members, we are very keen to make sure that we restart international travel in a way that is sustainable and robust and protects public health. That is the way to assist his and all our constituents in the travel sector, wherever we are in the UK.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I am pleased that Teesside holidaymakers who choose to fly to amber list countries can do so from Teesside International airport once again, but may I ask the Minister to reconsider the position of Dubai on the red list? The United Arab Emirates has vaccinated approximately 82% of its population and is home to hundreds of thousands of British expats who just want to come home.

Robert Courts: I pay tribute to Teesside International airport for the expansion in services there; it is very good to see, and I hope to see very much more of it in the weeks and months ahead. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we keep the categorisation of all countries under constant review. We are guided by the data provided and the advice given by the Joint Biosecurity Centre for Ministers to make the decisions, and we will continue to review those at all times.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: July and August are crucial months for airports, but the modest uplift in travel expected this year means that airports such as Newcastle International will continue to face an extremely challenging financial outlook for some time. Can the Minister confirm when we will see a more targeted comprehensive support package for the sector, as well as further help such as the harmonisation of quarantine rules for UK nationals vaccinated abroad and action to bring down the high cost of testing?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member raises a number of points; I will do my best to address them all quickly. She has spoken very compellingly in debates that I have attended about the importance of Newcastle International airport to her constituents and the jobs that are provided. We are continuing to take steps to see what we can do to reduce the cost of testing; she will have noticed that it has been coming down over recent weeks. We will continue to do anything we can to support the sector as we look forward to a successful restart.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I, too, woke on Saturday morning to lots of concerned residents who were upset about the change in self-isolation rules for people coming back from France. Can my hon. Friend reassure me by answering two particular questions?

First, why did the Government move so quickly to change those rules? I think that that message really needs to be key. Secondly, why was France singled out when beta prevalence is seen in many European countries and it is seen by many to be quite low in France?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am conscious that the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment will shortly make a statement and may be able to assist further with my hon. Friend's specific points on data, but he is absolutely right to raise those questions. As I know he will understand, the reason for speed is that, as we have always said, sometimes we just have to act quickly to protect public health. Unfortunately, one thing that we have always found with the pandemic is that things move quickly and sometimes we have to take quick action. We have always said that we will, and I think it is right that we do.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) [V]: The restrictive list of green countries, the expense of numerous tests, the changeability of rules, the severe quarantine arrangements and the refusal to give mutual recognition to vaccine certificates from other countries have discouraged UK citizens from travelling abroad and have stopped much of the inward tourism that generates so much money for our economy. First, will the Minister consider increasing the list of green countries, given the vaccination programmes in some of the countries that tourists would go to? Secondly, will he grant mutual recognition to vaccine certificates issued in other countries, so that tourists from other countries can come here?

Robert Courts: Those are two very important points. I would very much like to see more countries on the green list, but we have to be guided by the advice that is sent by the Joint Biosecurity Centre. A number of different factors are taken into account, and they are listed on the website. They include vaccination, prevalence, and the presence or otherwise of variants of concern. This has to be data-led, as I know the right hon. Gentleman will understand, but of course we would like to see more countries on the green list as soon as possible. With regard to the mutual recognition of vaccines offered elsewhere, we have said that this is a phased restart. Today, we are allowing those who have been double-vaccinated in this country to travel abroad and then come back without having to self-isolate, and that is a step. We are also looking to see what we can do to offer the same recognition to those from abroad. I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman any more at the moment, but I hope to be able to come back to the House to do so in due course.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: On freedom day, it is very good news that we can now travel to amber-list countries without restriction. In fact, for someone who is double-vaccinated, they can almost be treated as green countries. However, people can travel to these countries only if the Foreign Office advice says that they are safe to travel to. Could the excellent Minister confirm that the travel advice from the Foreign Office has changed, as well as the advice from the Transport Department?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend puts his finger on a very important point, which it is right to clarify. The advice that we in the Department for Transport give is

around the risk of importing a variant or prevalence of the virus back into this country. The Foreign Office, in giving its travel advice, is dealing with the situation that exists in the other country. It has to take into account a number of other factors, such as political stability and the state of the healthcare system in the other country, so it is essentially looking at different things. We are dealing with the risk of incoming; it is dealing with the risks, and the advice to be given to British citizens, in the other country. The Foreign Office will always have the ability to do that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As covid cases in England go through the roof, 1,200 scientists have backed a letter to *The Lancet* saying that it is completely reckless for this Government to lift all restrictions today. International experts are saying that England as an international travel hub is now a risk to the rest of the world. The reality is that the Minister's traffic light system is going to be meaningless as more countries such as Bulgaria put the UK on their red list, so when are the Government going to provide real support for the travel industry, rather than continuing to cause chaos and uncertainty?

Robert Courts: I am afraid that I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman. I simply do not agree that the system leads to uncertainty. It is a robust system, and we have explained in detail how it is put together to enable the industry and our constituents to have an understanding of the system. We will obviously keep it under review, but I think that when the hon. Gentleman looks at the systems that are in place across the world, he will see that ours is actually quite advanced.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend and he is absolutely right to put public health first, but he also has to recognise that public confidence in going abroad is now in a ditch. The travel agent industry is on its knees now, and it is on its last knees. My hon. Friend is responsible in the Department for setting the amber-list countries, and he has made the decision on France. If he cannot say when that decision will come to an end and stay like that, which I know he cannot, can I urge him to follow up on this matter? I have written to the Chancellor and to the Secretary of State for Transport to say the travel agent industry needs—in fact, must have—new grants applied to it because it cannot survive. Minister, it cannot survive. It employs thousands of people and produces a huge amount of taxation revenue for this country, but it will not survive. It needs that support, Minister.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for having drawn that to the House's attention. We will all have seen in our constituencies the critical importance of the travel agency sector, including the employment it brings and the way it opens up the world to all our constituents. We will of course continue to talk to the sector and to all our colleagues across Government in order to understand the way in which the sector may be best supported, but I emphasise the point that I have made today that getting people travelling again in a way that commands public confidence by protecting public health is the way in which we will help all parts of the travel sector.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In April, the rate in Britain was very low and the rate in southern Asia was very high, yet there were no restrictions on people coming from southern Asia, leading to the Johnson variant taking hold here. Now the rate in Britain is very high but we are preventing people from travelling to other countries where the rate is much lower, so there is chaos; people are uncertain about what is happening. Simultaneously, we read in *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* that Conservative MPs are turning off the app so that they do not get pinged and are able to go away on their holidays. Does all this not just add to the sense that we have a Government who are not in control and have different rules for the people from those that they are willing to follow?

Robert Courts: No.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) [V]: Travellers from the US and Canada, which have lower covid rates than the UK, can now travel to Europe but they cannot travel to the UK. I heard what the Minister said about the recognition of vaccines. May I urge him to move as quickly as possible on that? Is it not time to stop talking about green or amber countries and to start talking about green or amber travellers?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend puts his finger on a really important point: understanding the importance of vaccines and what that can tell us. There are a number of aspects on which we need to fully understand the science—for example, on the transmissibility of the virus if someone is vaccinated and the effect on different variants. We are working at great speed but doing the work diligently to make sure that we can take full advantage of the success of our vaccine roll-out and protect public health at the same time.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: Is there anything that the Government can do to help families who have a young adult who is currently 17, but who turns 18 during the holiday season? They cannot be vaccinated and, if they can, they cannot have both, and yet they can perhaps travel away but they cannot come back if they have turned 18 in the meantime. Is there any way we can relax the rule, perhaps to apply it from September, so that families can have a holiday together?

Robert Courts: The rules as they apply are laid out in detail online and all families can look at those and understand them. I am very happy to consider that suggestion and any others that right hon. and hon. Members may have to refine the system, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is worrying that the Minister fails even to allow for the prospect that it is entirely possible that much of the world may follow Bulgaria and place travel from the UK on a red list. If that were to happen, what comfort can the Minister offer to the UK travel sector? Does he not recognise that now is the time for additional support for that beleaguered sector, as travel disruption looks set to continue for the foreseeable future?

Robert Courts: It is difficult for me to comment on the steps that other countries may have taken or may take in future, because they all have differing systems. We continue to talk to all our international partners,

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both in multilateral and bilateral forums, to understand how best we can enable travel between us, for all the reasons that we have discussed in the House today.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's work on the reopening of international travel while Opposition Members support a complete shutdown. It has been possible thanks only to the success of our historic vaccine roll-out, but while we see the country opening up further today, travel companies in my constituency still have some very rough months ahead, even were travel to be completely unencumbered. They have found themselves low down the grant priority list after 16 months of just refunding customers. Where the Government confiscate, the Government must compensate. Will he therefore add his weight to calls on the Chancellor for ongoing sector-specific support?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. Again, he is right to draw attention to the travel agencies in his constituency, which are, of course, having a very challenging time. I entirely recognise the difficulties that they have. As I have said to other hon. Members, the best way we can help all these sectors is by having the vaccine, rolling out the vaccination programme as we have been doing, and then ensuring that we can restart international travel in a way that protects public health.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: When travelling through the channel tunnel or by air, circulating in their respective terminals, people are not just in public places but in workplaces. In the light of soaring infection rates, will the Minister ensure that all measures under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Employment Rights Act 1996 are taken to protect our transport workers, including public health measures such as wearing a mask and social distancing, to stop the transmission of covid-19?

Robert Courts: A number of different points were raised in the hon. Lady's question. All employers and all workplaces of course have to enforce the law as it stands; Parliament has legislated and that must be enforced, and there are authorities to do that. On covid-safe travel, a lot of detailed guidance has been made available and I would expect everybody to continue to follow it, to keep everybody safe, as indeed they very much are doing. Some travel providers may decide to take steps in addition, such as making a mask a condition of carriage or of entry. I am confident that those assessments that each travel provider undertakes on their premises or in their transport means will enable everybody to travel and to remain safe while they travel.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that fully vaccinated people can now travel to amber countries without having to quarantine on return, but I am disappointed with the change in the situation with France and, in effect, the creation of a new "orange-red" category. It is right that the Government act quickly, and it would have been a disaster if France had become a red country, but new variants are going to keep on coming—that is inevitable—and what the sector, families and travellers need is

certainty and predictability. Will my hon. Friend assure me that at the next review certainty and predictability particularly will be looked into, and that the traffic light system will remain a three-pronged one, rather than covering all colours of the rainbow?

Robert Courts: I am keen to reassure my hon. Friend that the system we have laid out in the Global Travel Taskforce report—the red, amber, green system—remains in place. A precautionary measure has been taken, for the reasons explained, with regard to France. I agree with him that certainty is what we would like to provide—we aim to do that through the system that we have. One difficulty, of course, is that if a situation develops in another country with regard to a variant or increased prevalence, we have to react to that, and it is right that we do so. In answer to his question as to whether these matters will be kept under review as we continue to consider policy, I can tell him that they will, of course.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Infection rates are at their highest since January, and the Health Secretary has said that he expects a spike following the relaxation of regulations today. So how can it be responsible of the Government not to require people to wear masks on transport? People spend long periods next to one another on planes, trains, the undergrounds and buses, so how can it be responsible not to require people to wear masks in those environments?

Robert Courts: There are two parts to the answer to that question. I believe the hon. Gentleman is referring to the broad range of transport, rather than simply international maritime or aviation—he refers to domestic travel as well. The Government are seeking to ask people to exercise their own judgment and responsibility, which is a situation we do have to get back to. However, we have made it clear that in some circumstances we would expect masks still to be worn, and some travel providers have also made that stipulation. If that is the case, it is right that people follow it. The reason for that is that there are very different circumstances between a crowded tube train and a rural train late at night that has only one person on it. There are different circumstances and we are seeking to make allowances for those.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I want to touch further on points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Recently, I visited Blue Bay Travel, a business based in my constituency, and people there particularly highlighted the mismatch that is causing issues between the traffic light advice for some countries, which would allow people to come back into the UK, and Foreign Office travel advice, which prevents them from leaving in the first place. Will the Minister please look at what more can be done to better join up this advice, to make it easier for travel businesses and for those wishing to travel abroad?

Robert Courts: I am very happy to assure my hon. Friend that I, like the Department for Transport more broadly, will continue to talk to our colleagues across government to see what more can be done. I have to point out again that the two issues are dealing with different aspects—almost two sides of the same problem. We are dealing with the risk of importing the virus, or variants of it, into this country. The Foreign Office is

seeking to give advice to British citizens when they travel abroad; although we will obviously continue to talk to each other, they are dealing with fundamentally different things.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: There is already confusion over recent international travel announcements as well as an increase in the rates of covid. We all know that masks cut the risk of getting covid and passing it on to others, so leaving face coverings to personal responsibility is just a recipe for further confusion, conflict, chaos and, of course, more covid. It also leaves 3.5 million clinically vulnerable people frightened to travel. Should not wearing a mask just be compulsory on all modes of transport?

Robert Courts: It is right that we allow transport providers to assess the situation on their own mode of transport and to make that a condition of carriage if required. Moreover, it is also right that we trust people to take the right decision for themselves and for those around them.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is great that international travel is now happening again, and I am absolutely clear that we must continue to do all we can for our aviation, travel, leisure and hospitality sectors. May I please draw the Minister's attention to the high cost of covid testing? Our families returning from holidays are forking out lots of money for this, so may I ask him to consider the uniformity of the policy and also to get the costs down, please?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend raises a critically important point. We are working with industry and across Government to see how we can help with the cost of testing; the Government are aware of it. We seek to enable that information to be made available to consumers on the website, which shows the different providers, but he will have noticed that the cost of testing has been coming down over the past few weeks and months, and I am confident that, as we see more travel in a safe, sustainable way, the cost will come down even further.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The Minister did not answer the question on support for the aviation sector and associated sectors, such as the travel industry and hospitality posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), so, here we go again. Has his Department lobbied the Treasury for additional funds to support jobs in these sectors, and, if so, what was the answer?

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady will be aware that we estimate that the aviation sector itself will have benefited from approximately £7 billion-worth of support by September, as well as the other sectors, which have benefited from the cross-economy support schemes that the Government have put in place. The best way that we can assist all of those sectors is to unwrap international travel as soon as we can while protecting public health, because that is the best way to help them.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Almost 70% of Ashfield residents have been double jabbed. Although that has given us back our domestic freedoms, does the Minister

agree that another freedom that we need to get back is foreign travel, which will give our aviation industry a much-needed boost?

Robert Courts: I am very keen to see foreign travel resume, because of the immense benefits that it brings to this country in individuals' life experience, the jobs that it brings in, the money that comes into the Treasury, the families who need to be connected, and the businesses who rely on international travel. I am very keen to see all of that increase as much as we can. However, we must do so in a way that reassures the public that we are protecting public health.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) [V]: The Minister's regulations require people wanting to travel abroad to have PCR tests. When will the Government publish an up-to-date and accurate list of suitable, recommended PCR test providers for travellers, and what will he do to protect travellers from those companies that charge a lot and then do not deliver timely results, thus ruining travel plans for families at the last minute?

Robert Courts: The Department of Health and Social Care continually reviews the list of providers. It has a rolling programme, and it takes action if providers are not delivering what they have promised.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Travel to the US is very important for businesses headquartered in my constituency. Several own major US subsidiaries, which they cannot adequately oversee—they cannot tour a factory, for instance, by Zoom—and many have major US investors whom they cannot update. Can the Minister assure me that he is doing everything he can to get a travel corridor in place with the US—I know that we have the taskforce—because it is essential that we can have travel going in that direction?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend gives a perfect example of the importance of travel: there are certain things we cannot do over Zoom and she is quite right to draw attention to that. Transatlantic travel is hugely important to the United States and to the United Kingdom for many reasons, and has obviously been greatly affected by the pandemic, which has kept families apart and made trade difficult. We want to restore travel with our closest ally as soon as we possibly can. My hon. Friend will know that the Prime Minister and President Biden made clear the importance of bringing about the return of safe travel as soon as possible, which is why the joint UK-US experts' working group to which she referred has been formed, and work is well under way to deliver that goal as soon as possible.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Significant concerns about conditions for people who return to the UK and in the quarantine hotels have been expressed by Members of this House and by the directors of public health for the local authorities around Heathrow airport. One cannot book a flight until the quarantine hotel is booked. My constituent had to wait for more than a week to receive vital HIV medication while he was waiting to enter the UK and then again while in the quarantine hotel. He contacted me and we were fobbed off by being told: "The hotels have on-site doctors". He needed a specialist doctor to prescribe his essential medication,

[Ruth Cadbury]

which he had to wait too long to receive. That is unacceptable and I worry how many other people's lives and health are being put at risk due to such delays and the poor management of the quarantine hotels and arrival system. What steps is the Minister taking to prevent this from happening to others who arrive in the UK?

Robert Courts: I am concerned to hear about the case raised by the hon. Member. If she would like to share it with me in writing, I will ensure that that complaint is sent to the right place and addressed. I am happy to take action on that individual case. More broadly, we of course continue, across Government, to ensure that the policies we have in place are not only accurate and required but carried out to the satisfaction of all involved. Circumstances have obviously been fast-moving. We are all committed to making sure that the policy is delivered and that quarantine hotels are managed appropriately.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I am sorry to say that the further restrictions for France stretch both the credibility of the system and the patience of the travel industry. The whole industry—from regional airports, including Exeter airport, to travel agents in places such as Sidmouth—continues to watch as its reserves are dried up, Government support is reduced and its ability to trade is hampered to an extent beyond that of any other industry. Will my hon. Friend look again at bespoke support for the travel and aviation industry, to avoid further job losses affecting hundreds of thousands of people?

Robert Courts: The travel industry and regional airports, particularly Exeter airport, have powerful voices in this place, not least that of my hon. Friend, who is exceptionally eloquent and powerful in making the case to me and others. I commit to remain in close contact with him and all in the sector so that we can best understand how we may be able to support them. As I have said, the best way to do that is to ensure that we are able to travel in a way that protects public health. None the less, we must enable travel.

Mr Speaker: I suspend the House for two minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

4.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

4.37 pm

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the pandemic.

Today marks an important milestone in our fight against this virus as we take step 4 on our road map. It is a long-awaited moment for the businesses that can now open their doors at long last, the happy couples who can have weddings without curbs on numbers and, of course, the people who can see more of their loved ones in care homes. Although we have made huge advances in our race between the vaccine and the virus, we are not at the finish line yet. Instead, we are entering what I believe to be the next stage—a stage where we continue with caution while doing what it takes to manage the risk of this virus, which is still with us and still possesses a threat. Cases and hospitalisations have risen over the past week, as we predicted, and we know that these numbers will get worse before they get better. Although there is never a perfect time to take this step, making the move today gives us the best chance of success. We are cautiously easing restrictions when we have the natural firebreak of the school holidays and when the warmer weather gives us an advantage, so we will move forward with caution, drawing on the defences we have built, as we set out in our five-point plan two weeks ago.

One of these five defences is the protective wall provided by our vaccination programme, and I would like to start by updating the House on this life-saving work. Our vaccination programme has given us extra legs in our race against this virus. The protection it has built up in people across the United Kingdom means that the ratio between cases and hospitalisation is the lowest it has been during this pandemic. This reinforces the need to protect as many people as we can as quickly as we can, and we made a four-week delay to step 4 so that we could do exactly that, with 8 million more vaccinations in that period. We set the target of giving second doses to two thirds of United Kingdom adults by today, and we hit that target last week with five days to spare. We also pledged to offer a first dose of a vaccine to all adults, and we have met that target too. Now, almost 88% of adults have taken up that offer. Although uptake among 18 to 30-year-olds is much lower and needs to increase, we are in a good place.

Our work is not over yet. As we strive to reach the remaining adults who have not yet had a first or a second dose, we are already making our plans for the next stage, because we do not know how long immunity lasts. Because coronavirus mutates, just like flu, we must stay one step ahead of it, so we are drawing up plans for a potential booster programme, subject to the final advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, so that we can protect the most vulnerable ahead of winter.

We are also looking at extending our vaccination programme so we can protect even more people. We asked the JCVI to consider whether children and young adults should be given the offer of a vaccine, and that advice has been published today. Before I continue, allow me to apologise to you, Mr Speaker, for mistakenly referencing that on air this morning before setting out the details in full before the House. The JCVI considered not just the health impacts but the non-health impacts,

as we asked it to do, such as how education is disrupted by outbreaks in schools. I reassure the House that the number of children and young people who have had severe outcomes from covid is extremely low: the hospitalisation rate during the second wave was between 100 and 400 for every million. When we look at the small numbers who were hospitalised, most had severe underlying health conditions.

Today's advice recommends that we continue to vaccinate 16 and 17-year-olds who are in an at-risk group, as we do now. It also recommends expanding the offer of the vaccine to some younger children with underlying health conditions that put them at greater risk of covid-19. That includes children aged 12 to 15 with severe neuro disabilities, Down's syndrome, immunosuppression and profound or multiple learning disabilities. The JCVI advice also recommends offering a vaccine to children and young people aged 12 to 17 who live with someone who is immunosuppressed. That means that we can indirectly protect the immunosuppressed, who are at higher risk of serious disease from covid-19 and may not generate a full immune response to vaccination. Finally, the JCVI advises that we should offer the vaccine to all 17-year-olds who are within three months of their 18th birthday so that they are protected as soon as they turn 18.

Together with Health Ministers in all parts of the United Kingdom, the Secretary of State has accepted that advice and has asked the NHS to put it into action as soon as possible. As we do that, we will be using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is the only vaccine in the UK that has been clinically authorised for people between the ages of 12 and 17. I know that people will have questions about what it means for them and their children. I assure them that nobody needs to come forward at this stage. The NHS will get in touch with them at the right time and will ensure that the jabs are delivered in a setting that meets their complex needs.

We also asked the JCVI to consider rolling out vaccines to all children and young people over the age of 12. Although we are not taking that step today, the JCVI is keeping this matter under review and will be looking at more data as it becomes available, especially on children with a second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. The steps that we are taking today mean that we will be offering even more vulnerable people the protection that a vaccine brings, and we will all be safer as a result.

We know that vaccines are our most important defence against this virus. That is especially the case in adult social care settings, which are home to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, who are vulnerable to a devastating impact from covid-19. Last week, the House passed regulations to make vaccination a condition of deployment in care homes, and the Lords will consider those regulations tomorrow. These regulations are designed to help maximise vaccine uptake and protect some of our most vulnerable citizens, yet I recognise the need for more detail on the Government's analysis of their expected impact, so today we have published an impact statement, and we will be publishing a full impact assessment as soon as possible.

As we learn to live with covid, we must be pragmatic about how we manage the risks we face. Self-isolation of positive cases and their close contacts remains one of the most effective tools we have for reducing transmission. However, we recognise that there are some very specific

circumstances where there would be a serious risk of harm to public welfare if people in critical roles, such as air traffic controllers or train signallers, are unable to go to their workplace. People in such roles who have received two vaccinations, and who are two weeks beyond the second vaccine, will not need to self-isolate to perform those critical tasks. However, they will have to continue to self-isolate at all other times. The people who are eligible for this will receive personalised letters setting out the steps they must follow. This is a sensible and pragmatic step, and one that will be used sparingly and responsibly.

We are being similarly pragmatic at our borders. As the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), has confirmed, UK residents arriving from amber-list countries who have been fully vaccinated will no longer have to quarantine, although they will still need to comply with necessary testing requirements. This will not apply to France, due to the persistent presence of cases of the beta variant, which was first identified in South Africa.

We are doing everything in our power to restore international travel, and to restore it safely, but new variants pose the greatest threat to our path out of this pandemic. We will not hesitate to act in a similar way with any other country. We will continue to keep a close eye on the data and to be firm and decisive in how we protect the progress we have made, but the enduring message is that getting vaccinated is the best way to ensure that people can travel as freely as possible.

Vaccination also holds the key to doing the things we love here at home. We are supporting the safe reopening of large, crowded settings such as nightclubs, as we saw last night, and music venues through the use of the NHS covid pass as a condition of entry to reduce the risks of transmission. I encourage businesses to draw on this support and to use the NHS covid pass in the weeks ahead. We will be keeping a close watch on how it is used by venues, and we reserve the right to mandate it, if necessary.

By the end of September, everyone aged 18 and over will have had the chance to receive full vaccination and the additional two weeks for that protection to take hold. At that point, we plan to make full vaccination a condition of entry to nightclubs and other venues where large crowds gather. Proof of a negative test will no longer be sufficient. Any decision will, of course, be subject to parliamentary scrutiny, and we will ensure there are appropriate exemptions for those who have genuine medical reasons for not getting vaccinated. I am clear that we will always look at the evidence available and do all we can to ensure that people can continue to do the things they love.

Our vaccination programme has put us on the road to recovery. We should all be proud of how this national effort is helping us to take steps towards a more normal life, but we must keep reinforcing the wall of protection—getting the jab, getting the second jab and getting the booster shot, for those who are asked to come forward. With such a deadly virus and the continued threat of new variants, our wall of protection must be more than just vaccines alone. We must continue to do all the other sensible things that we know can keep the virus at bay: getting tested, considering the advice and continuing to act with caution. Taken together, this will help us all enjoy these new experiences and safely slow the spread of this deadly virus. I commend this statement to the House.

4.49 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

Of course people have the right to protest against a lockdown that no longer exists, but will he join me in condemning the ugly scenes of harassment, thuggishness, throwing of objects, pushing and intimidation directed at police officers outside on Parliament Square earlier?

The Minister has said that a number of teenagers will be vaccinated. Can he tell us how many and by when? The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has approved the Pfizer jab for all 12 to 18-year-olds. Indeed, countries such as the United States, Canada, Israel, France, Austria, Spain, Hong Kong and others have started vaccinating, or soon will be, 12 to 18-year-olds, so why are we not?

The Minister rightly said that the risk of death to children from covid is mercifully very low, but children can become very sick and they can develop long-term conditions and long covid. Indeed, according to the Office for National Statistics, 14.5% of children aged 12 to 16 have symptoms lasting longer than five weeks, so will he spell out in detail the clinical basis for why the JCVI has made this decision? Will he publish all its analysis and documents in the same way that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies publishes its analysis—not just the advice—and can he guarantee that this decision was made on medical grounds and not on grounds of vaccine supply?

The Minister talked about infection among children being disruptive, and we know that infection among children is highly disruptive for learning—we have seen hundreds of thousands of children out of school. If we are not vaccinating all adolescents, can he tell us what the Government's plan is for September, when children return to school? For example, will he consider using this summer to install air filtration units in every classroom or in every school?

Testing is already stretched, with turnaround times lengthening. Can the Minister guarantee that through the summer—and especially once contacts can be released from isolation on the back of a negative PCR test in August—and into September, when schools return, there will be sufficient PCR testing capacity to meet demand? As we move into autumn and winter, we anticipate more flu and respiratory viruses. Those are illnesses with symptoms that often overlap with covid, so will he also now invest in our testing capacity, so that alongside a covid test we can test for flu and respiratory syncytial virus this winter? We need multi-pathogen testing going forward.

Three weeks ago, the Health Secretary told us that unlocking would make us healthier, and he promised us that it would be irreversible, but today we have some of the highest infection case rates in the world, and the mayor from “Jaws” has decided to reopen the beaches, recklessly throwing off all the restrictions with no safety precautions in place, such as mandatory mask wearing. It risks reimposing new restrictions in the future, and it means that the NHS is facing a summer crisis. Already, admissions for covid are running at around 550 a day, and hospitals are cancelling cancer surgery. Liver transplant operations were cancelled in Birmingham last week.

Throwing off all restrictions like this will see thousands suffer serious long-term illness. The clinically vulnerable and scared are feeling shut out of society, and selection

pressure could see a new variant emerging that evades the success of the vaccine programme, setting us back and snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. It is reckless, and it does not have our support.

More infections means more isolation. The NHS staff who will be released from isolation if double-jabbed will still want protection for themselves and their patients, so will the Minister ensure that the standard of masks worn in NHS settings is upgraded to the FFP3 requirement, as NHS staff have called for? What is his plan for keeping the economy and public services functioning throughout the summer as more and more people are asked to isolate?

We know that the Prime Minister's and the Chancellor's plan was to dodge isolation, so can the Minister tell us how this “random” clinical trial, which so helpfully selected the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, was set up? Will he tell us what exactly happened between 8 am and 10.38 am on Sunday that persuaded the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to withdraw from this presumably valuable and random clinical study? Can he tell us how many other Ministers have participated in the trial? Did he participate? How many Government Departments and officials were involved, and why? If he cannot answer these questions sufficiently, our constituents will rightly conclude that it is one rule for Tory Ministers and another for the rest of us.

Nadhim Zahawi: The right hon. Gentleman began well but ended with petty politics. However, I will address the issue of the testing trials over a number of days, which began, I think, around December. It was not just the Cabinet Office and No. 10 that participated; organisations such as Transport for London, Heathrow airport and others would have participated as well. The Government make thousands of decisions every day, every week, which is not something that the Opposition are used to doing—certainly not their leader, anyway. Nevertheless, I shall refrain from engaging in petty politics and try to address some of his more substantive questions.

On the harassment and thuggish misbehaviour, I join the right hon. Gentleman in condemning such behaviour outside the Houses of Parliament against our police officers.

On vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds, the right hon. Gentleman asked about the number for England. Approximately 370,000 children will receive that protection. We are currently not following the United States of America, Israel or other countries in vaccinating all children, although the JCVI is continuing to review the data and is waiting for more data on second doses. Millions of children in the US have already received a first dose but there is a time lag for second doses and that is being kept under review. We publish the JCVI advice accordingly.

On testing, the United Kingdom now has the capacity for over 600,000 PCR tests and many millions of lateral flow tests. I myself am not on the trial that the right hon. Gentleman spoke about, but I do take the lateral flow test and I tested negative earlier today, as I did on Thursday and Friday.

I am happy to have the right hon. Gentleman's support on the JCVI advice on protecting the most vulnerable children, and of course asking it to make sure that it reviews the data on all children. I reassure him that the decision was not in any way made taking into consideration

volumes of vaccine. We have plenty of vaccine available for the vaccination of all children that is necessary. We have ordered more of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is the vaccine that was approved. The decision was made by the JCVI based on looking at the data from other countries, and that is the decision that we will implement.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Nearly eight years ago, Mr Speaker, in Central Lobby on Saturday 7 September 2013, when the G7 Speakers were here as guests of your predecessor, I hosted the Japanese table, and at 8 o'clock that evening the fact that Tokyo would be the Olympic games city was announced. We send our sympathy to those who are affected by covid there and wish the games success.

Turning to the domestic matter of the NHS, can I put to the Government what has been put to me by a community sister? She said that in order to test voluntarily every day before going to other people's homes, she had been getting three months' supplies of tests. The system appears to have changed and each member of staff like her now has to apply for a seven days' supply, which are sent to their home, meaning much more waste and much more work for each member of staff.

Could the Government please get together to see whether it is possible for those who work for the NHS who want to test each day to get bulk supplies from work and cut out some of this unnecessary extra work?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who asks an important question. I certainly take that feedback very seriously and will take it back to the team to ensure that we get the most efficient operational way of delivering lateral flow tests to the frontline.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that we follow the science on this issue, and I welcome clarity from the JCVI on that matter. The Pfizer vaccine is required for young teens, and Pfizer or Moderna vaccines are required for young adults, but the supply of those looks to be the lowest since February. What assurances can the Minister give that delivery will be sufficient? With many younger adults unvaccinated, and with some more complacent about covid, how does the Minister propose to persuade more of them to get vaccinated, and dramatically reduce the risk of serious disease? The UK now has more daily cases than any other state in the world, and as the Health and Social Care Secretary has demonstrated, it is still possible to catch and therefore spread the virus when vaccinated.

Last week, more than 1,200 scientists, doctors and disease experts said that the UK Government and their complete and immediate unlocking of England with only 54% of the population fully vaccinated was a "threat to the world". Will the UK Government accept responsibility should the concerns of those experts come true? Finally, the Health and Social Care Secretary has spoken, as his predecessor did often, about the need not to politicise the pandemic. Will the Minister explain why his party colleagues in Scotland are attempting to attack the Scottish Government for their vaccine programme, despite the fact that a greater proportion of people in Scotland have been vaccinated than in England? Does he condemn attempts by his party colleagues to politicise the vaccine roll-out in Scotland, or does he consider their untruthful claims to be acceptable?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important questions. Pfizer supply remains consistent, and we have every confidence that the manufacturer will continue to deliver, as it has done, according to the delivery schedules. Being able to continue to vaccinate the over-18s with their first dose, and of course their second dose by the end of September is not a question of supply. Equally, as we did a few hours ago, jointly with Minister Humza Yousaf and the Ministers from Northern Ireland and Wales, we can take a decision that we will all follow JCVI advice on vaccinating vulnerable children and those who live with vulnerable adults, as I described in my statement.

On our capability in the UK to manage this pandemic, I hope, with the booster campaign in September, to transition from pandemic status to endemic status. With the wall of vaccinated adults—I think 87.9% have had a first dose in the United Kingdom, and 68% of all adults have had two doses—it is the right precautionary pragmatic decision to transition, and return our country to as normal a place as possible. We will get those businesses that were almost first in and now last out of the pandemic, back and up and running.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Thanks to the efforts of the Minister we have one of the best vaccine programmes in the world, so I hope he does not mind me expressing two concerns about our current strategy. First, if we are to introduce covid vaccine passports for nightclubs by the end of September, which I support, why are we waiting until then, and giving more weight to the concerns of people who want to go to nightclubs than to the additional extra cases that waiting two months is likely to cause, at a time when that growth of new cases is such a concern?

Secondly, on the NHS app, people who have been double jabbed know that if they are pinged they are less likely to have the disease. They are therefore starting to ignore the request to self-isolate, and in some cases to delete the app. Before we lose social consent, should we not replace the requirement to isolate for 10 days with a requirement for someone to isolate until they have had a negative PCR test, thus using that testing capacity that the Minister talked about to keep our national show on the road?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his two excellent questions—rather than one—which I shall try to address in reverse. He will have heard the announcement in my statement about the NHS app and frontline social care or healthcare staff, as well as critical workers. Part of the reason we want to do that is that we want to maintain the ability of that workforce to do what it does best. As my right hon. Friend rightly outlined, they will do that with a negative PCR test and seven days of lateral flow testing. The clear clinical advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the expert team is that 16 August will be the most appropriate time to do that, for the rest of the economy as well. As we open up—we are now at step 4—and are getting more people double jabbed and protected further, especially younger parents, teachers and other professions, this is the appropriate measure to take on 16 August.

On the issue that my right hon. Friend raises on nightclubs, by the end of September 18-year-olds will have received their second dose. We will work with the industry to ensure that we get the covid pass right—now and in September—while we collate the evidence.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Like hundreds of thousands of other school children, my seven-year-old daughter is out of school at home today, self-isolating. I am sure that the Minister will agree that children have paid far too high a price in this pandemic in their mental health and in their education, missing out on school. Yet only last week, Professor Whitty said that we may see new restrictions in five weeks' time, which is just before schools return. The Department for Education issued new guidance to schools, saying that they must be prepared to deliver remote education in the autumn. Today, the Minister said that we will not vaccinate all teenagers. What guarantees will this Government provide to pupils and parents across the country that schools will reopen in September fully and safely, and will stay open? Will he rule out any further school closures?

Nadhim Zahawi: We and the devolved Administrations have accepted the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to vaccinate vulnerable children, those children who live with vulnerable adults, and 17-year-olds close to their 18th birthday. The committee is, however, keeping the situation under review and looking at more data emerging from other countries, including the United States of America, on whether we should vaccinate all children. I reassure the hon. Lady that children will have two supervised tests on their return and that testing will continue until the end of September. A combination of that and vaccinating at scale all adults helps us to control transmission. Double-vaccinated people reduce transmission rates by about 50%.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: My hon. Friend said at the start of his statement that the disease was still here and that we were not out of the woods yet. The fact is that variants of covid-19 will be with us for many years to come. If we are truly to live with this virus, freedom day must mean what it says; the alternative is utter confusion, with hundreds of thousands of people having to isolate after being pinged by the NHS app. Here in Dorset, the police are beginning to struggle, because of the numbers who have to isolate. Will my hon. Friend tell me that the emergency services to which I think he referred include the police—that if they are double jabbed, they do not have to isolate—before enforcement of law and order becomes a real difficulty here in Dorset, I believe down in Devon and perhaps in other parts of the country?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we take this step confidently but cautiously. I remind the House that this is probably the most infectious respiratory virus known to humankind, with aerosol transmission, so we need to ensure that we are careful as we head into step 4.¹ I outlined the action that we are taking on key workers and critical workers, and of course the police fall within that.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the Catch Up with Cancer campaign, which I hope to join tomorrow in delivering a petition to No. 10 Downing Street, and thank them for their tireless work over the last year, pressing, petitioning and lobbying the Government to deliver urgently needed ring-fenced investment for our NHS cancer infrastructure so that cancer patients can get the timely diagnosis and treatment they need. The Minister mentioned the expert advice in his opening remarks. Will he outline his plans to ensure future

protection for immunocompromised or immunosuppressed groups, such as those living with cancer, like me, who may still be at risk from covid-19, despite the vaccine roll-out?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman attends the Friday briefings that I offer colleagues. He is absolutely right. Last week, Public Health England published some encouraging real-world data that showed that two doses of the vaccines offer around 74% protection for those who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised. That comes with a caveat that that group of people is not homogenous and we need to unpack some of the data. The JCVI has already recommended in its interim advice on the booster campaign in September that that group goes top of the list for the third dose as a boost. Of course, we have a large clinical trial, which will report imminently on the immunosuppressed and the immunocompromised. We will look at that data with the JCVI. The chief medical officer continues to ask the JCVI to look at what else we can do to protect that group, including through the therapeutics taskforce, which is doing some tremendous work.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: There is some real concern among my constituents that they might in some way have the wrong batch of AstraZeneca vaccine. My hon. Friend provided a useful update on Friday, but can he give any further reassurance that no British traveller will be turned away at the border because they have been given the wrong vaccine?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend is right that there is no such thing as a wrong batch of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in the United Kingdom. Our independent regulator regulates all manufacturing sites for AstraZeneca, Pfizer and the other vaccines. The AstraZeneca vaccine produced in the Serum Institute is the same vaccine—the Vaxzevria vaccine brand that is approved by the MHRA and the European Medicines Agency. There was some confusion in parts of world such as Malta last week, which the MHRA, the EMA and the Commission helped to clear up. I reassure my right hon. Friend that anyone who has had an Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and has the UK app or the letter to demonstrate their vaccination can travel. I think that 33 countries now recognise our vaccine certification.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Many of my former public health colleagues are very concerned about lifting mitigations today in the context of escalating cases—50,000 currently—12 million people who have not been vaccinated and an NHS and care workforce who are frankly on their knees. What estimates have the Government made of the effect of extending the wearing of masks and other mitigations three weeks after 80% of the eligible population have been vaccinated on incidence of long covid, hospitalisations and deaths?

Nadhim Zahawi: The vaccination programme could in no way have delivered the extraordinary uptake without the backbone being NHS doctors, nurses and pharmacists, working with our armed forces, local government and the private sector to deliver it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And the police.

1. [Official Report, 21 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 7MC.]

Nadhim Zahawi: And volunteers and the police. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) reminds us all of the role that policemen and women played in ensuring that the vaccination roll-out worked well. The very clear guideline is that we should take both personal and corporate responsibility. It is great to see Transport for London, other transport systems and the M10 of metro Mayors, which I speak to regularly, taking that corporate responsibility. We all have our part to play, as we have done by coming together and vaccinating the country at scale. This is the most infectious respiratory disease that is aerosol-transmitted.¹ We have to be very careful to ensure that we take this step carefully; for it to be irreversible, we have to continue to work together with a booster campaign. Beyond that, in the years to come, we have to get used to the transition from pandemic to endemic status.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As various hon. Members have noted, the number of coronavirus cases is rising very rapidly, but the great success of the vaccination scheme means that the number of deaths remains very low. That means that the fatality rate of coronavirus is now similar to that of other endemic viruses. Does my hon. Friend agree that with coronavirus now in approximately 200 countries around the world—almost every country in the world—the chance of eliminating it is almost zero, so as a society we have to learn to live with it, as we do with other serious infections such as flu and pneumonia?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question; I agree. I remember that when I took on the role of vaccines Minister in November, I explained to the House and the country that the reason we began by vaccinating phase 1—the most vulnerable cohorts, as set out to us by the JCVI—was that categories 1 to 9 were where 99% of the virus's mortality was coming from. That work has gone incredibly well: in all those categories we have uptake of more than 90%, in some of them it is at 95% or 96%, and in one it is even at 100%. There is very high uptake of the second dose as well. I think that it is right that we now take this step, pragmatically but cautiously, as we transition from pandemic to endemic status and help the rest of the world to do the same.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Because of the pandemic, nearly 5 million people in the UK are now waiting for hospital treatment of some kind or other. In many cases, they are waiting for really important operations, from eye operations that could save or improve their eyesight to hip or knee operations. Everybody gets that the NHS has been really stretched, but the problem is that thousands of people are now saying, “You know what? If I pay £3,000, £5,000, £10,000 or £20,000, I can get that new hip or that new knee done with exactly the same doctor that I would see in the NHS, but in the private sector.” Surely that is unfair. Surely we must say that the NHS will buy up every single piece of spare capacity in the UK to get the backlog down as fast as possible, including for cancer care and for things that might seem minor but that make a dramatic difference to quality of life, such as hips and knees.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Member for that thoughtful question. He is absolutely right: there are about 5.3 million people waiting for treatment. He is also right that we have to make sure that the NHS has

the resources to do it, which is why two things have happened: the Secretary of State has made it a priority to deal with the pandemic, and he has made it an equal priority to deal with the backlog. He has made £1 billion available for the NHS to do that work.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his statement, but I confess to some disappointment that the daily vaccination rate is not being sustained at a higher level. What is the constraint? Is it supply, is it logistics or is it that the hard-to-reach groups are slower in coming forward? What consideration are the Government giving to what is happening in other countries such as the United States, where people are being offered some kind of reward for coming forward and accepting a vaccination?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. The vaccination rates in the United Kingdom have been incredibly high. We are at 88% with the first dose and 68% with double doses. On double doses, we are actually ahead of the United States of America. That does not mean we become complacent, however. We are doing everything we can to ensure that every cohort, and every ethnicity has the ability to access the vaccine.

Let me give my hon. Friend an example of some great work in the London Borough of Newham. Last week it had 23 different vaccination sites in pop-ups, in mosques, in GPs and in community pharmacies across the borough. Young people were literally tripping over a vaccine site. Part of it is access. Part of it is taking the vaccine to those communities. I am working with a number of colleagues to make sure we get into rural communities, for example with vaccine buses, and in community centres where people feel safe and comfortable to have the vaccine. The work does not end today. We continue to double down on our effort to continue vaccination. Again, I want to place on record my thanks to the metro Mayors for the work they do with us to make sure that happens as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has been thanking everybody else, but I think we also need to thank the Minister, his Department, his team and the NHS staff for all they have done for the vaccine programme. Given recent news that those aged 12 to 17 will be offered a covid vaccination to protect them in the colder weather, has the Minister come to an assessment of how effective that will prove to limit the spread of covid-19 in schools? What discussions has he had with Education Ministers to deliver the vaccine roll-out?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Member, who is always wonderfully complimentary and polite. I am grateful for his compliments and I will take them back to the team. We have conversations all the time. We are making preparations for the co-administration, wherever possible, of the flu vaccine with the covid boost, beginning early September, based on the interim advice from the JCVI. The only caveat is obviously that it is only interim advice and it could change as the JCVI gets more clinical data through. We have a big trial on seven of our vaccines to see which delivers the best boost possible. When it gets that data back, we will firm up that advice, but operationally we aim to begin in September.

1. [Official Report, 21 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 8MC.]

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con) [V]: I am obviously pleased that we have reached step 4a of the road map, but I am keen to understand what lies behind the month-long gap between 19 July, when it feels as if we do not believe in our vaccines as much as we might, and 16 August when we do. What is the scientific basis for the decision to give my fully vaccinated constituents their real freedom after the middle of next month, but not now?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question, as always. Most restrictions have been lifted and many people have now been vaccinated, but it is still possible to catch and spread covid even if you are fully vaccinated. Introducing the exemption in August will allow more people to be fully vaccinated, as I mentioned earlier. Unlike in previous waves, the rise in cases driven by the delta variant is not translating into significant increases in hospitalisation and death. This is due to the effectiveness of the vaccine in reducing the risk of transition into severe illness.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: As Ministers recklessly lift almost all restrictions in England, despite the UK now having the third-highest number of cases of any country in the world—only Indonesia and Brazil have more—the efforts of public health leaders to keep cases down are being hampered by delays in accessing and processing PCR tests, with reports that the national booking system is being regularly switched off for hours at a time and that turnaround times for tests are lengthening. And that is before the even greater surge in case numbers that Ministers freely admit we face now that they have offloaded responsibility for managing the pandemic on to individuals and businesses. Can the Minister clarify whether the 600,000 PCR test capacity he referred to earlier is per day? How many tests will we need per day if we get to 200,000 daily cases? Can he really guarantee that we have sufficient capacity, in terms of PCR tests, to cope with the rising tide of covid infections that this Government are responsible for?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. On the PCR testing capacity, it is 600,000 per day. I looked at the data this morning for yesterday, and I think just about half of that was being utilised—300,000-odd tests. Of course, that does not include the millions of lateral flow tests that we are also capable of delivering.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Last Tuesday, the House passed a statutory instrument making it compulsory for care home staff to be vaccinated. The last time compulsory vaccination occurred was in the 19th century. I was slightly confused by what the excellent Minister said in his statement, so could he confirm that a full impact assessment was completed before this contentious legislation came to the Floor of the House and that he saw that assessment before signing off on the policy? After all, this was a major change in Government policy.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his excellent question. As I mentioned in my statement, an impact statement has been published today, and a full impact assessment will be made. Just to bring it to life for him, to reassure him and the House, I can say that Barchester Healthcare, one of the providers, has about 16,000 employees, so it is quite a large sample to look at, and it has implemented this policy early. When

it consulted its workforce on the duty of deployment, it managed successfully to get the workforce to be vaccinated—they were on a priority list in phase 1 of the vaccination programme—and only 78 out of the workforce of 16,000, or about 0.5%, actually chose not to and no longer work for Barchester Healthcare. I hope that gives him some reassurance that we look at this data very carefully.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I would like to pay tribute to the Minister for his work on probably the only functioning part of the Government's response to covid, but all of that work is at risk because of the Prime Minister's surrender strategy.

In my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency, I have one case—I will give it as an example—of a young girl who had eight negative lateral flow test results, but as she was symptomatic her parents insisted on a PCR test, and that was positive. A cluster has grown up around the young person and her family, and they are obviously in great distress not just because of her infection, but because of the consequences. So why do the Government, both here and in the devolved countries, persist in using discredited lateral flow devices that are not designed for use in asymptomatic subjects—they are designed for use in symptomatic subjects—and that are designed for use in the professional setting, not for self-administering that test? We have domestic tests that excel in both and that beat the current tests hands down, but they are not being contracted. Can the Minister please advise the House why the Government are blind to the domestic diagnostics industry?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I would just respectfully say that, on the contrary, the Government work with the diagnostics industry. Indeed, we were able to scale up. When we entered this pandemic, we were only capable of doing about 2,000 tests a day, but we now have a PCR testing capacity of 600,000, as he will have heard earlier, and millions of lateral flow tests. I think it is the combination of both those things that works, but if there are other companies in his constituency or indeed elsewhere in the country that he thinks are worth looking at, I will certainly put them through to the relevant team in the Department.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: Can I thank my hon. Friend for his unfailing courtesy and diligence in responding to MPs week after week in respect of his duties, and also ask him if he could share with the House the results of the test to release experiment? Like many businesses in my constituency, the Dine Yard restaurant in Leighton Buzzard had to close for a week, and I have been told that GObowling in Dunstable may have to close as well, because of a lack of staff, so anything the Minister can share with the House on that issue would be very welcome.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. We are, as he rightly outlines, incredibly aware of the stress of self-isolation and the effect of the policy on various workforces. Subject to the results of the clinical trials, which are expected within the next one to two weeks, we hope to be able to extend the use of daily contact testing for some workplaces, although the initial focus will need to be on workplaces with established asymptomatic testing sites, or possibly those that can rapidly stand up ATSSs, given that the first clinical trial is for assisted rather than home-based testing.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We all want to see the back of this pandemic and life return to normality. History will no doubt judge the wisdom or otherwise of “freedom day” at this point in time. I wish to focus on long covid, because it is a fact that the more covid there is, the more long covid there will be. At its worst, it is debilitating. It is just awful, and I know that because I am still suffering with it, after 16 months. If the balance of risk is more long covid, may I ask the Minister what more his Government will do to help those with it in their health recovery, to help employers impacted by an ill workforce and in providing social security for those on the long-term sick with long covid?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his excellent question and I wish him a continued recovery. I know from the work that I have seen that it is not easy. I believe there are just over 900,000 people suffering from different forms of long covid. We have made an additional £150 million available for the NHS, both in terms of looking at long covid, and having an infrastructure to be able to deal with it and help support GPs to diagnose it.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Minister is aware of my reservations about asking children to be vaccinated where it may provide only very marginal benefit to them, but this relies on the importance of informed consent and people being given all the right information. Can he confirm, first, that where children with medical conditions are being offered the vaccine, the risk posed to that child from a serious effect from covid is greater than the risk to that child posed by any vaccine? Can he also confirm that, where children are being asked to be vaccinated to protect an adult who may be vulnerable for whatever reason, those parents, carers and the child will be provided with the absolute—not relative—risk reduction for those individuals they are being asked to be vaccinated for?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend’s question is an excellent one. She has participated in the vaccination programme—she is one of the heroes I stand on the shoulders of—and she has done work in Sleaford and North Hykeham. I absolutely confirm to her that the JCVI advice is very specific on the conditions of young people who will be eligible to receive the vaccine to protect them from covid and, of course, those adults who are also vulnerable to it. That is why I talked in my statement about the NHS being in contact with those families to be able to advise them and then facilitate vaccination in a place and at a time convenient for them.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Health Secretary was double jabbed and got infected. In Swansea Bay, 18% of those infected in June were double jabbed and 31% were single jabbed. So does the Minister accept that freedom day is not the freedom to infect others, that masks and social distancing remain vital and that jabs are stopping people from dying? Will he confirm that he is not pursuing a policy of herd immunity, which would overwhelm the NHS and leave a massive legacy of long covid, disabling our economy?

Nadhim Zahawi: I can certainly confirm that, and the guidelines are very clear that we are both supporting people and recommending that they continue to be

careful when in indoor spaces and crowded places, to wear masks and to take personal and corporate responsibility, rather than having government by diktat.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I have to say that I do not welcome the Minister’s statement, particularly his announcement of compulsory vaccine passports for crowded venues, which is effectively moving to compulsory vaccination. However, I look forward to the debate and the vote in Parliament in September when he will bring forward the evidence, because I do not think that that policy is supported by the events pilots that have taken place.

I want to ask the Minister about the self-isolation regime. It is important for public confidence that it is supported by evidence. It is the same regime that we had before we had any vaccination or before we had any lateral flow tests, and the Government seem to accept that logic because they are going to move to a new, more sensible model on 16 August. I listened carefully to his multiple answers to colleagues on both sides of the House, but I am afraid he could not really explain why we were waiting until 16 August. All the things that will be true on 16 August about the reduced risk for those who are fully vaccinated of getting infected also apply today. I have to say to the Minister that, if the Government do not move on this before 16 August, he will be back at that Dispatch Box, probably during the recess. Reality will intrude, and I would rather the Government did this in a planned, organised and controlled way, rather than having a bit of a shambles developing later this month. I urge him to bring forward that announcement and those measures to today or this week; do not leave them to 16 August. Do the right thing, and I think the country will thank him for it.

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend always makes thoughtful and important interventions and I take his words incredibly seriously on both questions. One was about sharing with the House the evidence and working with the industry, whether it is the nightclub industry or at-risk large-scale indoor events. As I mentioned in my statement, we will come back to the House with that evidence. On the self-isolation issue, I hope he agrees that this was the right thing to do for frontline health and social care staff and for critical workers. The important thing is the clinical evidence. The chief medical officer’s very clear advice is that, as we go through step 4, we should have that additional buffer, if I can call it that, and continue to double vaccinate to allow us a bit more time to ensure that people who are double vaccinated can then come out of self-isolation because we can move to a PCR-negative or daily testing regime. That is the right thing to do. We will keep it under review, and I take his words very seriously.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Come September, the settings that will be most vulnerable to covid will be schools. School classrooms are going to have a higher percentage of non-vaccinated people than anywhere else. The Government have scrapped the need for face masks and the bubbling system, and they have now forbidden schools and nurseries from doing in-house track and trace and forced them on to the failing nationwide track and trace system. I understand why we need to be really sensitive and cautious about vaccinating young people aged 12-plus, and I am cognisant of the comments made by the hon. Member for Sleaford and North

[Peter Kyle]

Hykeham (Dr Johnson). However, in other areas, the JCVI has ensured that we are at the forefront of the global vaccination programme.

Could the Minister explain the conversations he has been having with the JCVI as to why the Government are being so cautious in this regard? Will he explain to the House when the JCVI will give updated advice, because really those young people should be vaccinated over the summer if it is safe? To be very clear, I am not asking for a forced programme for children. I am asking for this to become available when the JCVI says it is safe, and for parents and families to have all the information they need so that they can make the decision on behalf of the interests of the child, the family and the community, and take into account educational scarring as well.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Member asks a really important question; it is one that we have asked the JCVI. There will be two supervised tests on return to school, but the other advantage will be the wall of vaccinated adults that will continue to increase.

Peter Kyle: One teacher; 35 children.

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear the hon. Member and I absolutely understand. That is why the JCVI will continue to review the data on the vaccination of children. Specifically on his question, it has a concern. It has received data from around the world; from countries that are already vaccinating. We are with those countries at the forefront, but at the moment we are an outlier as they have chosen to move forward on children's vaccination and we have not fully; we are moving forward for children who are vulnerable and those who live with vulnerable adults. It wants to look at second-dose data; at the moment it has first-dose data. There is a very rare signal of myocarditis that it is concerned about and it wants to see second-dose data from places such as the United States before it makes its decision. That decision, however, is under review.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is good to see the Minister still standing on this freedom day, when it feels like half the Cabinet has been struck down, knocked out or whatever it is. Does he agree that, at a time when worryingly we hear of increased threats to vaccination centres, be they from the vile anti-vax propagandists outside this building right now or even people so keen to get jabbed that they leave vaccinators feeling vulnerable, nobody should feel intimidated when seeking perfectly legal healthcare? Does he also agree that there is scope for investigating an offence of violence towards NHS professionals, whether verbal or physical, in such a setting? It would bring the law into line with the "protect the protectors" legislation we already have for ambulance staff and the police. That was suggested to me by the Florence Nightingale nursing trainees I met last week. If he did that, he would be a hero among them—even though they did not get their pay rise. What does he think?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Lady, who made an excellent video about the vaccination centre in Acton—she had a bit of a go at me for not delivering it within a few weeks, but we finally got it delivered in Acton. She has done a tremendous job in leading the vaccination communication in her community.

I agree that it is abhorrent and completely wrong for anyone to intimidate people looking to get their vaccination, the incredible NHS staff delivering it, the volunteers or anyone else in the extraordinary mobilisation we have experienced of the nation coming together and delivering the largest vaccination programme in history. I will look at anything we can do to continue to protect our frontline staff. A senior responsible officer embedded in the vaccination deployment team looks seriously at security every single day, and we will not hesitate to take action against anyone who threatens any member of staff or volunteer taking part in the vaccination programme.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: We cannot ignore the slight reduction in vaccine uptake in the past couple of weeks, which is in spite of the fantastic work being done across Keighley and Ilkley to deal with this, including at the Silsden medical practice, Keighley's central mosque and Airedale Hospital, which this week are providing walk-in services for young people to get their vaccine. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging all those who have not yet taken up the offer of the vaccine to do so to prevent transmission and to help protect themselves and others?

Nadhim Zahawi: I commend my hon. Friend for his exemplary work in taking the message out to his constituents that vaccines protect people, families and communities. He is right to continue to double down on his efforts. I assure him that we will do the same across the system, whether through pop-ups, mobile sites or opening for longer hours. The Eid festival begins tomorrow and we have a whole programme around that. I wish the Muslim community a happy Eid Mubarak, but I also encourage them to come forward and get vaccinated.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): As the Minister will know, I have long campaigned for a vaccine passport to enable individuals, society and the economy to speed up the return to normality, so I very much welcome the long-overdue and realistic NHS covid pass, but how will the Minister ensure take-up? Will he tell us which venues will be included and—equally importantly—whether any sporting, hospitality or leisure venues will be excluded?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support. We are looking at high-risk, large capacity indoor venues. My colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and others—are currently working with the industry to take advantage of step 4, to get those businesses back on their feet and then, of course, to take all that learning so that I can be back here at the Dispatch Box in September to share with the House how we can sustain the industry going forward while we live with covid, because we will have to transition this virus from pandemic to endemic status.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The now famous test and release pilot was first announced on 29 April. Is the lack of any results from that pilot, nearly three months after it started, a failure on the part of Public Health England, or are the results being suppressed because the Minister might be concerned that NHS Test and Trace does not have the testing capacity available to make test and release available to everyone?

Nadhim Zahawi: In answer to an earlier question I informed the House that the test and release pilot results will be available in one to two weeks' time. When they are, we will come to the House and share them with Members.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Minister has proved himself to be helpful and thoughtful in the way he has handled his brief, but will he tell us what research there has been into the impact of long covid on younger people? If in the end long covid is an issue not simply for adults but for children as well, will that affect the way we assess the need for a vaccination programme for young children?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that excellent question and for his support on the weekly MPs' briefing that we deliver on a Friday. Long covid is a serious issue among adults and children, and the JCVI of course looks at the available evidence. I caveat what I say by reminding the House that obviously this virus has been with us for only 17 months and we have had vaccines for only the past eight of those months, so we are learning all the time. As I said in answer to an earlier question, we have made money available to the health service so that it can look at how to support, for example, GPs in diagnosing long covid.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: In addition to holidaymakers, hundreds of UK citizens want to go to France, a country with a much lower infection rate than the United Kingdom, to visit family, and there are also hundreds of UK citizens—expats—who wish to visit families in the United Kingdom. As a result of the decision taken by the Department of Health and Social Care, all those people now face exorbitant test costs and isolation when they come into the United Kingdom. The House of Commons has an excellent test system that generates a result within around 30 minutes and is reliable. Will my hon. Friend, who is the most effective of Ministers, use his influence to make sure that at the very least people who come back into the United Kingdom and have to be tested can do so at a reasonable and not disproportionate cost?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is always diligent in his questioning, including on the Friday calls, on behalf of his constituents. He raises a really important point about the beta variant, which as a precautionary measure is clearly a variant of concern to us. It is the one that would give us the greatest headache, in terms of vaccine escape—hence

why we took those precautionary measures. We keep that under review, and the biosecurity team does that very effectively.

My right hon. Friend also raises a really important point about the cost of testing. I will certainly take away his comments and discuss them within Government, including with the Secretary of State for Transport, who has looked at this and talked to those involved in the testing process to ensure that people are not penalised by exorbitant PCR test costs.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I listened very carefully to what the Minister said in response to the excellent question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who chairs the Science and Technology Committee. The Minister said that when the information is available from the test and release pilot in the next couple of weeks, he will come back to the House straightaway.

You will have noticed, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I am sure all Members will, that the House will be in recess at that point, and Ministers are unable therefore to answer written questions, lay written ministerial statements or make oral statements. I therefore ask those on the Treasury Bench, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether the Minister will ensure that the House is recalled to hear that evidence. Of course, the decision point is on 16 August—during the recess. This will be of interest to millions of people in our country who by that point may be self-isolating, so we need a commitment that the Minister will return and the House will be brought back to enable Ministers to be questioned on this important matter. It would be helpful if the Minister can confirm that at the Dispatch Box now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The Minister is smiling at me. I do not think he wishes to speak. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the House goes into recess on Thursday and does not come back until 6 September. It is way out of the ability of the Chair to recall Parliament, but I am absolutely certain that those on the Treasury Bench heard what he had to say and will pass it on to the appropriate people.

I thank the Minister for his statement and for answering 29 questions in well over an hour. We will now suspend for three minutes in order to sanitise the Dispatch Boxes.

5.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Nationality and Borders Bill

[1ST ALLOCATED DAY]

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to report that the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition has been selected.

5.55 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The British people have had enough of open borders and uncontrolled immigration; enough of a failed asylum system that costs the taxpayer more than £1 billion a year; enough of dinghies arriving illegally on our shores, directed by organised crime gangs; enough of people drowning on these dangerous, illegal and unnecessary journeys; enough of people being trafficked and sold into modern slavery; enough of economic migrants pretending to be genuine refugees; enough of adults pretending to be children to claim asylum; enough of people trying to gain entry illegally ahead of those who play by the rules; enough of foreign criminals, including murderers and rapists, who abuse our laws and then game the system so that we cannot remove them.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): You have been in for 11 years!

Priti Patel: The British people have had enough of being told that none of these issues matter. They have had enough of being told that it is racist even to think about addressing public concerns, and to want to fix this failed system.

Peter Kyle: Who says that?

Priti Patel: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to either intervene or listen.

The British people have repeatedly voted to take back control of our borders, something that the Labour party has repeatedly voted against and complained about. The British people finally have a Government who are listening to them, because our priorities are the people's priorities. For the first time in decades, we will determine who comes in and out of our country. Our plans will increase the fairness of our system.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I hope my right hon. Friend will forgive me if I intervene in this way, but she is giving the impression that no Conservative Government since 2010 have tried to address these issues. Can I assure her, on the basis of six years in the Home Office, that they have been addressed? I will refer in my speech to the fact that Governments constantly have to look at these issues relating to immigration, rather than thinking that one piece of legislation will deal with the problem forever.

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point, which the Labour party should also recognise. A little earlier, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) said, "In 11 years, what have you done?" As my right hon. Friend has just pointed out, cumulative efforts

have been made—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) would like to listen as well. It is important to note that over the years—my right hon. Friend is right, and in fact I am going to refer to a piece of legislation with which she will be familiar—change did come in, but unfortunately, for a range of reasons, the system is now being abused and gamed.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Priti Patel: I will give way shortly.

Our plan will increase the fairness of our system so that we can better protect those who are in need of genuine asylum. That is absolutely right, and it is important that we have that fair principle. However, it will also do something that I sense does not interest the Labour party: it will deter illegal entry to the UK, and, importantly, will break the business model of the smuggling gangs and protect the lives of those whom they are endangering.

Stephen Timms: One of the big problems at present is the very long time that it takes to determine asylum applications. Since the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), left the Home Office, the number of case workers has gone up but the number of decisions has gone down in every single year. Why has that catastrophic fall in productivity been allowed to occur?

Priti Patel: I shall go on to refer specifically to the time it takes to process cases, but the right hon. Gentleman will also be familiar with the number of appeals involved. This is not just about initial decisions; it is about the system itself, seen from an end-to-end perspective. That is why—and I will go on to make this case as well—in our new plan for immigration, as the right hon. Gentleman and all other Members will be aware, we are speaking about comprehensive end-to-end reform of the asylum system that looks at every single stage.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary explain why the number of initial decisions—not appeals—made by the Home Office dropped by 27% between 2015 and 2019, before the pandemic started?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. In relation to the initial decision making—this point is absolutely in our new plan for immigration—we are looking not just at caseworkers, but at digitalising the system to make it much more efficient. The fact is that when more cases are coming in that are down to things such as illegal immigration—people being exploited by coming into the country illegally—the number of cases in the system has gone up. That is a fact. Cases have gone up over a significant period of time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Priti Patel: I will shortly, but I am going to make a bit of progress. It is important to reflect on the fact that when it comes to reforming the immigration system and

tackling many of these complex issues, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. I think it is important for all right hon. and hon. Members to recognise that we would be kidding ourselves if we thought there was a silver bullet and said, “There is one thing that could be done.” There are a range of cumulative issues that this legislation seeks to address.

When we launched our new plan for immigration, Labour effectively spoke out about many of the measures in the Bill and in the new plan for immigration. I think it is fair to say that the Opposition seem to think that the British people have the wrong priorities when it comes to tackling issues of migration and illegal entry.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) *rose*—

Priti Patel: I will give way shortly, but I want to make progress first. The Opposition argue that it is wrong to deport murderers, rapists and dangerous criminals—*[Interruption.]* It is a fact. They think that border controls are wrong. They think that ending free movement is wrong. Well, Labour Members can sigh and shake their heads, but the fact of the matter is that over the last 12 months, when it has come to ending free movement and having discussions about reforming immigration and our points-based system, they seem to think that open borders are the answer. They obviously do not support our new plan for immigration. They do not like the people's priorities when it comes to these issues, yet they have no plan.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The public seem to want a fair, fast and affordable system, so can the Home Secretary tell the public how much more the taxpayer will pay for her new proposals?

Priti Patel: In fact, the taxpayer will be saving money in the long run. We already spend over £1 billion a year on dealing with the failed and broken asylum system. If the hon. Gentleman has read the Bill and the new plan for immigration, which I urge him to do, he will see that there are a range of measures—

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Priti Patel: I will.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful. Is not the truth of the matter that too often our courts exaggerate the significance of international treaties and obligations and, by so doing, frustrate the process by which we deport illegal immigrants, including large numbers of foreign criminals?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for his observation. There are a range of aspects, certainly through this Bill, that we are seeking to address in order to make courts and immigration tribunals more efficient. It is wrong for them to have endless appeals, where individuals frustrate the appeals process and clog up the system. It is right that we do that because otherwise there will be individuals—genuine people seeking to claim asylum—who are simply not getting their cases heard, and we want to make sure that we can give them the support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not.

For years, people have risked their lives to enter our country, such as those crossing the channel in dangerous boats to claim asylum. *[Interruption.]* I have been generous in giving way and I will give way again shortly, but I would like to make progress.

If there were simple and straightforward solutions to many of these challenges—my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has touched on this—issues such as illegal migration to the UK would have been resolved by now, but illegal entry to the UK and the subsequent claims of asylum have become complex because of the nature of cases that arise. But I am absolutely clear that no one should seek to put their life, or the lives of their family, in the hands of criminals to enter the UK illegally, and I would like to think that that is an important point that this House can unite on.

The Bill will finally address the issues that over a long period of time, cumulatively, have resulted in the broken system that we have now. It is a system that is being abused, allowing criminals to put the lives of the vulnerable at risk, and it is right that we do everything possible and find measures to fix this and ensure that a fair asylum system provides a safe haven to those fleeing persecution, oppression and tyranny.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are receiving emails saying that this Bill is somehow cruel to illegal migrants, but is not the cruellest thing to do nothing? This very day, hundreds of people are putting their life at risk by crossing the channel. If we close these loopholes, if we clear up the doubts about human rights legislation and if we create safe havens, this trade will stop dead, as it did for Australia.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are many ways in which we can address this problem, and creating safe and legal routes, which are in the Bill and are something I have spoken about many times, will build upon the generosity of our country. We are generous as a nation when it comes to providing refuge and support to people fleeing persecution, but what we have to do right now is stop this trade in which people are being exploited so that they can come to the country illegally.

Chris Bryant: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: No, I am giving way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has been waiting patiently.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way. One of the things that greatly concerns me and others in this House, and I know it concerns her, is the children held in immigration detention. The figure has dropped since 2019, down to 73, but they often arrive having been separated from their family, or they arrive unaccompanied, unaware that they will be placed in detention straightaway. What will be done to help children in particular?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will shortly address some of these wider issues, but obviously, along with our work on safe and legal routes, we have to provide the right pathways and a secure environment for children to rebuild their lives. That is at the heart of our work in being humane, compassionate and fair.

Our system is overwhelmed, and it is a strong point of reflection that, because of the trends we have been seeing in organised immigration crime and gangs that are effectively exploiting vulnerable individuals, we now need to be able to provide support and to understand where those needs are coming from. Genuine people are being elbowed aside by those who are paying traffickers to come to our country.

Stuart C. McDonald *rose—*

Priti Patel: I will not give way.

As a nation, we have always stepped up to support refugees in need, and rightly so. This is a great source of national pride for our country, and of course that will never change.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not give way.

Since 2015, more than 25,000 refugees have been resettled in the UK from regions of conflict under formal schemes, more than in any other European country. Again, reflecting on the comment made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, this has happened at a time when we have seen all sorts of challenges around the world and have seen people fleeing persecution, oppression and conflict.

In addition, more than 29,000 close relatives have joined those refugees in the UK over the past five years. Our country is not mean spirited or ungenerous towards asylum seekers, as some may claim.

Chris Bryant: May I gently say to the right hon. Lady that I do not think the issue is whether we are mean spirited or generous? The issue is whether the legislation that she is introducing will actually solve the problem. Every single Member of this House is opposed to illegal migration and every single Member of this House hates the trafficking that has made many vulnerable people put their children in terrible positions, through no will of their own. If we really are to have an end-to-end solution, do we not need to be able to answer the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee? Do we not all have to be able to say how we will make sure that the factors that push so many people out of their country, when they would much prefer to stay, are dealt with?

Priti Patel: If the hon. Gentleman had followed much of the work undertaken by the Home Office prior to the introduction of the Bill, and if he had looked at our new plan for immigration, he would fully appreciate the end-to-end work that is already in train. There is a lot of upstream work to go after criminals outside the United Kingdom, not just in France but across Europe. We do a great deal of work with our partners around

the world and across Europe on intelligence to go after criminal gangs, but he will recognise that that is one component of our work.

I have already spoken about the refugees we have resettled from parts of the world where there has been oppression and conflict. It is a fact that, since 2015, this Government, with the generosity of the British public, have spent billions of pounds on accommodation, education, healthcare and amenities to resettle people and keep them in their own regions. That is absolutely right. I can say from my time as Secretary of State for International Development that economic development in countries upstream is at the heart of everything we do. Of course, there is much more that we need to do on that.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Priti Patel: I will give way just one more time.

Chris Bryant: This is a really important point. The vast majority of people who, as the Secretary of State said earlier, put their children at risk by putting them on boats to cross the channel are doing so only because they were forced to leave their country—they did not do so of their own free will. The more we can do to prevent that happening at source will, in the end, save us from some of this headache, will it not?

Priti Patel: There are a number of points to make on the hon. Gentleman's intervention. First and foremost, no one would dispute the work that we do in other countries around the world, or how vital it is. All of our Governments have had a very strong record on that—on investment in people, in livelihoods, in women and girls, and in economic empowerment. That is fundamental to the work of the Government and always has been.

Secondly, we must recognise that, given the trends we are seeing in illegal migration, the majority of people entering the UK illegally are travelling through safe countries across the EU where they could claim asylum. Indeed, the figures bear this out. France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Greece are all safe countries, yet these people are being trafficked through those countries. Furthermore, the majority of people entering the United Kingdom are young men, not women and children, and they are paying the people smugglers to push those women and children to one side. That is why—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Priti Patel: If I may just finish my remarks before I go back to my speech. That is why our focus is on creating safe routes and looking at what we can do outside the United Kingdom to help support women and children and families to come to the United Kingdom to resettle. These are important principles that we have already established in our resettlement schemes, and we do want to do much more in this area.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech. As we can see from the Bill, much needs to be done. I want to draw her attention to part 4, which deals with modern slavery. I was very proud when the Centre for Social Justice brought forward the paper and very proud that my right hon. Friend the Member for

Maidenhead (Mrs May) brought forward the world's first legislation on this subject. There are problems with part 4. I gently ask her and her team to retain an open mind about changes that may come forward, because we really do want to lead the world on this and be generous to those who are not just trafficked, but trafficked for the most abominable reasons.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will know from our discussions that we will continue to work with him and others to ensure that we are doing the right thing. I will come to part 4 later in my remarks, but let me expand on exactly where we are seeing the problems and anomalies within the system. Of course we want to close them down, because modern slavery is absolutely abhorrent, but there are key elements that we also need to address.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I cannot let the comment from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) just pass. He made the point that people who seek asylum here are always fleeing their country because of persecution. I have many concerns about the immigration Bills that have been passed in this place, many by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister. It is naive to think that the people coming through irregular routes are only seeking asylum for reasons of persecution. There are a large number who are seeking asylum based purely on economic migration. Is that not one reason why separating out regular and irregular people is such an important change in the way that we are pursuing the legislation?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right, and that is where the system becomes conflated and there is no separation between the two. He is absolutely right to make that point.

Stuart C. McDonald *rose*—

Priti Patel: I will not give way. [*Interruption.*] I have been very generous in taking interventions, and I would like to make some progress.

It is important to reflect on the fact that, when it comes to anyone claiming asylum in the UK—this is established in long-standing legislation—we have a statutory duty in relation to accommodation, subsistence, cash and transportation. The system, as I have already mentioned to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), is currently costing the taxpayer more than £1 billion a year. It is right that we look to reform the system, and not just to make it efficient but to ensure that we do the right thing. The very principle of seeking refuge has clearly been undermined by those who are paying to travel through safe countries and then claiming asylum in the UK. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) said, many of those are economic migrants and not just those fleeing persecution. People should be claiming asylum in the first safe country that they reach and not using the UK as a destination of choice. That is why our intention is to work—

Patrick Grady: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Priti Patel: I will not; I have given way several times now.

Our intention is to address the wider system to fix this problem so that we can help those who are in genuine need to resettle here. We are strengthening through the Bill the safe and legal ways in which people can enter the UK, adopting a fair and firm approach. From today, I will be granting indefinite leave to remain to refugees resettled under our world-leading resettlement schemes, giving them the vital freedom to succeed from the moment that they arrive in our country and, importantly, offering certainty and stability to help them rebuild their lives from day one.¹ That is absolutely the right thing to do. From that, we can also learn and build better schemes going forward.

We also want to continue to strengthen our proud record to support those in need, such as, over the past few months, the brave Afghan nationals who have worked alongside our brave military and who are now benefiting from a bespoke resettlement scheme. That is in addition to the type of scheme we have set up for British nationals overseas from Hong Kong whose liberties were restricted and who are now able to live freely in the UK, with a full pathway to citizenship, thanks to the route that we opened up this year. We will always give people coming through safe resettlement schemes the support that they need, which is of course the right thing to do. From learning English to gaining employment and training, they will gain essential skills to build a new life in the UK. New pilots to support refugees into work are already happening. Community sponsorship schemes that are well-established and have been established over recent years are making an enormous difference and helping local communities to support refugees directly. We want to do more, and we are empowering more schemes like these every day.

Those displaced by conflict and violence will also be able to benefit from access to our global points-based immigration system to enable skilled people who have been displaced and who have fled their homes to come to the UK safely and legally through established routes. We will work with the charity Talent Beyond Boundaries and other partners on this pilot project. Up to 100 refugees in Jordan and Lebanon will be supported first to gain sponsorship from a UK employer. These are the types of schemes that we will continue to build on.

This is in addition to our world-leading resettlement schemes. Providing greater support to refugees arriving safely will reduce the incentive to enter the country dangerously and illegally, because when the British people object to illegal entry, they are right to make the case as to it being absolutely abhorrent. In 2020, 8,500 people arrived in the UK by small boat, 87% of whom were men and 74% of whom were aged 18 to 39. Those who claim that it is heartless to stop these illegal crossings have it all the wrong way round, because it would be heartless and immoral to let them continue to do so through these dangerous and perilous journeys. People have drowned in the channel, and thousands, some only recently, just three weeks ago, have died in the Mediterranean.

It is not just illegal sea journeys that are lethal. One of my first and saddest tasks as Home Secretary was to respond to the devastating and, really, preventable deaths of 39 Vietnamese people in a trailer found in Essex. The judge described their deaths through suffocation as

1. [*Official Report*, 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 9MC.]

[Priti Patel]

“excruciatingly painful”. This terrible crime was organised by a gang; it was all gang activity. In recognition of the severity of this appalling crime, five members of the people-smuggling gang were jailed, with two ringleaders going down for 20 and 27 years respectively. Two lorry drivers were imprisoned on manslaughter charges with sentences of 18 years and 13 years, four months. Such cases are not just heartbreaking; there is only one word for them: they are evil. We have a moral duty to prevent such appalling atrocities from happening again. There is simply no justification for what is going on. People-smugglers are motivated by profit. They line their pockets with the takings to finance other crimes such as drugs and firearms-trafficking. They do not organise illegal entry by small boat and in the back of lorries out of kindness.

Three weeks ago, to give another example, late at night, I received what I can only describe as a sickening call from officials at the Home Office. They told me of reports of a family attempting to make their way across the channel who had been separated. They said that people smugglers in northern France had forced a mother and father to get into a small boat at gunpoint. They said that their family, their two young daughters, would be put in the next boat to make the crossing. When the parents refused to be separated from their children, the people smugglers threatened them again.

The anguish and distress of those parents is absolutely unthinkable, but it is all too common for families to be put into many such perilous situations by criminal gangs. Organised gangs involved in exploiting and trafficking children are of course involved in modern-day slavery. We have also had recent accounts of facilitators using violence. The threat of guns and violence has now become the norm. The threat of violence also includes rape to control people. We are talking about unimaginable wickedness. We cannot, in good conscience, fail to act. We have a moral obligation to stop this vile trade, because human beings are not cargo.

The status quo is entirely unacceptable. That is why I and this Government will look at all options—every option—and work with international partners on how to fix the system and save lives. We are determined to smash the criminal gangs who cause such misery. We are absolutely determined to break their business model.

Let me turn to the key measures in the Bill. It is illegal to arrive in UK waters without permission. Those who bring migrants to the UK and facilitate illegal entry will now face a life sentence. That criminal and exploitative behaviour can now be punished with the severity it rightly deserves. A maximum prison sentence for entering the country illegally will increase from six months to four years. We are sending—we need to send—a signal to those criminal gangs that there is increased risk of paying for propping up criminal activity to get to the UK illegally.

The Bill will also give Border Force additional powers, including powers to seize vessels used to facilitate illegal entry to the UK. Border Force will be able to search all freight for people suspected of seeking illegal entry, to prevent illegal trafficking and facilitation, like the case of almost 50 minors who were found recently hidden in tiny crevices in the back of a lorry with no chance of escape. This is what we are dealing with.

In addition to the changes and the powers for Border Force, we intend to make the border fully digital, which will not only allow us to count people in and out, but, importantly, help us to stop dangerous people coming here. Anyone who is not a British or Irish citizen will need to provide more information about themselves before they travel, including any history of criminality. Electronic travel authorisations have been a major step in our border security. Carriers will check that passengers have the digital authorisation, or another form of digital permission such as a visa, before they travel. They will risk a civil penalty if they fail to deny boarding to those without permission. We are also increasing the maximum penalty for hauliers caught entering the UK with an illegal migrant onboard from £2,000 to £5,000.

In addition to many of the changes included in the Bill, we will introduce new accommodation and reception centres, which are already used by many countries across Europe and elsewhere. They will provide new accommodation for processing and speeding up claims, and that will include the reforms to and digitisation of much of our own processes within the Home Office. Asylum seekers will be allocated to accommodation centres by the Department and the Home Secretary, rather than being dispersed across the United Kingdom, as we do already.

Currently, detained appeals are subject to the same rules as non-detained appeals. There is no set timeframe in which decisions have to be made. That can result in appeals taking a long time. We will reinstate an accelerated appeals process that is fast enough to enable claims to be dealt with from detention, while ensuring that a person who is detained has fair access to justice. That will expedite the removal of people without a legitimate need to claim asylum in the UK.

In recent years we have seen some of the most shocking cases of grown adults—mostly men—claiming asylum as children. Through deception, they have been able to access children’s services and education, leading to the most worrying cases and safeguarding issues. This Bill will change how someone’s age is assessed. Many countries around the world and across the EU already employ safe scientific methods, and we will start to do so. This will stop people falsely claiming to be children and protect genuine children from being moved into the adult asylum system.

The British public are incredulous that it is so hard to remove foreign criminals and failed asylum seekers from our shores. We are therefore amending the early removal scheme to help us to remove foreign criminals from the UK as early as possible. The British people have also had enough of foreign criminals getting one over on us. One foreign national offender first claimed asylum in 2001. He chose to leave the UK voluntarily in 2009, re-entering in 2011 with his wife and child and claiming asylum for a second time. He was deported in 2015 after a 15-month sentence for sexual assault on a child. He returned to the UK in breach of a deportation order in 2017 and was arrested and detained. He then went on to make a fresh asylum claim. He then appealed that refusal and eventually exhausted his rights to appeal.

In detention, this man sewed his lips together, refused food or fluid and declined healthcare. Then, in 2018, he was released on health grounds with electronic monitoring. He appealed this decision through the family courts and a hearing was scheduled for months later, acting as a

barrier to removal. Then, in early 2018, he cut off his electronic tag. In 2019, he was arrested on suspicion of murder after his estranged wife was found dead. That is not justice, and it shows that our system is simply not working. Things cannot continue like this, and we must change the law so that we can remove dangerous foreign criminals and ensure that justice is done.

The Bill raises the minimum sentence for any foreign criminal who returns to the UK in breach of a deportation order from six months to five years.¹ It speeds up appeals and stops the endless cycle of baseless claims. People who are subject to removal action often wait until the very last minute to make a challenge, leading to cancelled flights and delayed removals—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead could recount many tales from her time as Home Secretary—and this has become standard practice when it comes to too many of these cases with foreign national offenders and others.

Time and time again, we see murderers, rapists and child abusers launching numerous last-minute claims to attempt to try to stay in the UK. That simply is not right. These last-minute claims and appeals mean that criminals can thwart removal from our country, even when they are on the tarmac ready to be removed from the UK. We have had far too many cases like that, and we and the British public are sick of it.

Through this Bill, all protection-related issues will need to be raised up front and in one go, and that includes, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has already said, claims of modern-day slavery. It will stop the endless cycle of people raising repeated claims to frustrate their removal. Our approach is fair, but firm. It is firm where we have seen too many abuses over many years and, in fact, decades. The notice period of an intention to remove someone will be standardised, and we will provide fair access to justice and legal advice for individuals.

Slavery is one of humanity's greatest evils, and it has never gone away. It was a Conservative Government who pushed through the Modern Slavery Act 2015, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead when she was Home Secretary. The House recognises—we all do—that she deserves immense credit for the work that she undertook. It was an act of good faith that other countries have since been inspired to follow. We will continue, as we have done, to protect victims of modern slavery by creating a statutory grant of leave for confirmed victims. They of course need the time and the support to recover from their horrendous and appalling ordeals, and the authorities also need time to bring perpetrators to justice.

I would also like to pay tribute to many colleagues in the House and to policing partners as well, who have worked diligently. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has already mentioned the Centre for Social Justice, but we have worked with policing partners as well to look at many of the cases around law enforcement and bringing perpetrators to justice—how difficult some of those cases are. But the law on modern slavery is being exploited.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman will have his chance to speak shortly.

There has been an alarming increase in the number of illegal entrants and foreign national offenders, including child rapists and people who pose a national security risk seeking modern-day slavery referrals to avoid immigration detention and frustrate removal from the UK.

One individual, who was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK, had that leave revoked following persistent offending that led to a prison sentence adding to more than 12 months. They were subject to a deportation order, a decision upheld by the courts. On the day that they were due to be removed, they went on to make an asylum claim. Once that was refused, they claimed to be a victim of modern slavery in relation to incidents several years before they came to the United Kingdom. This was then referred to the national referral mechanism, which rightly identifies and supports victims of modern slavery. Decisions on these cases currently take around 12 months, with a low bar for postponing removal. The person was released from detention and their removal was postponed. They subsequently absconded and went on to commit further serious offences.

The Bill contains vital measures to ensure that victims are identified as quickly as possible, while making it easier to distinguish between genuine and non-genuine accounts of modern slavery. It is absolutely right, as I have said throughout my remarks this afternoon, that we are doing the right thing to support genuine victims and genuine asylum seekers. This is where we absolutely need to reform the system, to close down loopholes and gaps that are being exploited by those who have been a harm to British citizens and who have no legal right to be in the UK.

Help and support will be available where there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person is a victim, rather than that they may be a victim. People claiming asylum or human rights protections will be required to provide relevant information relating to being a victim of slavery or human trafficking within a specified period. In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, I say that this is exactly the area where we need to do more work. We will absolutely work with Members of the House and other organisations to make sure that we have the right protective measures in place for those who have absolutely been victims of modern-day slavery.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The Home Secretary is being most generous in giving way. The time in which people are granted leave to remain has a bearing on whether we can prosecute those who are guilty, because they need to be settled, in a settled state, able to give evidence and not fearing what will happen next. This will have a huge impact on the ability to prosecute those who traffic them.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Without going into detail here, I give him the assurance that this is effectively what we are seeking to achieve and are working on right now. The point has been very well made by him and by the Centre for Social Justice. Linked to his comment, it is right that we pool all our resources into helping genuine victims of modern slavery and that we do not allow dangerous foreign criminals, who are effectively pushing aside real victims, to go on to abuse the system for their own despicable means.

1. [Official Report, 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 9MC.]

[Priti Patel]

We already maintain a list of safe countries that consistently adhere to international human rights law, to stop people delaying removal by falsely claiming that their human rights are at risk. Every EU country will be on that list, as they are safe countries. That speaks to the point frequently made and discussed in this House that people moving through safe countries—through EU member states—should seek to claim asylum in the first safe country, not to come to the UK as a destination of choice. Furthermore, we are taking a power to allow us to remove countries from the list as well as adding them to it, so that the list can remain relevant and appropriate to our needs as assessments change.

If someone's human rights claim is clearly unfounded, there will no longer be a right to appeal. Whether someone has complied with the asylum or removal process will also be considered when deciding whether to grant immigration bail. Other countries must co-operate when taking back those citizens who have no right to be in the UK. If countries do not co-operate in the return of their nationals, their access to our generous, fast and open visa system will be at risk. Every effort will be made to remove those who enter the UK having travelled through a safe country in which they could and should have claimed asylum.

For the first time, how people arrive in our country will impact on how their claim is progressed. Those we cannot remove but whose claims prevail will receive only temporary status with limited entitlements. Anyone who arrives in the UK via a safe third country may have their claim declined and be returned to a country they arrived from or a third safe country.¹ People who make a successful claim after arriving via another safe country may receive new temporary protection status without the same benefits and entitlements, and that will be reassessed periodically.

The Bill also makes it easier to remove someone to another safe country while their asylum claim is being processed and enables us to recover taxpayers' money from lawyers where their unreasonable behaviour wastes the courts' and other parties' resources.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not give way. I have taken many interventions.

We are also closing the loophole that has prevented the defence of some immigration decisions on the ground of national security.

I am resolute that we must fix a terrible injustice suffered by the Windrush generation and others who were denied British citizenship unfairly—

Neil Coyle: At the hands of the Conservative party.

Priti Patel: By successive Governments, if the hon. Gentleman had read the Wendy Williams report about Windrush. I have already overhauled the Windrush compensation scheme. I urge colleagues across the House to help us encourage people to come forward. What happened to them must never be repeated. That also means fixing our outdated nationality laws. The Bill gives the Home Secretary power to grant British citizenship to people who would have become British citizens if not

for unfairness and exceptional circumstances beyond their control. For example, in one case, an individual was refused citizenship due to an absence from the UK on a given day, despite many years of previous residence. Of course it was not his fault.

The Bill provides further flexibility to waive residency requirements to help members of the Windrush generation and others acquire British citizenship more quickly. That will also mean that children unfairly denied British overseas territory citizenship can finally acquire citizenship here. That was one of the anomalies that came out in the Windrush scandal.

Our laws must be clearer and easier to understand. The "Windrush Lessons Learned Review" by Wendy Williams also said that immigration and nationality law is complex. The Bill gives the Home Secretary the power to simplify and consolidate immigration law so that we can address many of the citizenship anomalies that have existed for too long—for decades, in fact.

The British people are generous and compassionate. As I said to the hon. Member for Rhondda earlier, they give billions of pounds every year in overseas aid to provide support in countries around the world, to empower countries and communities and to invest in many economies. The British public also embrace those in genuine need and want people to succeed. They also want a system that is fair and firm—fair to the British people and to those in genuine need, but firm against the criminals and those who exploit our generosity by gaming the system.

The Bill is critical to delivering that new fair but firm system. It is also central to our new plan for immigration. It goes a long way to addressing decades of failure and challenges, in the law and illegal migration and in immigration courts and tribunals, in the way in which I have just reflected upon. The Windrush scandal has shone a spotlight on many of the anomalies that have existed when it comes to citizenship. We will change those areas, with secure borders and rules that will be easy to understand. That is part of the cumulative end-to-end change that we seek to introduce.

We want to slam the door on foreign criminals, put organised crime gangs out of business, and of course give help and support to those in genuine need. Everyone who plays by the rules will encounter a new system—

Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the Home Secretary, but does the hon. Lady have an actual point of order?

Debbie Abrahams: As the Home Secretary is very eloquently saying, this is an incredibly important piece of legislation, and the lack of opportunity to hold the Government to account on it is a source of real concern. Can she invite—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. We are starting a debate, the purpose of which is to allow this House to hold the Government to account. We will be doing so until 10 o'clock tonight, and then again tomorrow. That is not a point of order, and the hon. Lady knows that.

Priti Patel: This is an important Bill, and it is right that we have given the House plenty of time to debate it.

1. [Official Report, 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 9MC.]

We are seeking to achieve systematic, end-to-end reform of this system, but it is complex—it is absolutely complicated. Throughout this debate and in Committee, I hope all hon. Members will reflect on some of the points that have been made by Government Members. Over decades, we have found anomalies in our system. I have mentioned Windrush, tribunals and many of the processes that we want to streamline, which will of course deal with efficiency and productivity in case management.

Fundamentally, the new system will be fair to those who need our help and support. Everyone who plays by the rules will encounter a new system that is fair but firm. As representatives of the British people, we will be finally in control of many of these highly challenging issues that many successive Governments have sought to address in different ways, but now this Government are committed to fixing the broken system.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the shadow Home Secretary—[*Interruption.*] I would be obliged if the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) did not speak loudly while I am on my feet. He can heckle other people, but he should not be heckling the Chair. I draw to the House's attention the fact that there is obviously a very long list of people who wish to take part in this important debate. Therefore, there will be an initial time limit of four minutes, which will be reduced to three minutes at some point, depending on how fast we proceed.

6.42 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Nationality and Borders Bill, notwithstanding the need to address the increasing number of dangerous boat crossings in the English Channel, because the Bill breaches the 1951 Refugee Convention, does not address the Government's failure since 2010 to competently process asylum applications which has resulted in a backlog of cases and increased costs to the taxpayer, fails to deal with the serious and organised crime groups who are profiteering from human trafficking and modern slavery, does not address the failure to replace the Dublin III regulations to return refugees to safe countries, fails to re-establish safe routes and help unaccompanied child refugees, and fails to deliver a workable agreement with France to address the issue of boat crossings.

We on these Benches will be opposing this Bill. It is a Bill that is wrong and will make the dangerous situation in the English channel worse. We on these Benches do not want to see people risking their lives making a sea crossing in some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, often in boats that are unfit for purpose, but the measures proposed will not address that.

By judging claims on the type of journey people make, Ministers will create

“a discriminatory two-tiered approach to asylum”.

Those are not my words but the words of the United Nations Refugee Agency. That must be our starting point today. Any proposals—I will come to some in a moment—to address this profoundly serious issue must be compliant with the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees.

We should in this House remember the circumstances in which that convention was created. Drafting began in 1946, after the end of the second world war, as the full horrors perpetrated in that conflict had been brought into public view. It was a noble ideal for nations to work

together to prevent such awful things from happening again. Countries came together to ensure that, across the world, we would offer a new protection to those who suffered persecution. Countries would not look the other way when there was systematic persecution in other parts of the world. We all bore a responsibility in our common humanity to help others.

The convention was signed under the post-war Labour Government in July 1951, but the document became one of the foundation stones upon which all post-war British Governments stood—a matter of pride to our country and a sign of the values we stand for around the world. It sent a clear signal that Britain was a force for good and was setting a strong moral example that gave it the authority to argue that other countries take responsibility as well. It is to this Government's shame that they stand outside that fine British tradition. Seventy years after the 1951 convention was signed, this Government have decided to renege on its commitments. [*Interruption.*] I hear what the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), the Minister for immigration compliance, says, but do not take my word for it. This is what the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says about the proposals:

“The international refugee protection system, underpinned by the 1951 Convention, has withstood the test of time and it remains a collective responsibility to uphold and safeguard it. If States, like the UK, that receive a comparatively small fraction of the world's asylum-seekers and refugees appear poised to renege on their commitments, the system is weakened globally and the role and influence of the UK would be severely impacted. UNHCR is concerned that the Plan, if implemented as it stands, will undermine the 1951 Convention and international protection system, not just in the UK, but globally.”

If the Minister doubts that, this is what the United Nations Refugee Agency had to say ahead of this Second Reading debate:

“Plans to create a new lower class of refugees are discriminatory, breach commitments in the Refugee Convention and should be dropped”.

They are breaching commitments in the refugee convention that a past British Government who truly believed in a global Britain had signed.

In fact, the UN Refugee Agency said the two-tier approach is:

“a recipe for human suffering, social problems, inefficiency and greater cost to the taxpayer.”

Frankly, it is a dangerous and ill-thought-out proposal with profound consequences.

Stuart C. McDonald: Given that there seems to be unanimity that the Bill should be interpreted in the light of the refugee convention and apparently the Government intention is to follow the refugee convention, surely there could be no possible objection to an interpretation clause in the Bill. We can all work together to put that in there to ensure that all the provisions follow refugee case law and the refugee convention as it is.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In reality, this is a Bill based on an immigration plan that is harmful. Just listen to the story of Waheed Arian, now an NHS doctor, who escaped the Taliban in Afghanistan as a child. These are his words:

“When I arrived alone in London, a bewildered 15-year-old with nothing to my name but \$100 and my hopes and dreams, I had no idea I'd end up two decades later working as an NHS

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doctor fighting Covid-19 on the frontline in A&E. As a former child refugee from Afghanistan, under the UK government's so-called New Plan for Immigration, it is doubtful I would be here at all."

I repeat:

"It is doubtful I would be here at all."

We also know the serious concerns that have been raised by campaigners across the LGBT+ community about the Bill. The way it is so badly drafted risks us turning our back on people fleeing persecution. This is particularly chilling when we know the scale of the dangers faced by so many LGBT+ people across the world, including state-sanctioned persecution. The plan is wrong and it is wrong-headed.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): If the right hon. Gentleman had listened to the Home Secretary, he would realise we are not on about Waheed. We are not on about stopping him from achieving what he wants to do. We are on about people who are coming here through safe routes, often adults using the child route, and stopping them from abusing that system. If the right hon. Gentleman had actually listened to my right hon. Friend, he would have probably picked that up.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: With the greatest respect, if the hon. Gentleman had listened to me, he would realise they were not my words I was quoting—it was Waheed Arian himself I was quoting.

The Government say that the asylum system is broken. I totally agree. And it is the Conservative Government who have broken it over the past 11 years. Under this Conservative Government, the asylum processing system has imploded. Their own incompetence, removing targets from the system and failing to run it properly, has completely undermined it.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman says it has imploded under the Conservative Government. I remind him that after his party had been in power for 10 years, there was a backlog of nearly 500,000 asylum cases and 120,000 of them were put in the controlled archive because they were unable to trace them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: If the hon. Member wants to hear about statistics, try these: the share of applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in 2014 to 20% in 2019. That is the scale of the failure of this Government. At the end of March 2021, over 66,000 were waiting for an outcome on their initial claim. Seventy-five per cent. of them—over 50,000—have been waiting over six months. New research from the Refugee Council shows that, according to the most recent data available, over 33,000 people have been waiting for over a year. I have been intervened on about the last Labour Government, but that represents a tenfold increase in the past decade—tenfold. It is failure heaped upon failure, and not only that: the initial decision making is so poorly judged that around 40% of initial decisions are overturned: so four in every 10 decisions are wrong. Yes, this process is broken and, frankly, it is getting even worse.

Mrs May: I note the right hon. Gentleman has made the point about initial decisions. Does he not recognise that one of the problems has been the ability for people

to bring extra evidence after that decision has been made, so that the court is often looking at a case that is different from the one on which the initial decision was made?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will come to that point in a moment because I have deep concerns about that. The right hon. Lady passed, as has already been pointed out, the legislation on modern slavery, but it is also the case that victims often feel too traumatised to talk about their experience at an early stage, so this idea of giving such minimal weight to later evidence I find very concerning, particularly in the modern slavery context. I will come back to that in a moment because I know it is a matter of concern on the Conservative Benches as well as on these.

Mrs May: I do apologise to the right hon. Gentleman and he is very gracious in giving way, but can I just say to him that that comment about modern slavery—and he will hear that I have some concerns about the modern slavery aspects of this Bill—did not respond to the intervention that I made?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: With great respect to the right hon. Lady, she was making the point about late filing of evidence, and I was making the point in response—I will come on to it in a moment, and I am quite happy to give way to her again when I do—that the way this Bill is framed, in terms of the direction to give very little weight to late evidence, is very concerning with respect to victims who are unable to talk about their trauma at an early stage in the proceedings. I will come back to that and I will be very happy to give way to her again when I do.

On asylum accommodation, the idea of sending people to offshore processing sites is dehumanising and unconscionable. As the UN Refugee Agency puts it,

"The UK should abandon plans to 'externalise' its refugee commitments, which would see it shift responsibility for protecting refugees on to states with less capacity and more refugees."

Frankly, it is an attempt to distract from Government failure on the housing of those seeking asylum.

Stephen Timms: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I agree with him about this point. Of course, Australia has undertaken offshore processing, and there are terrible stories, which shame Australia, about what has happened to some people in those places. Has he had any indication: where might these offshore places be where asylum applicants could be processed?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. Unfortunately, I have had no such indication beyond leaks to the media, a fact which will probably not surprise him.

Last month, the High Court judgment on Napier barracks found inadequate health and safety conditions and a failure to screen victims of trafficking and other vulnerabilities. The Home Office continued to house people against the advice of Public Health England, endangering those in the accommodation, staff and the local community. It resulted in what the Court described as an "inevitable" covid outbreak in January 2021, with nearly 200 people testing positive for the virus. No wonder the independent chief inspector of borders and Her Majesty's inspector of prisons published an emergency

report that raised “serious safeguarding concerns”. On asylum accommodation, this Government have failed and failed dangerously.

The idea that this Bill helps those fleeing violence and persecution does not stand up to scrutiny. Let me take one example, because the former Prime Minister raised it a moment or two ago. The Bill says that evidence submitted late without good reason should be given only “minimal weight” by asylum judges. Asylum seekers have been required for the past 19 years to submit arguments and evidence at an early stage. Now it seems we are going to have a situation where judges are directed to have minimal regard to evidence being given late. But there are many reasons why refugees, and particularly victims of human trafficking, cannot provide evidence at an early stage, not least the fact it is difficult for survivors of trauma to talk about their experience immediately, including—and, indeed, especially—women and other survivors of sexual violence. That shows the real failure at the heart of this Bill. It fails victims of human trafficking, and it is a glaring missed opportunity to address the vile crime of people smuggling. Instead, the Government will turn their back on some of the most vulnerable people on Earth.

The Bill changes the law so that helping an asylum seeker will no longer need to be done “for gain” to attract criminal liability. That is what the Bill does, and it is a profound and dangerous change in the law. It could criminalise the Royal National Lifeboat Institution for saving people at sea, and it seems to take no account whatsoever of the international law of the sea, which requires ships’ captains to assist those who are in distress. Let us be frank about this. Had this measure been in place when Sir Nicholas Winton was rescuing hundreds of children from the holocaust on the Kindertransport, he would have risked being criminalised—*[Interruption.]* There is no point in Members shaking their heads, because this legislation risks bringing into the scope of the criminal law those who are helping people for humanitarian reasons.

Shaun Bailey: Disgusting.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman says that that is disgusting, but it is what is in the Bill. I suggest he takes it up with the Home Secretary. The Bill is wrong, it benefits nobody and it sends out the worst possible signal about the Government’s intentions.

Let me turn now to what the Government should be doing instead. First, we need legally binding targets for clearing asylum cases and proper resourcing for Border Force. The Government are failing, and they are not acting in the national interest. The system is hugely costly for the taxpayer, and it leaves people in the asylum system stuck in limbo, unable either to properly enter society and rebuild their lives or to be returned to a safe country. There is little wonder that performance has been so poor due to the cuts to Border Force.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. This might be me being naive, as I am quite new to the House, but is not the whole purpose of Second Reading to discuss the Bill so that we can go forward to the Committee stage where the Opposition can put forward their points, rather than voting against the whole of a Bill that would stop this broken system that they keep mentioning?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Bill is wrong and it will not solve the problem. Let me just continue with the critique. The Government—

Sara Britcliffe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

The Government should seek to rebuild the system so that it is fair. Quick, effective decision making is in the best interests of everyone, and Ministers should be legislating for legally binding targets for processing asylum cases. We need a proper plan to deliver deals with international partners to tackle gangs, because the measures outlined in the Government’s plans completely fail in their own terms. The measures are all dependent on deals with international partners, both to stop criminal gangs operating on the French coast and to replace the Dublin III regulation allowing those registered in a “safe country” before they reached the UK to be returned after a failed claim.

The existing arrangements with France on stopping gangs exploiting people and putting them into boats in the English channel are clearly not working. The Minister for immigration compliance has talked about his joint operational plan. He said that he would be completely cutting this route and that he would be working at pace “in the coming days” to make that a reality. That was 11 months ago. The Government talk about safe countries, but Ministers have not signed any of the required deals with any of the European Union countries to return those whose claims have failed. The Government have shown a complete inability to deliver these deals, which risks leaving people stranded in the UK, unable to be returned and in limbo. Yes, there should be full life tariff sentences for human traffickers and tougher sentences on modern slavery. The problem is that under these plans the Government will weaken protections for victims of modern slavery—

Shaun Bailey: What?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads clause 48 of the Bill, because he will discover in it a higher bar for people receiving support as victims of human trafficking. That is despite the fact that recent reports show that four out of five rejected trafficking claims are overturned on appeal. These reforms risk leaving greater numbers of victims without support and more gangmasters free to commit further crimes. Human trafficking and modern slavery are vile crimes and those responsible should face the harshest penalty. Yes, there should be a full-term life sentence for those convicted for human trafficking and increased sentences for perpetrators of modern slavery, but such measures will not be effective if we withdraw support from victims.

I come to the issue of safe routes for claiming asylum and helping unaccompanied children. Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the resulting refugee crisis, the Government agreed to Lord Alf Dubs’ amendment to accept unaccompanied children to the UK. The initial pledge was understood to have committed to provide support to around 3,000 unaccompanied children, but the scheme closed with the number having been capped at 480. It was wrong to close the Dubs scheme after helping just a fraction of the number of children promised help. It has meant that under this Government the UK has looked the other way when

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unaccompanied children have faced dire consequences, including when the Moria refugee camp was ablaze last summer.

Worse still, clause 9 introduces a new requirement for the registration of a stateless child aged five to 17 as a British citizen or a British overseas territories citizen, and maintains existing requirements in relation to those aged 18 to 22. No wonder there is concern about leaving children stateless, which would run contrary to the UK's obligations under the 1961 UN convention on the reduction of statelessness.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The shadow Home Secretary talks about the Dubs amendment and those 480 children. I remind the House that those children were already in safe European countries, and I remind the shadow Home Secretary that the United Kingdom currently has more unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—more than 5,000—than any other country in Europe, including Greece and Italy. Finally, on the point about providing protection to those in need in war zones, the resettlement schemes that have operated here since 2015 have seen in excess of 25,000 people being directly resettled not from Europe, which is safe, but from war zones such as Syria. That is more than any other country in Europe. This Government's record is a proud one and we stand by it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Well, we will see how proud their record is in a moment when we go through it. Let me just say to the shadow Minister for Immigration Compliance—

Chris Philp: Not shadow.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I certainly stand corrected on that. The point is that there were local authorities that were willing to step up and help beyond that 480 and it was this Government's absolute failure—[*Interruption.*] Including my local authority, yes, and I am very proud—

Chris Philp: Torfaen—zero.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Absolute utter nonsense. I have visited the Syrian refugees in Torfaen, so I hope the Minister will take that comment back because it is utter nonsense.

The Government often talk about the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—I just heard it from the Minister—and I of course pay tribute to local government, including my own local authority of Torfaen, for stepping up to help to deliver safe havens for those fleeing persecution. Those who have come to the country under that scheme have added to the diversity and richness of our communities. The Government have gone quiet on a 2019 commitment to resettle 5,000 further refugees at the conclusion of the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, and they still refuse to make proper commitments on the future of the scheme. Existing safe routes are very limited. The Minister stood up a moment ago to speak about statistics; well, in March 2021 the new UK resettlement scheme began, and in its first month it resettled a grand total of 25 refugees. The lack of safe and legal routes will lead people to continue to attempt dangerous routes to the UK.

Priti Patel indicated dissent.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Home Secretary shakes her head, but in the 2019 report “Responding to irregular migration: A diplomatic route” the Foreign Affairs Committee warned of exactly that:

“A policy that focuses exclusively on closing borders will drive migrants to take more dangerous routes, and push them into the hands of criminal groups.”

The Home Secretary should remember that because she was a member of the Committee at the time and her name is attached to the report.

While we are debating—or at least should be debating—a plan for refugees, we should cast our minds back to last week and the failure to restore the 0.7% commitment to international aid. The Department for International Development was tasked with delivering help to countries to tackle poverty and the drivers of people becoming displaced from their homes in the first place. The abolition of that Department was wrong and short-sighted. The work that was going on around the world to tackle the refugee crisis has been starved of funds, with programmes suddenly cut off. Our reputation around the world as a force for good has been damaged. The Government should restore the Department for International Development and restore spending to 0.7%.

The Bill is as wrong as it is ineffective. It will not tackle people smugglers, and it will not protect victims of human trafficking. It is, in reality, a continuation of this Government's culture war. It is a culture war that led them to side with those booing the England men's football team for taking the knee. Instead of supporting that brave stance against racism, the players were dismissed as taking part in “gesture politics” by the Home Secretary, and were told to stay out of politics altogether by other Conservative MPs. Last week, the Government refused to live up to their promises on international aid, and they ran away from their own failure to stand with football players against racism. This week, they promote more division with this Bill. As ever, they talk tough, but deliver nothing.

As it stands, the Bill is a charter for human trafficking. It is a missed opportunity that represents the worst of all worlds, lets evil criminals off the hook, and fails those who have been exploited. The cruel irony of this Government's approach is that they are weak on taking action against criminal gangs, and brutal when it comes to orphan children from war zones. I ask all Members of the House to reject the Bill in the vote tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. To reiterate, I am sorry but we have to start with a time limit of four minutes, simply because so many Members wish to participate in the debate. I call Mrs Theresa May.

7.6 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to get in as many points as I can in those four minutes. I thank the Home Secretary for holding prior discussions with me on the Bill and the Government's approach. The Government are right to try to find a better way to differentiate between economic migrants and refugees. This is an international challenge: as I said to the United Nations in 2016, we need to revise international conventions on this issue, so

that we can more clearly focus our help on those who are refugees. As we saw in 2015 with the significant movement of people into the European continent, many of whom were trying to get through to the UK, they were widely portrayed as all being refugees, but in fact the majority of them were economic migrants. We must find a way to differentiate between them.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most compassionate thing we can do to help these people, is stop them getting in the boat in the first place?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why the work being done—I shall refer to this later—to increase the economic development of the countries that people are coming from, and to deal with the criminal gangs, is so important.

I have set out three principles, which I am pleased to say underpin the Bill. First, we must help to ensure that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. The current trend, where refugees reach a safe country and then press on with their journey, can only benefit criminal gangs and expose refugees to grave danger. The refugee convention does not state that refugees must claim asylum in the first safe country they come to. We were able to exercise that rule in the Dublin regulation as part of the European Union. Obviously that is not applicable to us now, and indeed the EU has since changed the Dublin regulation.

Secondly, we need to improve how we distinguish between refugees fleeing persecution and economic migrants, which will help to target support on those refugees who need it most, as well as encouraging people to support such a measure if they see that the people who are coming are genuinely refugees. Thirdly, we need a better approach to managing economic migration, which recognises that all countries have the right to control their borders. We must all commit to accepting the return of our own nationals when they have no right to remain elsewhere.

Sadly, as the Home Secretary said, the business of people trafficking has increased in recent years. To the criminal gangs, it does not matter whether they deal in drugs, weapons or desperate people—it is all the same; they want to make money. Breaking their business model is essential. That means stopping the routes available to them, but it also means catching and prosecuting them. That requires international co-operation. We have been very strong on international co-operation, and we must encourage more countries around the world to see this as an issue on which they should be working with us, and others.

I recognise that the Bill focuses on differentiating between those who came here legally and illegally, and I understand why the Government have gone down that route, but that in itself does not address the issue of better differentiating between refugees and economic migrants. I hope that the Government will give some thought to how they can work internationally to try to deal with that.

The concept that Britain could process asylum claims outside the UK came up when I was Home Secretary, and there was a lot of discussion on it in the European Union, but we did not go down that route because of practical concerns. It would not automatically remove

the criminal gangs' business model, because they would get people to the centre and still take those rejected by the centre and move them on across the Mediterranean, so there could be an increase in people being picked up and taken into slavery. There is also the problem of what we do with those people who are rejected for asylum but cannot be returned to their country of origin. The concept of allowing asylum to be granted outside the UK is also a major step, and it would have ramifications for any Royal Navy or Border Force vessel operating humanitarian missions in the Mediterranean, for example.

On seeking protection but entering illegally without a valid entry clearance becoming a new criminal offence, we must not send the message that somebody genuinely fleeing persecution whose only route out of that persecution is to the UK will automatically be seen as a criminal. I also echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

Yvette Cooper: Does the right hon. Lady agree that part of the concern is about ensuring that the modern slavery provisions do not end up being drawn too tightly?

Mrs May: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her intervention, because I am coming on to that point. I am sure that across the House we are sickened to know that some are abusing our world-leading modern slavery legislation in trafficking people into this country. We need to deal with the problem, but I have two concerns with the Bill. The first is about timing and the issue that the Secretary of State can require information to be provided within a specified period. It takes time for many victims of modern slavery to identify as a victim, let alone be able to put forward the evidence to establish that. I would like reassurance about how that power will be exercised.

Secondly, I would like an explanation about the change from needing reasonable grounds that a person may be a victim of modern slavery to reasonable grounds that a person is a victim of modern slavery. I know we need to toughen up to ensure that the law is not being abused, but again this relates to the degree of information that an individual may be able to provide at an early stage in consideration of their case.

I understand the complexity of the issues with which the Government are dealing in this area of policy. There always seems to be a need for a new immigration Bill because people are always trying to find loopholes that they can use to get here, so we must have legislation that not only strengthens the Government's ability to deal with illegal immigration but continues to show that the UK is a country that welcomes those who are genuinely fleeing from persecution.

7.13 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am afraid that I regard this as a dreadful Bill, and the Refugee Council was absolutely right to characterise it as the "anti-refugee" Bill. There are eight welcome clauses on nationality, but thereafter what we see risks trampling international convention after international convention, and vulnerable children, stateless children and victims of trafficking will all pay

[Stuart C. McDonald]

a penalty. Nowhere is the retreat from international law, international co-operation and basic human decency more apparent than in the absolute trashing of the refugee convention as it approaches its 70th birthday. A convention that has saved and protected countless millions of people is being undermined by one of its first champion countries.

Refugees and asylum seekers—we have skirted over this so far—will be criminalised, stripped of their rights and offshored. That is true whether they are Uyghurs fleeing atrocities in China, Syrians fleeing war crimes or persecuted Christians seeking refuge here. The Bill does absolutely nothing to stop them getting in boats in France; what it does is punish them when they get here. That is morally reprehensible.

It is not just the Bill's awful ends that justifies the Scottish National party refusing it a Second Reading and stopping it in its tracks but the means by which it seeks to pursue those ends. We are talking about a unilateral rewriting or reinterpretation of our obligations under international law. That is, once more, a hugely dangerous precedent to set. It will make our international partners query whether this country gives two hoots about international law and keeping its word.

Secondly, to put it directly, what we have here is a deliberate policy decision to inflict harm on people seeking sanctuary by criminalising them, splitting them from their family, forcing them into destitution, putting them in legal limbo and offshoring them. That is not just ineffective and dangerous, but morally outrageous.

Not only is the Bill the opposite of the right solution, but it wrongly identifies the problem that needs solving. The problem in the asylum system is simply down to the incompetent management of it by this Home Office and this Government. We live in a world in which 80 million people have been forcibly displaced, and 30 million of them are outside their country of origin and are therefore refugees. Four million of them are asylum seekers pursuing recognition as refugees. Some 86% of them are hosted in developing countries, 73% in neighbouring countries.

What we are asking of wealthy western countries barely scratches the surface of their share of responsibility. In European terms, what has been asked of the UK is very little at all. I applaud and support everything that has been achieved through the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme and other resettlement programmes, but none of it justifies what the Government propose today.

The Government regularly trot out that they have resettled more Syrian refugees than other European countries. In absolute terms that is true but, per head of population, neighbours such as Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland and Ireland have all resettled more. Yes, although the UK resettled a few thousand more Syrians than Germany and France, those two countries have offered sanctuary to more Syrians through their asylum systems by massive margins.

In 2019, the UK received around five applications for asylum per 10,000 people, compared with the European average of 14, putting the UK 17th in the table of member states, just behind Italy, Finland and Ireland. Similarly, the UK granted roughly two applications per 10,000 people, compared with the European average

of 13, putting it 16th in the table. Yes, although by international standards the UK has a decent history of offering protection, let us not pretend that it has been bearing an unbearable burden that entitles it to rip up the refugee convention and start trying to pass refugees back up the chain to those that already do much more.

The real problem, as we have heard, is that the Home Office's handling of asylum cases is abysmal. We have heard the extraordinary figures on how long it is taking, and it is not just the length of time it takes to make a decision but the number of decisions that it gets wrong. We are at record levels of successful appeals—it is almost 50:50.

It is not just statistics that cause grave concern but the regular stories of life inside the Home Office: impossible targets, a culture of fear, ill-treatment of staff, high staff turnover, a shortage of skilled asylum caseworkers and administrative chaos. Asylum decision making is a matter of life and death, and it seems clear to me that it should no longer be entrusted to the Home Office, a Department that has again shown itself to be unfit for that purpose. Such decisions should be removed from political interference and entrusted to an independent body, as they are in Canada. That would be a sensible approach.

Chris Philp: What about democratic oversight?

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely, as there is in Canada.

Members from all parties in this House, sitting on the Front Benches and the Back Benches, regularly speak up for some of the most oppressed people on the planet. We have seen brave interventions on Uyghurs fleeing atrocities in China. The plight of Syrians fleeing a decade-long conflict has been championed, and Christians around the world, including Christian converts, have numerous ambassadors in this Chamber, but we have hardly come to terms with what this Bill means for them.

This Bill prompts a question: why speak up against persecution abroad only to say, when they come knocking at our door seeking shelter, "You are not our responsibility. Go somewhere else"? France seems to be the popular answer among Conservative Members. What if France and the rest of Europe say the same thing? We would end up with the system of international protection of refugees breaking down, as the UNHCR points out.

If the Bill passes, that is exactly what it means. Prior to the Bill, we would have sheltered people fleeing persecution. The Bill expressly seeks to discourage them from coming here by making life miserable for those who do. Today, if a Uyghur, Syrian or persecuted Christian convert arrives in the UK to seek asylum, life will be far from plain sailing, precisely because of the outrageous waiting times, the dreadful asylum accommodation, the prohibition on work and the dreadful levels of financial support. They get here and, thanks to our amazing non-governmental organisations and charities, they slowly start to rebuild their lives.

But next year, if this Bill passes, for many of those Uyghurs, Syrians or persecuted Christian converts claiming asylum here, things will be infinitely bleaker, and that will be a deliberate policy choice of this Parliament. Arriving next year, the Uyghur, Syrian or persecuted Christian will be much more likely to be criminalised, regardless of arguments about whether they had come here directly or not.

Section 24 of the Immigration Act 1971 already punishes illegal entry by those without leave to enter. Sensibly, however, those who claim asylum on arrival are granted immigration bail, which does not count officially as entry. Clause 37 of the Bill changes all that. It would essentially criminalise the very act of arriving to claim asylum, because, as the explanatory notes acknowledge, the majority of asylum seekers will not have the ability to secure entry clearance. Despite the Home Secretary's protestations last week, as the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, this criminal offence will apply to Uyghurs, Syrians, persecuted Christian converts and anybody else, and the penalty is up to four years in prison.

The next problem for the Uyghur, Syrian or persecuted Christian convert is that although they are absolutely obviously in need of international protection, this Government, in their wisdom, are not even going to consider their claim for protection for six months. The Government are trying to pretend that that is some sort of replication of the Dublin regulations that the UK was party to prior to Brexit, but of course it is not, because, as we have heard, there are no returns agreements with any remotely relevant country and little indication at this stage that there will be any time soon. Any such returns agreement would have to be carefully circumscribed so as to be consistent with the convention and to have carefully considered the circumstances of the individual, including any ties to the UK, such as family members here.

By contrast, the powers in the Bill will allow the Home Secretary to remove a Uyghur, persecuted Christian or Syrian to any country at all, even if there is no connection, and with very little by way of restriction. Today, the Uyghur, Syrian or persecuted Christian faces outrageous delays in asylum protection systems, and the Bill simply adds another six months.

Where will the Uyghur, Syrian or persecuted Christian be during that time—during that limbo—while the Home Office goes through the futile motions of seeking to remove them? Just now, for those who seek asylum we have a struggling, privatised, over-concentrated system of dispersed asylum accommodation. Numerous Committees have told the Home Office how it could be improved, only to be ignored. Under this Bill and this plan, that is not where the Home Secretary envisages the Syrian, the Uyghur or the persecuted Christian going. Instead, the grim future for these refugees appears under this Bill and this plan to be the disgraceful, disreputable open prison-like conditions that we have already witnessed at Napier or Penally.

Even worse, as we have heard, they may face being removed to an offshore centre to have their claim resolved. Here is the real asylum shopping: the British Government grubbing around to find a country to palm off their responsibilities on to. Let us think of the outrages and the lack of accountability we have seen in relation to immigration detention and the Napier open prison—the abuses that have been meted out there and the harm done. As we know from the Australian experiment, that will be as nothing compared to the hell that is likely to await at an offshore asylum facility. How on earth have we gone from having a Parliament where there was widespread support for time-limiting and restricting the use of detention, to imposing a form of it that is infinitely worse?

Having endured their limbo period, these three groups of refugees will finally have their case assessed by the Home Office. But instead of working to improve asylum decision making, the Bill seeks to make it harder for them to prove their case. It seeks to alter the long-established test set out in the refugee convention that the standard of proof required is a lower, but far from negligible, standard of real risk. That standard is clearly justified by the possible consequences of getting decisions wrong and the huge challenges of proving circumstances that happened thousands of miles away in a country the person has fled.

The Bill seeks to muddy the waters by applying a higher legal threshold. The claimant now has to prove, on the balance of probabilities, that they do belong to one of the protected convention groups and that they fear persecution based on that characteristic. That not only undermines the cautious approach in the convention, justified by the dangers that exist for asylum seekers, but pays no regard to just how difficult it is to prove events that happened in faraway countries.

In addition, by having two different standards of evidence in the same proceedings, it makes life harder for already struggling caseworkers. The judge or decision maker may be certain that the proselytising Christian convert will face the death penalty or torture on return, but now the “real possibility” that the claimant is such a proselytising Christian convert is not enough. If the judge is only 49% satisfied that the person is a proselytising Christian convert, the claim is going to be rejected, even though the risk of torture or death is absolutely certain if the decision maker has got that assessment wrong. I find that deeply troubling, and it is clearly inconsistent with the refugee convention.

Let us imagine that the persecuted Christian, the Syrian and the Uyghur have survived their limbo period and made it through the asylum system, and the Home Office refusal of their application has been overturned on appeal. Unbelievably, the harms inflicted on them by the Bill have barely started. On the contrary, the repugnant programme of disincentives is ramped up further, even after they navigate that system. Because they have stopped temporarily in a European country, they are to be treated as a second-class refugee. Regardless of what any Minister says, that is absolutely contrary to the refugee convention and, more importantly, it is simply disgraceful. It is not just nasty, but sickening—

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that on many occasions, particularly for those seeking asylum on the basis of their sexuality, those in the LGBT+ community are the most likely to be adversely impacted by this new legislation? Does he agree that more should be done to protect them and ensure that they can come here as a safe haven?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There are all sorts of problems with provisions in the Bill that penalise late disclosure of information, which can very often be the case in modern slavery or LGBT cases, or even religious conversion cases.

Having established that these people are refugees—and the Government have had to recognise that—the system should allow them to rebuild their lives after the trauma of their persecution, their journeys and their asylum claim, but instead this Government still want to turn

[Stuart C. McDonald]

the screw. Instead of the stability and permanent residence refugees were once provided with, today they are given five years' leave, with a review that is fairly light-touch, before settlement. But this Bill and the Government's plan propose endless 30-month cycles of review and ongoing attempts to remove. Nobody can rebuild their lives in those circumstances—and I do not know how on earth the Home Office is going to cope with having to revisit every single asylum case every 30 months.

These refugees will not be entitled to public funds unless they are destitute. So if, say, the Christian convert finds some part-time, low-paid work—a big ask, given the language and cultural barriers, the enforced years out of work, and the trauma—there will be no universal credit to cover housing or income shortfalls, and if he or she was able to bring a child, there will be no support for that child. Their refugee family reunion rights will be diminished, according to the plan, meaning that they cannot be joined by a spouse or perhaps a child. The detail is not in the Bill, but that is what the plan suggests and the Bill enables.

That inevitably gives the Christian convert a choice: does the family stay apart or do other family members—often the women and children that the Home Secretary professes to be protecting—then have to follow and make their own dangerous journeys? Without the family, without state support and without stability, the Uyghur, the Syrian and the persecuted Christian convert have no hope of rebuilding their lives. That amounts not to a place of sanctuary, but to a place of punishment—and the Home Office has the audacity to claim that it is in their best interests. This is, in short, an outrageous way to treat refugees, and it is why the Bill is rightly being called the anti-refugee Bill.

There is so much that could be said about the undermining of efforts to support trafficking victims, the total absence from the Bill of protection for children, and the undermining of rights of stateless children. We need to know what the placeholder clauses will give rise to. We do not even have the chance to debate them here on Second Reading, and there are six or seven of them. The whole of the dentistry profession is up in arms at the suggestion that the discredited and unethical dental X-rays system could return as an inaccurate method of assessing age.

Chris Philp: Just like in any other European country.

Stuart C. McDonald: Well, the dentistry profession and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees say that it is not accurate and it is entirely unethical.

The Home Secretary is also making it harder to identify victims of modern slavery and cutting their recovery period to the minimum allowed in international law.

There is so much that should be in the Bill that is not. I mention just one thing: the failure to end the disgracefully painful 10-year route to settlement that many essentially British kids face and the outrageous fees that others are charged for registering their entitlement to British citizenship. When will that finally be done? This is an abysmal and, indeed, shameful Bill. It does not remotely deserve a Second Reading.

7.27 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the support that I have received—a research capacity in my office, relating to my work on asylum seekers, refugees and migrants—from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project.

When discussing immigration, asylum and our borders, there is a real problem with language and tone. I tried for 18 months to get that tone right, not always successfully, I will admit—although, having listened to the shadow Home Secretary, there was apparently much that I did not do successfully. But I always remembered that behind every visa application, every asylum claim and every journey to the shores of the UK there is a personal story—an individual. Meeting people in detention centres—Syrian refugees who came here fleeing war or young people trying to regularise their status in order to complete their education—was both the toughest and the most rewarding part of the job.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's reiterated commitment to a firm but fair immigration system. There can be no question but that the issue of small boats making perilous crossings of the busiest shipping lane in the world is a challenging one. I have many constituents who are concerned about the crossings. In her opening remarks, my right hon. Friend reminded us all that this is a trade in human misery. She is right in her determination to crack down on that evil trade, but we need to find practical and sustainable ways to do so.

My right hon. Friend will know as well as I do that once a craft has taken to the waters of the English channel, it is not only difficult to stop but potentially puts lives at risk, not only of asylum seekers but of our Border Force personnel. Small boat crossings are not a problem that will be solved on the water. She highlighted the use of guns and violence. That of course could be turned on our own Border Force mid-channel. I worry for their safety if attempts are made to turn boats around on the water.

I want to focus on the issue of support for those who seek to use safe and legal routes to claim asylum here. Britain has a proud history of providing a safe haven for those fleeing persecution. In particular, I draw attention to the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, as highlighted earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). She has spoken about it already, but it deliberately selected the most vulnerable, the most in need, and the Home Secretary is right to look at making its successor programme less geographically specific. However, we have an important responsibility to resettle adequate numbers. That will be challenging to meet.

We have to be fair to those seeking asylum and fair to the taxpayer. I was pleased to hear the borders Minister say in a Westminster Hall debate recently that there is to be a dramatic uplift in the number of those employed by the Home Office to process asylum claims. That is good news, in particular given the scale of the current backlog, but it is essential for the system to be relatively rapid, and I worry about building in a six-month delay at the start of the process for those who might have travelled through a safe third country. Currently, there is no mechanism to return them, and it will be extremely challenging to find appropriate accommodation for those individuals.

There is of course discussion of reception centres, but the proposals to establish those are not yet clear. We do not know if that will involve the housing in those communities of women and children. I gently direct the attention of Ministers to their responsibility under the Children Act 1989. It is crucial that when we do this, we get it right, and that we treat people humanely. It is obvious that local authorities such as Kent, Croydon and Glasgow are already under extreme stretch. I am worried that the new plan for immigration might place further burdens on them. These are long-standing problems and, therefore, sustainable solutions are needed. I know that being pragmatic is not necessarily everyone's cup of tea, but it is essential.

7.31 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to follow the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who has worked hard on this issue.

There should be widespread agreement that the UK should do its bit to support those fleeing persecution and torture, that the system should be fair and not be undermined, that there should be a crackdown on the criminal gangs who exploit people's misery and desperation, and that we should prevent the dangerous journeys across the channel in unsafe boats in which lives are put at risk. That includes encouraging asylum much earlier. In this House, we have debated many different ways to tackle those problems in a calm and common-sense way that avoids stoking division or promoting hostility against those who are most vulnerable, because we know where that leads. However, that is one of the things that troubles me about the debate and the approach Ministers are taking.

I also think that the Bill is counterproductive. It is likely to attract more people into the UK asylum system and drive more people into the arms of criminal gangs. The caseload, the backlog, is not a reflection of an increase in applications. In fact, those have stayed at about 30,000 a year—with a drop recently, during the pandemic—but the number of initial decisions made dropped 27% between 2015 and before the pandemic.

The Bill will make that worse, because there is no serious return agreement to replace the Dublin agreement for people who have travelled through a third country. Under the provisions of the Bill, asylum seekers who have travelled through third countries will have to wait in the system for six months. Those whose claims are unfounded will not be assessed or be returned, and those whose claims are justified and who need support will not be able to get on with their lives, to start working and rebuilding their lives here. Moreover, instead they will be waiting, dependent on the support of the Home Office, dependent on making the system more costly for the taxpayer.

Rightly, the Government say that we should prevent dangerous routes, but the Government have cut the alternative safe legal routes. The resettlement scheme has been halted, with no commitment for how many people will be supported.

Chris Philp: It has not halted.

Yvette Cooper: I will give way to the Minister if he wants to tell me how many places will be included in the resettlement scheme when it restarts.

Chris Philp: It never stopped. When we met the 20,000 commitment in February this year, the UK resettlement scheme continued. Obviously making a precise numerical commitment is difficult, given the coronavirus circumstances, but it has never stopped; it continues to this day.

Yvette Cooper: Everybody understands the pressures of the coronavirus crisis, but what we need is a commitment to the number of places. The UK has been resettling approximately 5,000 a year over the past few years as a result of cross-party consensus to support Syrian refugees, but we have not yet heard a commitment. Will it be 5,000? Will it be 10,000? What will the support be from the Government to ensure that the resettlement scheme continues?

The Dubs scheme has been cancelled, even though we know the need for support for those who are most vulnerable, and the Dublin family reunion system has not been replaced. Safe Passage, which works with young people in need of family reunion, said that last year, under the Dublin scheme, all the young people it worked with on family reunion went through the legal system; they did not try to go with people traffickers or people smugglers through a dangerous route. This year, however, under the new system, a quarter of the children and young people it has worked with had given up in frustration, sought to try illegal routes and ended up in the hands of people smugglers or people traffickers as a result. Those are the dangers that we face: if there are not safe legal routes for family reunion, we end up with more people driven into the hands of dangerous criminal gangs.

Clause 26, on offshore processing, is perhaps most troubling of all. The Government floated a range of impossible proposals: sending asylum seekers to be processed on Ascension Island or disused oil platforms or, most recently, sending them to Rwanda. Of course those proposals are impossible, but it is deeply troubling that the Minister even thinks that it is okay for them to be floated and for him not to deny them. We heard from Australia about how its offshore processing simply did not work in the end. It stopped doing it in 2014 because there were too many humanitarian and practical problems and it was costing approximately 1 billion Australian dollars a year to accommodate just 350 people.

This is not an answer. It is deeply shameful and undermines our international reputation. We need France, Spain, Italy, Greece and countries across the world to work together, but for that we need to show proper international leadership and not undermine our reputation.

7.37 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): When this country voted to take back control, clearly it had immigration in mind. As we all know—many of us deal with a lot of casework on it—this is an extremely complex and difficult area. Over the years, I have always felt that the Home Office has never got on top of the correspondence; sometimes these things go on for years and years. If, when the Bill is passed, we have a more efficient system for dealing with cases more quickly, I think we will all welcome it.

When we took back control, it seemed to me that it was about us determining our priorities as a country. That may mean turning the tap off in times of high unemployment and turning it on in times of high growth.

[Sir Robert Syms]

At the moment, it looks as if we will probably have a labour shortage and may well need people with skills in certain areas to come in and keep a fast-recovering British economy going.

My constituents get very upset, however, when they watch television and see reports of people arriving on boats—something like 8,000. They think, “Can’t the Government do more?” We all know the problems of trying to deal with small boats in the channel. We have tried to co-operate with the French, who I understand are doing their best to stop the trade, but when people are arriving illegally daily and then, when we finally put them on a plane back to the country whence they arrived, human rights lawyers get involved, clearly we have a system that is not functional and is going to drive some of our constituents nuts.

In so far as the Bill gives us a vehicle for starting to deal with that, I think it can be welcomed. Whether the whole balance is right, I do not know, but as it goes through Committee there will be opportunities to improve it. It is vital that the Government try to break up the criminal gangs and stop this trade, which is dangerous and profitable to some.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) is absolutely right that most people who are economic migrants come through two, three or four safe countries; maybe France is such a terrible place that the Government, tax rates and sunshine that we have in the United Kingdom and the English language are a great draw. The reality is that, as a responsible neighbour to some of the EU states, we have to take some of the refugees that the Italians, Greeks and Spanish get because of their proximity to north Africa and the middle east, and it would perhaps be better to do that in a planned and organised way than to allow illegal crossings of the channel. This is a complex area. I welcome the fact that the Government have introduced this Bill. One of the first Bills on which I did an all-night Committee sitting was the Immigration Bill introduced by the Blair Government in 1998. This really is a little bit like putting fingers in the dam to try to stop changes as they occur over a period of time. It is a constant battle that both the Labour party and the Conservative party have always wrestled with, and, as we have signed up to various pieces of human rights legislation, it has become even more complex.

I welcome the Bill and I welcome the opportunity to try to deal with this very important issue. My constituents will want to see the end of the rubber boats turning up in Sussex and Kent and perhaps a more streamlined and efficient system for dealing with these very important and complex problems. Nobody in the world has all the answers, but I am sure that this Government are trying their best to get to where they want to be, which is to produce a fair and equitable system.

7.41 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: This Bill on such an important issue to my constituents and to the country is sadly a flawed piece of legislation that will undermine our humanitarian obligations and foster a punitive environment for asylum seekers and refugees, some of the world’s most vulnerable

people. Moreover, as we heard from the Home Secretary when she opened the debate, it perpetuates the myth that the UK is overwhelmed by asylum seekers and refugees to fit the Government’s political agenda. It is strong on populist rhetoric and headline-catching gimmicks, but weak on delivery.

The reality and the facts tell a very different story. In total, the UK receives a much lower number of asylum applications than other comparable countries in Europe. In 2020, the UK received 29,456 asylum applications, whereas France received more than 95,000 claims. This Bill is being brought forward because the Government have broken our asylum and refugee system through chronic underfunding and mismanagement over the 11 years that they have been in charge. It is a fact that, in March 2021, there were more than 66,000 people—the highest number in a decade—waiting for an initial decision from the Home Office. It is also a fact that the number of people waiting for over a year has increased tenfold since 2010, from 3,588 to 33,016 in 2020. Unfortunately, the proposals in the Bill will just increase the delays and the backlog.

Clause 37, which proposes to judge an asylum seeker’s claim based on the journey they have made, breaches article 31 of the refugee convention and will make journeys even more dangerous; it will push refugees further into the control of trafficking gangs. As a member of the Home Affairs Committee, I am particularly worried about the lack of safe and legal routes for immigration, particularly in the case of family reunion. For example, let us look at the widely acclaimed Dubs scheme, which has helped just 480 unaccompanied children when the expectation was that it could help up to 3,000. The Government have claimed that local authorities will not take more children, but I doubt that. In Hull, we have always stepped up. We are a city of sanctuary, proud of welcoming some of the world’s most vulnerable people. We have played our part in the Gateway programme since 2006 and the Syrian refugee resettlement programme. However, our pride in this is matched by concern that other local authorities are not doing their fair share. Hull has seen massive cuts to its budget throughout the years of austerity, far more than Tory councils that take no or very few asylum seekers and refugees. The distribution of asylum seekers must be fairer and manageable.

The current system means that this Conservative Government, often at very short notice, with no consultation, can unilaterally increase numbers in a council area with little regard to local resources, the suitability of accommodation or the pressures of the pandemic. While some councils are simply allowed to opt out, other councils that engage in a spirit of civic responsibility get treated shabbily by Ministers, which is both wrong and unfair.

Finally, I turn to the issue of trafficking. I am particularly concerned about criminals who traffic women for prostitution. Evidence obtained by the all-party group on prostitution and the global sex trade revealed that the UK sex trade is dominated by serious organised crime, exploiting predominantly non-UK national women and trafficking them around networks of so-called pop-up brothels and hotel rooms to be raped time and time again. Evidence suggests that Romanian women are heavily represented in brothels across Britain. The suffering inflicted on the minds and bodies of these women can scarcely be imagined. Perpetrators face low risks for

high profits and this Bill will not bust the business model, as the Home Secretary claims, nor will it support the women who have been trafficked.

7.45 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I rise to speak in broad support of the Bill, which offers a comprehensive reform of an asylum system that is broken and dysfunctional in part.

It is clear that a system is needed that is fair to those in genuine need but firmly against those who break the rules and the criminal gangs who seek to exploit some of the world's most vulnerable and desperate people. Access to the UK's asylum system should be based on need, not the ability to pay for people smugglers. All too often, it is they who gain, not the individuals who are being trafficked.

My constituents have been rightly enraged by the images of abandoned boats on the south coast and they have not been backwards in making their demands for change. They do not want to pull up the drawbridge, but they expect that we should have a system that cares for those in need and which exercises genuine control over who enters the country and in what circumstance. Mine is a community of strong ties, which has welcomed families from afar with open arms, but it also a community that, frankly, has been shocked to find it would appear that we do not have control over who enters and leaves our country, so I applaud my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's determination to improve the UK's position.

Imagine, for a moment, the lived experience of some of the people arriving on the UK's shores by boat—a boat not fit for purpose and overpacked with families with a bursting need to leave their homes. Such people sold most of what they owned to pay for a journey that is likely to be illegal from beginning to end and have paid what money they have gathered to criminals who care not a jot for their safety or whether they make their end destination. These are people who are drip-fed stories of a land of milk and honey on these shores by gangs who want to extort as much money as possible from them by making the journey longer, by encouraging them to travel through safe countries to the UK. The gangs do not care about their charges; they care about their wallets. This is a system that must be reformed and the most valuable tool to do that is to bear down on those who enable it: the vile criminal gangs at its heart.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's determination on that aspect of the Bill in particular, but I would also welcome the Government giving some consideration to strengthening an area linked to that—that is, joining up the powers that they might employ to gather information from across different silos, such as law enforcement, the private sector and the public sector. We know that these gangs are linked to lots of different types of criminal activity, whether it is money laundering, human slavery or even common scams, so we need to break down those silos to work more effectively and tackle them.

I also welcome that the Government have been clear that we stand by our moral and legal obligations to help innocent people fleeing cruelty around the world. This is rightly the cornerstone of our immigration policy. Continuing the resettlement of genuine refugees, family reunion and improving the reception processing system are welcome measures.

I would also argue that there is another side to this that needs watching: if we choose not to reform the system now, we risk stoking up outrage and fear on our shores. I have already seen in my constituency some of the effects of this. We have had hateful right-wing propaganda distributed on the streets using some of the imagery from the south coast. Our cenotaph in Barrow was recently defaced, and we have had a few—very few, thankfully—isolated incidents of racism on our streets. The people responsible are the exception and the fringe, but we must be in no doubt that by tackling this issue fairly, we remove some of the tinder that could light a dangerous fire at home.

I broadly welcome the measures in the Bill. It is beyond time to reform our broken asylum system and replace it with one that is fair and offers a hand up for those in genuine need and targets those who seek to exploit some of the most vulnerable in the world.

7.48 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Let me start by saying that I categorically reject this Bill and its proposers. The UK has a long and proud history of welcoming those fleeing war and persecution and providing sanctuary to some of the most vulnerable people in the world. The Bill would end that forever. It would not just turn away people seeking safety in the UK, but would treat them as criminals.

The most damning assessment of the Bill has come from the UN Refugee Agency itself. The UNHCR has warned that the Government's proposals "could cause great suffering", and could undermine the 1951 refugee convention and the international protection system. The Government are fond of talking about the broken asylum system, but they fail to acknowledge that it is they who have broken it with a decade of mismanagement. Delays in the system have reached disgraceful levels. The Refugee Council recently reported that the number of asylum seekers who had waited more than a year for an initial decision had increased tenfold since the Conservatives had come to power. Even when the decisions are made, the number overturned on appeal has consistently risen over the past decade. The Bill does not tackle that. It will increase delays, it will add to the backlog of asylum claims, and it does nothing to address the culture of disbelief in the Home Office.

The Government are keen to emphasise their commitment to safe and legal routes for vulnerable children and adults to reach sanctuary in the UK, but there are no such commitments in the Bill. We urgently need a renewed effort on refugee resettlement and family reunion. Detention Action recently summarised the position, saying that

"while the Bill fails to deal with the real problems that exist in the system, it pretends that the problems lie elsewhere and proposes a host of regressive, authoritarian & discriminatory policies that will cause deep harm to our society."

While abdicating their responsibility to provide sanctuary for the world's most vulnerable, the Government are simultaneously cutting international aid, which will inevitably drive up the number of refugees. The combination of those two actions will have a devastating impact on vulnerable people and refugees around the world.

Let me end my speech by reminding the Government that this legislation was an opportunity to overhaul our asylum system, and to embed fairness and compassion

[Afzal Khan]

in the Home Office. Instead, the Government have chosen to pursue a deeply hostile and unpleasant attack on those who flee conflict and persecution and have sought a safe home in our country. I for one will never be able to support that, and I hope that my colleagues on both sides of the House will stand up against this dangerous and malicious legislation.

7.52 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): The United Kingdom has always been a generous, open and welcoming country. We help some of the most vulnerable people in the world to settle and make their lives here. We welcome migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from around the world, and we will continue to do so: nothing in the Bill will change that.

People who enter the country legally will continue to be able to claim asylum here. We will continue to prioritise helping the most vulnerable: the elderly, children, and the poorest—those who are unable to travel hundreds of miles or to pay people smugglers, like the 25,000 people who have come here through our resettlement programme in the last six years. We have resettled more people through that programme than any other country in Europe.

People in genuine need deserve an asylum system that functions properly, supports them through the process, and makes a decision quickly. Perpetuating the current system is not fair to them. Nor do we want to continue with the system that is being exploited by people smugglers who callously treat human beings as if they were cargo, and sometimes not even as well as that. The Bill will introduce life sentences for those found guilty of people smuggling. It will give Border Force additional powers to search, seize and divert vessels carrying people illegally, and it will provide an incentive for people to use safe and legal routes to claim asylum in the UK. This combination of measures will disrupt and undermine the business model of people smugglers.

It is important that we are able to keep all our citizens, our constituents, safe. There are currently 10,000 foreign national offenders outside prison in this country whom we need to deport. Some are guilty of the most hideous crimes. They have no right to be here, but time after time Labour Members have come here to Parliament to plead for their rights. I am more interested in the rights of their victims. That is why I support the measures in the Bill that will end repeated, last-minute and vexatious legal challenges to deportation, expand the early removal scheme for removing foreign offenders from the UK as early as possible, and increase the sentence for breaching a deportation order from six months to five years.

This Bill will deliver an asylum system that continues to prioritise the most vulnerable, immediate indefinite leave to remain for refugees who are resettled through safe and legal routes, tougher sentences for people smugglers, and tougher sentences for foreign national offenders who try to come back to our country when they have no right to do so. That is what I am voting for. My question to Opposition Members is: will they?

7.55 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

History is going to judge our Parliament and our Government harshly for introducing this legislation at a time when there are unprecedented numbers of refugees around the world—the total figure globally is about 80 million. They are fleeing from war, poverty, injustice, human rights abuses and environmental disasters, and they are living in refugee camps in enormous numbers—in Bangladesh, where there are 1 million Rohingya people, and in Jordan, Lebanon and other countries across the middle east, including Libya. Those conditions are created by unfair trade and the arms that we sell, which bring about the wars that bring about the refugee flows. The number of refugees is likely to rise.

At a time when country after country is closing its borders to refugees, who are stuck for decades in refugee camps, our Government are joining the throng who stand against refugees, rather than for them. Instead of patting ourselves on the back for our historical good work in supporting refugees from some countries, we should recognise what is happening at the present time.

I took the opportunity to visit the refugee camp in Calais in 2015, for which the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, described me as preferring to spend a weekend hanging round with a “bunch of migrants”. I found poor and desperate people who had walked all across Europe to try to get to a place of safety. They were frightened of gangs in the camps, the police and fascist gangs, and they wanted to get to this country, where they hoped they would be better treated.

Under this legislation, the Government will make the task of anyone trying to get into Britain much more difficult. The Bill will also create two tiers of asylum seekers: those who come through a moderately legitimate route by arriving in a port of entry and applying, and those who come out of desperation on leaking dinghies.

So what are we doing? Are we looking after the refugees or accusing them of wrongdoing for trying to get to a place of safety, and then condemning those who try to save them so that seafarers around the world who pluck refugees from the sea will be accused of illegally abetting migration to this country? It is a terrible situation. Ten days ago, a Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboat took a group of people on a dinghy into a north Kent harbour to give them a place of safety. Are the Government going to prosecute the RNLI for saving life at sea? That would be contrary to the law of the sea, which requires it to save such lives.

I also ask the Government to look at the conditions in which refugees have to survive in this country, such as the disgusting conditions at Napier barracks, and at the number of refugees sleeping on our streets and begging to try to survive. Just think for a moment of what it is like to be a refugee trying to make a contribution to our world, and being criminalised in the process. We rely on refugees in hospitals, as doctors, as engineers, as teachers, as technicians and in so many other jobs in our society. Instead of criminalising people who try to get to a place of safety, can we not have a more humane approach and use the opportunity of this legislation to send a message of decency, humanity and responsibility towards the world as a whole?

7.59 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), although, ironically, his views on

issues such as those included within the scope of this Bill are the main reason I find myself in this House today.

Since 1994, every single year the UK has seen positive net migration. From 2004, when several new states became members of the EU, net migration dropped below 200,000 only once. The trend is continually up and the most recent figures show that 700,000 migrants arrived in the UK in the year ending March 2020. To put that into perspective, that number is five times the size of Blackpool. This is simply unsustainable.

For the past 50 years, the Conservative manifesto has always referenced controlling immigration. Immigration puts pressure on our schools, the NHS and housing, while also challenging our identity and values when it is not properly controlled and when new arrivals do not integrate within their new communities. The British people can see this and understand this, and they have demanded action for at least the past two decades.

The vote to leave the EU was, among other things, a vote to take back control of our borders and to control immigration. Of course, that is not to say that immigration does not bring benefits to the UK, but the over-supply of low-skilled labour has had severe consequences, suppressing wages and reducing the number of entry-level jobs available. I am so pleased we have a Home Secretary who is willing to discuss these issues and face up to the problems that large-scale immigration is causing. Successive Governments have been far too reluctant to do so, perhaps through fear of facing the cancel culture of the woke brigade.

The element that is most emotive and that angers my constituents more than any other is illegal immigration—specifically, the thousands of small boats arriving on the south coast. It is high time this Bill was brought forward to tackle the scourge of illegal immigration, and I strongly welcome the measures outlined within it. Giving our Border Force additional powers to turn around boats crossing the channel, making it a criminal offence to knowingly arrive in the UK without permission and introducing life sentences for people smugglers will all reduce the number of migrants making the unnecessary and illegal crossing in small boats.

However, some will still make the perilous journey. The task of processing asylum claims must be made quicker and, for those who are rejected, we must be far more robust in deporting them from the UK. Over the past 15 years, around three quarters of applicants who were refused asylum have lodged an appeal. Their vexatious and often last-minute appeals—submitted and encouraged by left-wing human rights lawyers—are done at tremendous cost to the UK taxpayer, and it is encouraging that this Bill will overhaul the legal system for asylum claims, finally putting an end to this utter nonsense. If people have no right to be here, they should be swiftly deported—it is as simple as that.

Those on the Opposition Benches, including the Leader of the Opposition, have previously stood on election promises to reintroduce the free movement of people, showing just how out of touch they are with traditional Labour voters. On this side of the House, however, we are building a system that is fair for the British people and reforms our broken asylum system, and this Bill is one I wholeheartedly support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Cardiff North, I should tell the House that after the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), the time limit will reduce to three minutes. With four minutes, I call Anna McMorris.

8.4 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Bill is not about improving legislation, but about hate. It is little more than political gesturing of the worst kind. Worse, it panders to far-right politics, stirring up resentment, fear and division because the system is not working for them. It is the nastiest, most vicious politics.

We live in an increasingly hostile world, where conflict, climate change and covid are making life impossible for many. Innocent families with children flee for their lives, driven from their homes and communities and joining the 30 million refugees worldwide with little more than the clothes on their backs and their hopes and dreams. They flee to protect themselves and their loved ones, but tragically that hope is usually never fulfilled. I recently spoke to a mother who fled drought in South Sudan. She lost her children to thirst and starvation. I have felt the pain of victims of conflict—the many who have fled Syria, who suffered immeasurable brutality and war crimes at the hands of the Assad regime and are heartbroken that they cannot return. I have spoken to women and girls forced into arranged marriages as young children who have fled a life of violence and abuse. They faced sexual assaults, gang rapes, exploitation on the road between camps and homelessness before finding refuge. To those who make that perilous journey, the Government are saying, “We don’t care,” and attempt to build a wall around our shores.

Taking a deliberately and unnecessarily hostile attitude does not tackle the drivers of displacement, which will continue to force the vulnerable to flee and aggravate the very threats that make our lives here at home less secure. It will make the United Kingdom even more isolated, not just from our partners but from the values that made us a welcoming nation.

So many look towards us with hope. As the pandemic has shown, our planet is shared and so are our successes and failures. We must not forget that the United Kingdom was a co-signatory and the first to ratify, with the support of the whole House, the 1951 refugee convention. Rather than be open and inclusive, the Government seek to remove us from those shared challenges, wash our hands of the crises and injustices fuelled by many decisions made at home, and weaken communities’ resilience overseas.

The Bill seeks to criminalise refugees. They are not criminals and seeking safe haven is not a crime. The true crimes are the provisions and the intention at the heart of this heartless Bill. It puts the UK at odds with decades of consensus on the need to offer safety to the persecuted and stateless, and it would breach international law. It picks on the poor and the desperate and the children put in boats by their parents who are desperate because they see that the sea is safer than the land.

When we strip away the means to safe passage, cut international aid, which helps people remain in place, and penalise anyone for facilitating arrivals, how does

[*Anna McMorris*]

the Home Secretary intend desperate people to arrive? In stark terms, what would the Bill have meant for the Kindertransport? Would it mean turning our backs on the children fleeing the brutality of Tigray and Yemen today?

8.8 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

My focus today in the short time available—I cannot wait for call lists to end—is a very specific element in the Bill: part 4. I co-sponsored the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill with Lord McColl and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for meeting me and Lord McColl on a number of occasions to look for a way to improve it before it was published. I spoke on 19 October last year about the need for an immigration provision that provides confirmed victims—I stress “confirmed”—with certainty of recovery and the ability to focus on working with the criminal justice system to ensure that we increase the very low number of prosecutions for offences related to modern slavery. I want the House to hold that thought because it is critical. Our self-interest means being better on that element of the Bill.

Part 4 sets out several reforms on modern slavery. I am aware that the Home Secretary is seeking to meet varying objectives through the Bill and that she wants to reduce abuse of the system. I want to deal with clause 52, which will provide identified potential victims in England and Wales with assistance and support for a period when the person is in the national referral mechanism. Although I welcome the support for adult victims in England and Wales during that period being put on a statutory basis, as is already the case in Northern Ireland and Scotland, the support that clause 52 places on a statutory basis is actually less than is currently provided as a matter of practice in England and Wales, which is a problem. Essentially, whereas the current guidance in England and Wales affords 45 days' support, as does the statute in Scotland and Northern Ireland, clause 52 proposes a reduction in England and Wales to just 30 days' support for confirmed victims of modern-day slavery. I draw that to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister, because it needs to be dealt with.

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend has many faults, and I am aware of a handful of them, but one of them is not naivety. He has far more qualities, and his quality will tell him that the system is being gamed by all kinds of unscrupulous people. The risk is that modern-day slavery is one way of gaming the system.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I simply ask my right hon. Friend to notice what I said: I referred to those who already have confirmed status as a victim of modern-day slavery. This is important, because it means they have already gone through the NRM. It is a question of how we deal with them at that point. This will give time to arrive at the right conclusions.

Statutory support is provided during the national referral mechanism, so having no such support afterwards makes no sense. They go out of the NRM and are

suddenly in the cold world, unable to navigate their way and fearful of retribution by those who treated them so badly in the first place. The provision of support to help these people is also in our self-interest, because it is in our national interest to ensure victims get sufficient support to allow them to help police and prosecutors with criminal investigations. In a way, by reducing such support, we are making things worse.

Clause 53, on leave to remain for victims of slavery or human trafficking, is at the heart of the Bill. I co-sponsored a Bill with Lord McColl to provide leave to remain for 12 months, along with assistance and support, for adult victims who want to remain in the UK. I gave evidence on this to the Home Office, and I am therefore disappointed that, instead of addressing the problems with discretionary leave that I highlighted last October, the Government have simply placed current practice, which is clearly not working, into a statutory framework.

Under clause 53, leave to remain will remain discretionary and the same justifications for its provision will apply: being necessary to assist the police with investigations, being necessary because of personal circumstance or being necessary to make a compensation claim.

The ability of a victim to remain in the UK is unchanged by the Bill, and one would therefore expect that the proportion of confirmed victims in receipt of leave to remain would remain low. In other words, this Bill would perpetuate rather than address the current arrangements in which the vast majority of confirmed victims are denied leave to remain in the UK to help their recovery. The police have made it very clear that they want victims to be settled in accommodation so that they know where they are and they can give evidence.

I support much of what the Bill is trying to do, and I understand the motives behind it, but part 4 deals with those from the most terrible backgrounds and facing the worst persecution, trafficked as they are. We need to give them time, and that time will help us prosecute the very people we wish to go after. Being good and decent is a payback to us at the same time.

I support this Bill, but I look for changes to part 4 during its passage.

8.13 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: As we have heard today, this Bill is deeply flawed, cruel and inhumane. If passed, it would punish those entering our country to seek refuge from violence and persecution. The Bill would see us abandon our international duties and, ultimately, turn our back on the world's most vulnerable. Under international law there is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker, yet, if passed, the Bill would seek to ignore that reality and establish a dangerous new precedent.

I wish to briefly outline two of the most concerning aspects of this legislation. First, I am deeply concerned about the powers that the Bill would allow the Government to create offshore camps in which to detain refugees. There is no justification for such an inhumane practice. Wherever that has been tried, it has failed and put those who are subjected to it at risk of re-traumatisation. The Australian Government's own report into their offshoring facility in Nauru revealed horrifying conditions, including the sexual abuse of women and children. Meanwhile, detention centres such as Napier barracks demonstrate clearly that this Government are very comfortable with

housing asylum seekers in the most squalid conditions. Those conditions would only get worse if the Government were allowed to move asylum centres offshore, out of reach of oversight and accountability.

Secondly, as chair of the all-party group on no recourse to public funds, I am particularly concerned that the Bill would greatly expand the number of people who are subjected to that awful condition. The Bill removes the automatic right to settle for those who secure refugee status having travelled to the UK through another country. By introducing that condition, the Government will substantially increase the number of people who have no recourse to public funds—people who will no longer have the right to work or to access homelessness assistance. In short, if the Bill passes, a huge number of people will be forced into destitution.

In conclusion, if the Government were truly interested in fixing our asylum system, the Bill would have contained new commitments to provide safe routes to this country and to ensure that all those who claim asylum here are able to live a dignified life while they await a decision. Instead, the Bill abandons our obligations under international law, criminalises refugees and expands the cruel and inhumane “no recourse to public funds” regime. For those reasons, I shall be voting against this Bill and I urge all Members to do the same.

8.16 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Children separated forcibly from their parents at gunpoint, pregnant women held at knifepoint, babies and toddlers stripped of lifejackets and dangled over the side of dinghies. Young women and girls disappearing, unaccounted for; their last known movements in the hands of criminal gangs involved in modern slavery. This is not happening in some far-away conflict zone. This is not happening in a war-ridden country. This is happening here in our land and across the English channel—death, violence, sex trafficking, exploitation, bribery, guns, drugs, modern slavery, and illegal migration. Let us make no mistake: this is the reality of the small boats crisis. Where is the compassion in walking on by, in leaving families, young children and babies in the hands of people traffickers and violent criminal gangs when people are already safe in France and in many other countries before they even get to France?

Let me turn now to the risk to our national security. Persons with criminal intent have been identified coming into Dover in boats picked up in the channel. Any local person knows about the very many boats that do make it onto the land, onto the beaches and onto our shores in the coastal villages of Kingsdown, St Margaret's and Walmer and further afield. It happens so often—even today, even this very morning. We must be compassionate to people in greatest need—I believe that that unites all parts of this House—but it would also be naïve given the very real risks that exist, with some people actively wishing to do us harm and they do harm others. That is why, for our national security, we must have strong borders and bring an end to the small boats crossing route.

Today's measures are not about a lack of compassion. They are about recognising that there is no compassion in allowing this illegal activity to continue. Today's Bill, alongside its sister immigration reform Bill, provides more powers to strengthen our borders and more options

to work with other countries to make sure that people are encouraged to use legal and safe routes and discouraged from using these dangerous and illegal ones.

The bottom line is this: it is only when migrants and traffickers alike know that they cannot break into Britain in this way that the small boats crossing route will come to an end.

8.19 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests because I have help from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy—RAMP—project for my work in this area. RAMP is brilliant, in direct contrast to this Bill, which is the worst I have ever seen. This dog's dinner would have been avoidable, however, if Ministers had listened to the evidence of experts, or even to the consultation responses, which they have promised, and failed, to publish. I hope that they will publish them as they finalise the Bill. It was strange after 11 years of a Conservative Administration to hear the Home Secretary admit, on the Second Reading of her own Bill, that it was not yet complete, in response to the question from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

At a time of rising global crises, this Government could help to stop asylum seekers being created by intervening, perhaps under “global Britain”, but that has sadly proved to be an empty slogan, often mouthed by emptier heads. That given, we have a Government who have twice betrayed their own manifesto—and, of course, the people who voted for them—by cutting our aid and by cutting our armed forces personnel, which will mean shrinking our global reach and influence. This Government are also shrinking our international standing by seeking exclusivism in the form of a new special status for the UK outside international law, to the direct detriment of and cost to other countries, including our immediate neighbours. It is bonkers, but Ministers present this fiction to us. They have a real battle with reality ahead.

It is a fiction to pretend that we have deals with other countries to return anyone to them, except for Albania, a country that we accept asylum claims from. It is a fiction to claim that it is fair to criminalise someone fleeing communist torture and slave labour in Xinjiang, or that it is fair to criminalise RNLI volunteers or anyone on any boat who rescues asylum seekers from drowning. It is a fiction to claim that this Bill is fair on councils, who already pay for Home Office failures and delays, because they will face additional costs through the rough sleeping that these plans will create and the estimated additional £55 million of the new costs of these proposals, which will create 3,000 more people experiencing the pernicious Home Office “no recourse to public funds” restrictions. It is a fiction to pretend that this is fair to the taxpayers who will pick up the bill, whether it is through the Home Office, through councils' emergency social services or through the new criminal justice and imprisonment costs, which are estimated to be more than £400 million a year.

The only truth I heard from the Home Secretary today is that the system is broken, with the number of people waiting over a year for a decision rising tenfold since 2010, with 33,000 in that position in 2010, including almost 7,000 children. What is maddening is that the number of people working for the Home Office has

[Neil Coyle]

risen but productivity has collapsed, with around 2,500 people now having waited three years or more for a decision. It is a decade of Tory rule that has broken the Home Office. The party who used to claim to represent law and order has run the Department for law and order into the ground, with nine in 10 crimes now going unpunished in this country. But now, Ministers are asking the Home Office to act unlawfully in pursuing an aim that breaks international law. Sadly, the idea that the people who broke the Home Office now have ideas about how to fix it is also a fiction. I would ask Ministers to think again about these plans, but there is little evidence that they put much thought into the Bill in the first place.

8.22 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: I start by paying tribute to some of the fantastic organisations that support people seeking asylum in my constituency, such as Asylum Link Merseyside, the Merseyside Refugee Support Network and the British Red Cross. Every day, I see the difference they make in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society who have come to our country seeking refuge, only too often to find that their trauma and suffering are made worse by the hostile environment that this Government have created for them.

I agree with the Home Secretary on one thing: our asylum system is broken. However, that is where our consensus ends. Many aspects of this Bill are objectionable—probably too many to mention in the time available. It is a disgraceful attempt to make people seeking asylum pay the price of the gross mismanagement of the asylum system by the Home Secretary and her predecessors. According to figures from the House of Commons Library, the Home Office's asylum case load has doubled since 2014. I have constituents who have now been waiting over two years for a decision, and many who have been waiting nearly two years for a substantive interview.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees put proposals to the Government on fixing the asylum system based on its experience and best practice around the world. Instead of implementing those proposals, the Government have chosen to put forward a Bill that undermines our international obligations and our standing in the world. I am sure I am not alone in this House in being proud that the UK was a founding signatory to the 1951 refugee convention. It was then, and is now, an important legacy from the horrors of world war two and the many people who were displaced as a result.

The UNHCR serves as a guardian of the refugee convention. In its detailed observations about the measures in the Bill, UNHCR has been clear that it disagrees with the Home Secretary's statement that her proposals comply with our obligations under the convention. It has stated that many aspects of the plan do not respect fundamental principles of refugee law and will undermine the 1951 convention and international protection system, not just in the UK but globally.

Let nobody in this House be under any illusion: supporting the measures in the Bill will signal to the world that we are withdrawing from our international obligations. In that context, why would any other country

be willing to reach agreement with us on what the Government describe as safe and legal routes? I appeal to hon. Members on the Government Benches who value Britain's standing and reputation as a global leader not to let the Government get away with undermining the sacrifices and achievements of the generation before us with this Bill. I also call on the Government to share with the House their legal advice to support the Home Secretary's statement that the measures in the Bill are compatible with our obligations under the 1951 refugee convention.

8.25 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I believe everyone wants to tackle people smuggling, human trafficking and dangerous trips across the channel. The only way to do that is the one thing that the Bill does not do: to provide safe legal routes to sanctuary in the UK. Instead, the Bill treats asylum seekers more harshly, despite no evidence that such an approach will stop them trying to come here.

The Home Office has been treating asylum seekers abysmally for years, keeping them in unsafe accommodation, making them wait months for a decision on their claim, banning them from working and forcing them to rely on little more than £5 a day. If cruelty were the answer, the problem would have been solved long ago.

What about the legal routes to asylum that the Government promised? The number of people granted asylum in the UK fell by 46% last year. The number of children granted asylum fell by 55%. The Government's new scheme, which opened in March, resettled 25 refugees in its first month—just 25. That compares with 477 per month on average under the previous schemes. The proposals under the Bill are not just cruel; they undermine the UK's commitments under the refugee convention. We cannot simply rewrite them to suit ourselves.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for a fully funded commitment to resettle 10,000 vulnerable refugees each year. We should resettle a further 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees from elsewhere in Europe over the next 10 years, and we must guarantee the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Europe to be reunited with family members in the UK.

Another historic injustice that the Bill fails to address is comprehensive sickness insurance. A few years ago, many EU citizens had their application for a permanent residence document refused. Those refusals were down to an obscure need for CSI, which they had never previously needed to live in the UK or to use the NHS. At the time, the Government insisted that they were powerless to change the requirement as it stemmed from EU free movement laws. The requirement was removed from the EU settlement scheme, but CSI is still hidden deep within our rules. Many thousands of children have been cut off from their rights to be citizens of this country, all because of some obscure insurance requirement that no one was told they needed to have. The Government must come clean and use the exit from the EU for some good, as they so often claim they do. There is no more excuse to hold on to the CSI requirement for those seeking to become UK citizens.

Rather than fixing the problem, the Bill will make the problems worse and fail those most in need. I will vote against it.

8.28 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is crucial that we restore trust in our immigration system. Our asylum system is in desperate need of reform and our constituents rightly expect it to be fixed.

In only the past year, 16,000 people have entered the country illegally, and those are just the ones we know about. Some of those people are genuinely fleeing persecution and need our support, but others are not, and they may abuse the legal system by making repeated vexatious and often last-minute claims, challenging the Home Office's ability to remove individuals lawfully in those cases and costing taxpayers a lot of money. That also creates a severe backlog, which delays the processing of genuine asylum cases and slows down our judicial processes.

Most worryingly, there are now 10,000 foreign national offenders in circulation outside prisons in the UK whom the Home Office are intent on deporting but cannot because of legal barriers. I welcome the fact that the Government's new plan for immigration will speed up the removal of these dangerous foreign criminals. Any foreign national who comes to this country and abuses our hospitality by breaking the law should be in no doubt of the UK Government's determination to deport them.

When assessing the needs of individual asylum claimants, knowing the age of applicants is really important for ensuring that children get protected and properly looked after. The UK is currently one of the very few countries in Europe that does not commission or employ scientific methods of age assessment when determining how old these young people are. As a consultant paediatrician, the welfare of children is of the utmost importance to me. As a doctor, I have participated in the past in the assessment of asylum-seeking children, and the current system in place is nowhere near accurate enough for making such crucial and important decisions. I welcome the fact that the Bill will enable the use of scientific age assessment techniques, and that there will be increased research into their accuracy, so that we can best direct our efforts to support the youngest and most vulnerable people.

Finally, the Bill addresses a number of anomalies in the system of British nationality law. Behind each of these anomalies is a person and a family, and I am pleased to see a change in the law that I have lobbied for since 2019: nationality for children whose fathers are not the husband of their mother at the time of their birth. One of my constituents, who has served this country on military operations, was shocked to discover that he was unable to get British citizenship for his son, despite the fact that he is British and the son was born in Britain. This is because his European mother was still legally married to a foreign national at the time of their son's birth, and under the current legislation a child's father is legally deemed to be the husband at the time the woman gives birth. However, in this particular case my constituent is the father in all biological, emotional and practical terms.

New measures in the Bill will provide an entitlement to British citizenship for people who were previously unable to acquire it because their mother was married to someone other than their biological father at the time of birth. This will fix an outdated rule and ensure that

my constituent and many others can rightfully pass on their nationality to their children. I am pleased to support this Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For the sake of clarity, I ought to reiterate what Mr Speaker said to the House earlier today. As the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) has been required to self-isolate and therefore cannot take her usual place in the Chair, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) will shortly be taking the Chair having been appointed a temporary Deputy Speaker, and I hope that the House will be gentle with her.

8.32 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: The Government state that this Bill is necessary to deter irregular journeys and increase the fairness of the system in order to support those in need of asylum. I think that most of us in this House agree that the system needs to be fairer. Lengthy waits for asylum applications to be processed are the norm, immigration detention is often indefinite, and modern slavery and trafficking survivors are routinely detained. As the Red Cross states, removing support and raising the penalties for those who arrive irregularly does not address the underlying reasons why people seek safety in the UK.

This Bill is brutal. It in effect punishes those desperate souls who often genuinely flee persecution, famine and war in the hope of safety. The Refugee Council has stated that

"the actual effects of the bill in its current form will be to punish refugees who have been recognised as such under international law, and actually reduce safe and regular routes to the UK as refugee family reunion rights become more limited."

One of the most dangerous parts of the proposals is that someone's means of arrival will determine how worthy they are of protection in the UK. Asylum seekers arriving through anything other than resettlement will receive a lesser form of protection, including temporary status, no access to financial support and limited rights to family reunion. In fact, the new proposals plan to criminalise anyone arriving irregularly, not through official channels. But as we all know, people fleeing atrocities are rarely afforded the luxury of arriving through official channels. As the UN Refugee Agency has confirmed, this principle is in breach of the refugee convention.

These are cruel and unworkable plans. I agree with Amnesty International:

"Instead of introducing this piece of utter legislative vandalism, what the Home Office should be doing is establishing safe routes for the relatively few people escaping persecution who wish to seek asylum here... This reckless and deeply-unjust bill is set to bring shame on Britain's international reputation."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Liz Saville Roberts.

8.35 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Ddirprwy Lefarydd.

The Bill is an assault on the human rights of men and women who happen to be asylum seekers and on our common humanity. Across Wales, thousands of decent people are united. This legislation shames us, and it is not in our name. It expands the hostile environment by criminalising asylum seekers and their families. The Bill's

[Liz Saville Roberts]

proposed tier system for claiming asylum rips up the basic tenets of the 1951 refugee convention: that people's mode of arrival should have no influence on whether they are legitimate refugees or on their right to make an asylum claim.

The potential criminalisation of the life-saving work of organisations such as the RNLI is incomprehensible. I commend the determination of our lifeboat crews to continue to come to the aid of anyone in peril on the sea. The Bill threatens to penalise seafarers if they do not leave people to perish, and thus it scorns the UN convention for the safety of life at sea, as well as the refugee convention.

Expanding the use of detention-style asylum accommodation will result in more people being sent to sites such as Penally camp in Pembrokeshire, which was described by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration as

“impoverished, run-down and unsuitable for long-term accommodation.”

Let us not forget that the Home Office was shamed into closing Penally only four months ago.

The human cost of these proposed changes would be immense. They would criminalise people such as Joseff Gnagbo and prevent them from seeking sanctuary in the UK. After fleeing the Ivory Coast following threats to his life, Joseff sought refuge in Wales. He now works as a carer, a translator and a teacher, and he volunteers for Cymdeithas yr Iaith, the Welsh Language Society. These are his words, and they are worth hearing:

“We are already treated as an inconvenience under the current asylum system. Under these reforms, we will be treated as criminals... The welcome I have received by the people of Wales in that time is in stark contrast with the Home Office's cruel policies. I want refugees and asylum seekers to have more help in integrating into Welsh society. Sadly, this legislation seeks to make that almost impossible.”

Wales is a far richer place because of people such as Joseff, but the Home Secretary would make criminals of them. We must stand up to this heartless borders Bill, which prevents Wales from fulfilling the humane, honourable ambition of our own Parliament: to become “a nation of sanctuary for refugees.”

8.38 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: I rise to speak in support of this Nationality and Borders Bill, because the current system is not working for the interests either of nationality or of UK borders.

It cannot be right that over the past year an estimated 16,000 people have entered this country illegally—and that has been during a period when international travel has been severely restricted because of the covid-19 pandemic. It is right that the system be changed and updated so that people who come to the United Kingdom should do so on a legal basis, not circumvent the system that exists. The suggestion that those coming to this country from continental Europe are fleeing persecution in those countries is ridiculous. There is no analogy with the situation that existed in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

I wish to mention an aspect of nationality that has not been properly addressed: the position of the descendants of the Chagos islanders who were forcibly removed from the British Indian ocean territory by Harold Wilson's

Administration in the late 1960s and typically resettled in Mauritius, the Seychelles and some other locations. Many of those descendants are the grandchildren of people who were British subjects in the British Indian ocean territory and now find themselves with, in effect, no rights to British citizenship, despite the fact that it was no fault of their own that their grandparents and relatives were forcibly exiled from their home territory.

I would therefore be grateful if the Government considered including in the Bill a clause to rectify that anomaly, which affects a relatively small number of people. This injustice has existed for more than half a century. I plan to introduce an amendment on Report, but I hope that the Government can work with me to remedy this historical injustice once and for all.

8.40 pm

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to have the chance to speak in this debate, although I regret the fact that the time limit means my comments will be brief.

This important Bill aims to provide a fair and safe asylum system and give greater rights and protections to those who have legally sought asylum in the UK. It seeks properly to control our borders and thereby strengthen our national security, and it will clamp down on some of the most despicable criminals: the gangs who make money from people smuggling and modern slavery. For me, that is the most important provision in the Bill.

Everyone in this place should back any measures that will stop the trade in human misery. We all remember the tragic deaths of migrants who have paid smugglers to cram them into lorries without sufficient ventilation. We have seen people with no sailing experience who have paid to be piled into unseaworthy vessels—often nothing more than a dinghy—and then pushed offshore to make a dangerous and, tragically, often deadly sea crossing. It is the duty of our Home Secretary to take any measures she can to stop these perilous attempts to enter UK, and I thank her for her clear commitment to reform the system and stop the organised criminals. Let us be clear: while such journeys are deemed to be viable, others will attempt the same journeys. We must act to stop them.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, many who seek to come to the UK by illegal routes are economic migrants. If I had more time, I would speak about the work that the UK is doing in trade and education, and the work that we should do to help developing countries to really develop, so that people all over the world can have prosperous, fulfilling lives for themselves and their families.

I was deeply disappointed by the shadow Home Secretary's remarks about the Bill creating a more discriminatory asylum system, because by not supporting measures in the Bill he would allow the current system to continue. He must surely look at the current system and see the clear discrimination against older people, disabled people, women and children—against anyone unable or less able to make long, arduous, dangerous journeys.

As I have only a few more seconds, I conclude by saying that we should all want a fair and just asylum system, and such a system does not say that if people are young enough, fit enough or brave enough, they can get ahead and jump the queue. A fair and just asylum

system does not reward organised gangs of criminals for putting vulnerable people's lives at risk. A fair and just asylum system is not this perverse and deadly real-life "Hunger Games". That is why we must act and why I support the Home Secretary's measures. I commend her determination to stop these vile, inhumane practices.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Patrick Grady.

8.43 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope you are enjoying the view—congratulations.

I sometimes wonder whether the Home Secretary or her cheerleaders on the Government Benches have ever actually met an asylum seeker. If the asylum seekers who come to my surgeries in Glasgow North find it stressful, embarrassing or upsetting to have to carry a biometric ID card that states that they have no right to work when, being a human being, they are born with that right, or that they have no recourse to public funds, it is no less humiliating to have to explain from the other side of the surgery table why the Government are so unremittingly hostile to their presence in this country.

It is easy to stand at the Dispatch Box or on the Back Benches and say that these people should leave the UK; try looking them in the eyes—eyes that have seen horrors that some of us cannot even imagine—and saying that. I defy any Minister or any Tory Back Bencher to come to the next meeting of the Maryhill Integration Network Voices group, listen to the testimonies of the men and women who take part and then come back to this House and justify the policies that they are promoting today.

For 20 years the Maryhill Integration Network has supported asylum seekers and refugees in the north of Glasgow, welcoming them into the community, and helping to share experiences, culture, food and joy across the entire city. For 17 of those years, it has been led by the remarkable Rema Sherifi, until her recent retirement. Rema was a refugee—she was a journalist in Kosovo—who fled to a refugee camp in Macedonia with her family, before being evacuated to Glasgow for health reasons. Since that time she has worked tirelessly to support thousands of others who have been through similar experiences, helping people to overcome traumas, and learn how to make new lives as part of Glasgow's wonderfully diverse community.

My friend and constituent Abdul Bostani has a similar story. He fled the Taliban in Afghanistan at the age of 18, and on arrival in the UK he was put on a bus to Glasgow, a city he had never heard of. Twenty years later he is a proud father who works in translation and runs Glasgow Afghan United, which brings people together for sport, language, culture and other activities. How many more Remas and Abduls are out there who could help to transform our country and make it a better place for everyone, but who instead will find themselves shut out, turned away, and criminalised by the Bill? How many will be put up in barracks before being deported, and criminalised on the moment of arrival, because of course they had to struggle to get here—their oppressive regime did not give them a passport and a ticket to the airport?

Hostility is the hallmark of this Government: hostility to devolution, hostility to the aid budget, and now a supercharging of the hostile environment for refugees

and asylum seekers. A hostile environment pervades the Home Office. The visa system is in at least as much of a mess as the asylum system, and it amounts to one message: global Britain is closed. Do not come here unless you are going to spend lots of money and then leave again very quickly.

I agree with the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on his point about the Chagossians. Well Scotland wants no part of it. In time, Scotland will have its own immigration system, and just as Scots have been welcomed and made their homes in countries around the world, we will welcome travellers, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, respecting their human rights and our humanitarian responsibilities. I say this to refugee and asylum-seeking constituents in Glasgow North: no matter what you hear from the Tory Dispatch Box today, you are welcome in Glasgow, you are welcome in Scotland, we want you to be safe, and we want you to stay.

8.46 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I was elected in 2019 on a manifesto that promised to reform our immigration system. For too long, excessive and uncontrolled immigration, and abuses of our asylum system, have allowed people to get around the rules without much prospect of ever being removed once they are here. The Bill is an important turning point. It provides the powers we need to remove people who should not be here, and to discourage anyone who would try to cross into the country illegally. The message is simple: if you come here illegally by irregular means, you will not be staying.

The Bill has three main objectives: first, to increase the fairness of the system better to protect and support those in need of asylum; secondly, to deter illegal entry into the United Kingdom, thereby breaking people smuggling networks and protecting the lives of those they endanger; and thirdly, to remove more easily those with no right to be in the UK. Those aims are sensible, proportionate and just. They are also what the public want us to do.

Whenever I am out and about in Hyndburn and Haslingden, I hear concerns from residents about controlling our borders and cracking down on illegal immigration. There is a proper asylum route into this country, and it is important that people realise they will be punished if they do not follow it. The Bill will not only deter those people who get in boats to make illegal crossings, but it will smash the networks that bring them here. There are no words strong enough to express my contempt for the traffickers, who give people false hope and then risk their lives by unscrupulously smuggling them into the country for a huge fee. We need an asylum system that is compassionate towards people who apply to come here, processes claims efficiently and effectively, and quickly removes anyone who is not successful in their application. The Bill delivers on all that.

The Bill will broaden criminal sanctions for offences related to illegal entry or bringing people here illegally, and it will increase the maximum penalties for both. It will also give border and immigration staff additional powers to stop and redirect vessels out of UK territorial waters. The Bill is an important step in creating a new immigration system, based on merit, which controls who, when, and how people can come here, and cuts immigration overall. It gives my constituents confidence that the Government have heard their concerns on immigration, and are working to tackle them.

8.49 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Judged while seeking justice. Criminalised while fleeing criminals. Expelled while being exploited. Scapegoated while escaping some of the worst violations against human dignity or human rights. In breach of global agreements. The words in the Bill should never enter the minds of anyone, let alone those entrusted to protect us. They should never be echoed in the Chamber, let alone be brought forward in legislation. In our country—the place that founded human rights—the Government have reached the depths of stigmatising people fleeing war, terror, trafficking, climate catastrophe and, yes, destitution, judging them on how they arrived, not what they have left. As the Government play on the global stage by cutting aid to the world's poorest and removing their last hope of being able to stay home and support family and community, play with our climate, which is burning our planet and every grain that could feed the most destitute, play war by selling arms while walking away from building peace, fail to use their voice, power and influence on the global stage to stem some of the worst violations against humanity, and preside over a broken asylum system and do not fix it, they must recognise their contribution to the decimation of the global order before pointing the blame at its victims.

From centuries of imperial abuse to withdrawing from reparation today, the Government are now prepared to suppress a small number of the 80 million people forced from their homes and land without shelter or hope. They are prepared to criminalise people who, for the want of safety and survival, and some just to be reunited with their families, have been subject to criminal gangs. Worse, the Bill will stop people even fleeing danger as the Government force them to apply to enter the UK from a place of peril or some offshore hidden place, creating more risk, more trauma and more harm.

I appeal to all Government Members not to tread those dark paths. I appeal to all who say they live by a moral code and are here to further justice and advance human rights not to support their Government tonight but to uphold our British values, which welcome the repressed and offer people somewhere to live safely. I am so proud to represent York, the UK's only human rights city and a city of sanctuary, where we put the needs of others before our own, tear down walls and create bridges, and take care of those whose stories break us as they recount the trauma they have endured in their lives. We listen and we act. We quicken our resolve to speak up and stand up for human rights and against violations and abuses. That is why I speak out to oppose this oppressive legislation and say: not in my name.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Sir John Hayes.

8.52 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Welcome to the Chair. Edmund Burke said:

“Justice is itself the great standing policy of civil society; and any eminent departure from it, under any circumstances, lies under the suspicion of being no policy at all.”

Restoring justice and order to the chaotic and confusing asylum system broadcasts that a line in the sand has been drawn that will not fade away with every new boat

that arrives on the beach. The Bill is a testament to the principle that laws must be just and be seen to be; otherwise, we can hardly call them law at all.

According to poll after poll, the vast majority of the public see illegal immigration as a serious problem. Is it any wonder when there were 16,000 illegal entrants into Britain last year, with 8,500 on boats? Those are the ones we know about. This year alone, 7,000 have arrived on those boats.

Richard Fuller: Does my right hon. Friend not think that somehow turning the debate simply into, “Everyone who claims asylum must have a legitimate claim and everyone who is against it must be racist” does not help in trying to get to the just law that he is talking about?

Sir John Hayes: Absolutely, it does not, nor is it just to pillory the public and those who speak for them when they argue that we should enforce the law and that migration should be controlled. As a number of hon. Members have said, legal migration has been out of control for some time, and illegal migration, by its very nature, is both unjust and unfair because it breaks the law. It breaches that principle that people who arrive here and pursue legal routes are doing the right thing and that those who do not are simply doing the wrong thing and should be deported. That is what the public think, and that is what we should say very clearly.

Stuart C. McDonald: Is no one on the Conservative Benches remotely concerned that the Bill would see a Uyghur fleeing persecution in China, a Syrian fleeing disastrous war crimes in that country or a persecuted Christian seeking sanctuary on this shore criminalised with an offence that could see them in prison for up to four years, stripped of their family reunion rights, offshored and whatever else? Does nobody on those Benches have any qualms about that whatsoever?

Sir John Hayes: Surely the hon. Gentleman must realise that while the principle of granting asylum—of giving sanctuary to people in desperate need—is a noble one, it is being gamed, day after day and month after month, with people travelling through many safe countries before claiming asylum, repeated claims on a whole range of different grounds, and even modern slavery, which we all deplore, being used as a justification to stay here when it is invented. That is to insult—to besmirch—those who are really suffering persecution and who come here in genuine need. It is being gamed, frankly, by a combination of unscrupulous civil rights and human rights activists, and people-traffickers. Although they do not work together in an organised fashion, the combination of the two is damaging public faith in our ability to control our borders. If “take back control” means anything, surely it means taking back control of our sovereign borders.

When the average Briton sees the asylum system being played, it leaves them bewildered, frustrated and angry that we should be taken for such fools. British people do not want to pull up the drawbridge to the world's needy. What they want is a consistent system that helps the right people in the right way: one that will remove those with no right to stay in Britain just as it protects those we ought to be protecting, not one that grants favour to those who manage to successfully break our laws when they first arrive here.

Sara Britcliffe: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, contrary to what the Opposition are saying, the Government are not changing their approach to maritime law and those organisations and individuals will still be able to rescue anybody who is in distress at sea?

Sir John Hayes: As my hon. Friend may know, I am a former maritime Minister, and it absolutely right to say that the agreement that we have with the International Maritime Organisation to rescue people at sea is also being exploited by unscrupulous people, and we need to be mindful of that fact.

This Bill goes some way to addressing the huge gulf that exists between public perceptions and those of the liberal establishment that has too much say about too many things in this country. Criminal gangs and desperate economic migrants know that every time bleeding-heart liberals oppose tougher penalties and tougher measures—and so blur the distinction between those in genuine need and those who break the rules—they do immense harm to the cause of genuine asylum seekers.

Finally, let me say a word about foreign criminals, who have been mentioned. In 2010, there were 4,000 foreign criminals here; now, there are 10,000. Surely every one should be deported. We do not want to import crime into our country. We must take back control and we must pass this Bill to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Angela Crawley.

8.57 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I welcome you to your role. I am grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate and to follow several hon. Members who have spoken so eloquently on this Bill—sadly, for the most part, on the Opposition Benches.

My colleagues and I will oppose this abhorrent legislation that rides roughshod over the refugee convention. As we approach the 30th anniversary of the convention, this Bill places some of the most vulnerable people in the world at risk of destitution, exploitation and family separation. The Government's rhetoric and virtue signalling has failed to comprehend the valuable contributions that those people make to our society, regardless of how they got there. If the Bill is passed, it will, as we have heard, cast the UK adrift from international law, making it more insulated from other countries and staining what is still left of our international reputation on the world stage. It is insensitive, rushed and deeply problematic given its intention to effectively end the right to seek asylum in the UK. By doing so, it contravenes the refugee convention itself and also the European convention on human rights. The Bill proposes a two-tier system and a two-tier approach to asylum, despite there being no legal requirement in international law for an applicant to seek asylum in the first country they reach.

By bringing this Bill forward, the Home Secretary is ignoring both international and UK law with her approach, as well as being blind to the fact that how an applicant arrives in the UK is unrelated to the level of protection that they require. The Home Secretary encourages asylum seekers to use official schemes to make their application, fully aware that in many cases the abhorrent regimes that an asylum seeker is seeking refuge from will place them and their families at greater risk. The risk that

many asylum seekers face is not a choice they make freely; it is a choice they make simply because it is the only choice they have left—to turn to criminal gangs for help, leaving them open to exploitation.

The UK simply cannot depart from international law on an issue that requires co-operation with other countries and by doing so refuse to play its part in supporting some of the world's most vulnerable citizens. The Bill is shoddy, it vandalises the UK's international reputation and it undermines the devolution settlement itself.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent, which I am proud to represent, has the fifth-highest rate of asylum seekers per 10,000 of population, Glasgow being the first. Does the hon. Lady agree that the SNP-led councils outside Glasgow should step up and do their bit, and start being part of the asylum dispersal scheme?

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Member for that comment. Feel free to fund Glasgow City Council to deal with the situation that, frankly, the Government have caused.

Most importantly, the Bill ignores the reality of why people flee in the first place and seek safety. That wilful ignorance lies within the Bill's severest risk of harm to refugees seeking protection in the UK. The Bill would put the continued use of military-style barracks at the heart of the Home Office strategy, flying in the face of court rulings and expert opinion, including the NHS and Public Health England. Their use has been ruled unlawful and the court has banned it by a decision of the High Court. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) wishes to make a further intervention I will take it, otherwise I will carry on. It is simply astonishing that the Home Office is casually disregarding that ruling and the views of public health experts, and placing this practice at the heart of the Bill.

The Bill is one of the many reasons that Scotland needs her independence and to break away from this insular little Britain that the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister are working to create. These are real people. These are real lives. That someone should arrive here, illegally by this Government's definition, by exploitation or worse and be penalised for the very notion that they make it successfully here at all is absolutely abhorrent. This place should be regarded as a safe haven. The UK is that opportunity for many, many people. This Government turn their back on so many lives.

9.2 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then, Janis Bite was 13 years old and living in Latvia at the start of world war two. Two years later, the Nazis came. Their request was simple: one male member from each family to go and fight the Russians. It was either Janis, his dad or his younger brother, so Janis went to the Russian front and witnessed the horrors of war in temperatures of minus 40.

When the war ended in 1945, Janis was classed as a displaced person—a refugee. Imagine that. He could not go back to Latvia, because he had been sent straight to Siberia and that is where they sent his dad, so Janis was given two more choices: the US or the UK. So he came to the UK to a small village in Derbyshire, where he and other refugees were housed in Nissen huts in

[Lee Anderson]

army barracks. He did not complain or whinge or moan about the barracks or set fire to the barracks or make TikTok videos. In fact, they were so grateful to the UK that they all volunteered to work in the fields at local farms picking potatoes and other seasonal vegetables for no pay. Janis met a girl in the village, he fell in love and he later married. He worked hard all his life and had three sons, one of them being Alan in Ashfield. Janis loved his football. He became a British citizen and loved this country. He even went on to meet our Queen. Janis is no longer with us, but his story makes me feel incredibly proud of our great country and its willingness to help people from all over the world.

Sir John Hayes: The story my hon. Friend is telling is a story of someone who sought our aid and got it, but would he contrast that with what is happening now? Would Janis not take the view, which has been articulated in this Chamber tonight, that the system that he held in such high regard is now being gamed and exploited, besmirching the good name of our country and people like him?

Lee Anderson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. That is absolutely right. I spoke to Janis's family last week in Ashfield, and they made exactly that point. I will feed that back to them when I get back to Ashfield this weekend.

We have always been a welcoming and tolerant country that has reached out to genuine refugees from all over the world, but just like Janis's family in Ashfield, most people in the UK do not accept that people travelling here from France in dinghies are genuine asylum seekers—[*Interruption.*] They are not genuine asylum seekers. We know that many of them have been trafficked with a clear instruction on how to claim asylum once they get here. That is because our asylum system is not fit for purpose, and this Bill stops that.

The Labour party and the Opposition want to bring back free movement. They dislike our points-based immigration system, and now they are going to vote against a Bill that protects our borders and helps us deport foreign murderers and rapists. They will always vote against the British people. This new Bill will ensure that people in genuine need, like Janis all those years ago, get the help they need, and the greedy lawyers and the human traffickers will be told, "No more." We owe it to people such as Janis who are suffering today to ensure that we have a fairer system that offers genuine refugees a safe haven. This Bill does that.

We have nothing to be ashamed of in this country. We are a kind, tolerant and welcoming country. That is proven by the number of people who risk their lives every single day to get here. If Janis's family can see that the current situation is unacceptable, surely the Opposition should see that too.

I give a massive thanks to the Home Secretary, who has stuck to her guns. She has listened to the British people and delivered. Opposition MPs want to travel into reality. I will offer this opportunity to all of them now sitting there now with those glazed expressions on their faces: come down to Ashfield, come speak to some real people in my towns and villages, and the message you will get will be completely different from the message

you are feeding into this House. I am here because of you lot and the attitudes you had in 2019. We are getting tough on crime, we are getting tough on immigration and we are getting tough on law and order.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Stephen Timms.

9.6 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on taking the Chair. I am delighted to see you there.

Every year or two, we hear from a Conservative Home Secretary that they are going to fix the broken system. The Home Secretary has told us again tonight that the system is broken, and of course she is right: it is broken. All the previous attempts—we have heard about exactly the same things in the past—have not fixed it, and this one will not either. I cannot agree with the thinking in this Bill that making life more miserable for people whose circumstances are already utterly miserable will fix these problems and deter people from their desperate efforts to reach the UK.

Most people think that distinguishing between asylum seekers on the basis of their route to the UK is contrary to the 1951 refugee convention. No doubt that will end up in the courts. I am particularly dismayed by plans to process asylum applications overseas. We have no idea where this will happen. We certainly should know before we agree to this Bill.

Australia has offshore facilities in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, although nobody has been sent there since 2013. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees urged that they should be evacuated because of poor health standards, highlighting in particular the number of suicides there. Those facilities shame Australia, and if we go down the same road, it will shame us too.

The long wait for asylum decisions is a massive problem. I asked the Home Secretary about this earlier. There are 50% more asylum caseworkers now than there were in 2014-15, but the number of decisions they make has gone down every single year in that time. Why has productivity fallen so far? I asked the Home Secretary that and she did not give me an answer. Without fixing the problem, things will just carry on getting worse.

The number waiting more than a year for initial decisions, as we have been reminded repeatedly in this debate, has risen tenfold since 2010. I have seen that in constituency surgeries. People wait four years, and they have no idea when they will hear anything. Sometimes a reply to me is the only way they know they actually are in the Home Office system. They have no other evidence that they are.

I strongly support the proposal of my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) for legally binding targets to process asylum cases more quickly. If people cannot stay, they should be told soon, not, as happens so often at the moment, after years, so that leaving is impractical and in practice hardly ever happens. The current gross inefficiency helps nobody. I hope the House will reject this Bill.

9.9 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Our United Kingdom has always stood up for those in need, whether by helping the thousands escaping fascism in

Europe in the 20th century or by offering a home to the people of Hong Kong who face persecution at the hands of the Chinese communist party.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, an adopted Stoke, is right to say that our asylum system is broken. People in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke will see images of people crossing the channel illegally in small boats and are rightly infuriated, because they know the impact that illegal immigration has. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have done more than almost any other area in giving asylum seekers a home. At the end of 2020, we had the fifth-highest rate of asylum seekers per 10,000 of population in the whole UK, housing more than 1,000 asylum seekers. That means that one in every 250 people living in Stoke is now an asylum seeker, and with the certainty of even more illegal entries into the UK on boats, in lorries or through those arriving without visas, places such as Stoke-on-Trent will be pushed to their limit. In 14 council wards, the one in 200 cluster limit has already been breached in Stoke-in-Trent, with Etruria and Hanley, a ward I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), having a ratio of one in 44. The stark truth is that our city has reached its limits. Services such as our local NHS and schools are under strain and being stretched even further, and I fully support the decision by Stoke-on-Trent City Council's leader, Councillor Abi Brown, to pause our involvement with the asylum dispersal scheme.

Patrick Grady: Perhaps some of the asylum seekers in the hon. Gentleman's constituency could be given the right to work and could then work in the schools and hospitals, and the whole community could benefit from the economic, cultural and social growth they would bring, rather than demonising, othering and making people afraid of them.

Jonathan Gullis: I see the hon. Gentleman getting very animated. I just hope he can convince his Scottish National party colleagues—or the nats—to get involved in the asylum dispersal scheme. I know that the Minister will be very keen for meetings tomorrow to start the paperwork and let us have lots more councils in Scotland taking part in the scheme.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking my intervention. He keeps saying this, as do many of his colleagues. However, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) met the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last week and it said, as it has so many times before, that every one of the other 31 local authorities in Scotland would be happy to get involved in the asylum dispersal scheme if it were funded—why shouldn't it be funded? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it should be properly funded?

Jonathan Gullis: Stoke-on-Trent, sadly, has the second-lowest council tax revenue income of any local authority in England, yet all I am hearing from those opposite is excuses, excuses, excuses. The SNP has money for all these vanity projects, but it does not have any money to look after asylum seekers—I find it baffling. By creating new accommodation centres, removing asylum seekers to a safe third country while an asylum claim is pending, in the same ways as is being done in Denmark, increasing maximum penalties for entering the UK illegally, enabling

the quicker and easier removal of foreign criminals convicted of horrific crimes such as rape and murder, creating new safe and legal routes that will be looked on favourably when people apply for asylum, and backing our Border Force to stop and redirect boats out of British waters, returning them to safe countries from which they came, such as France, this Bill is delivering the reforms that we need and that are wanted by the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke.

Angela Crawley: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the picture he paints is not the same as the one we experience in Scotland? In Glasgow, in Kenmore Street, people wrapped themselves around those who were being deported by the Home Office and said, "Refugees are welcome." The picture he paints is not representative of the whole of the UK—it is inaccurate and false.

Jonathan Gullis: I have the greatest respect for the people of Glasgow, their council and their MPs, because they have got involved in the asylum dispersal scheme, and they deserve full recognition and credit for that. That is just like how Stoke-on-Trent has wrapped its arms around the people who have come to this country in need and looked after them. But we have simply said that our NHS, local schools and local council services cannot do this any more and it simply has to come to a point where fairness is applied equally. I say to the hon. Lady again that if all the SNP councils that are not in Glasgow want to, they can meet the Minister and get the asylum dispersal scheme signed up to and we can share the load across our country.

But let us talk about the Labour party, who will listen to the woke mob on Twitter rather than listening to the people in former red wall seats. The Labour party wants to sign back up to free movement, which its leader spent years arguing for when trying to block Brexit. He also believes that immigration controls are racist. I suggest that the Labour party champagne socialists of north Islington, whose Labour-run council had not given accommodation to a single asylum seeker by the end of 2020, and their leftie sponging lawyer friends who soak up taxpayers' money by preventing foreign criminals from being deported should get out and talk to some real people rather than worrying about their likes on Twitter. The truth is that the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke want to take back control and this Bill delivers that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Allan Dorans.

9.15 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Good evening and welcome to the Chair.

"It is a sad fact that in our broken world forced migration is a reality...UK Government Ministers might wish for people to stop trying to cross the English Channel but when there is still conflict and injustice in the world then there will always be those wanting to seek sanctuary from war and suffering."

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about conflict and suffering and, of course, we deplore that on both sides of the House, but I am not aware that that conflict and suffering are in France. Much as I deplore many aspects of French civilisation, including its attitude to the monarchy,

[*Andrew Griffith*]

France is in the G7, the G20 and a founder member of the United Nations, so I do not understand why he feels that we need to give a safe home to those who are already in a fellow G7 member state.

Allan Dorans: They are fleeing conflict and war. That may be not be in France, but they are fleeing from it in their own countries where they are in severe danger of losing their lives.

Andrew Griffith: Will he just clarify whether, in his view, France is a safe country?

Allan Dorans: It is a safe country, but these asylum seekers are travelling from war-torn countries where their lives are in danger.

“We cannot close the door and instead we need to call out this policy for what it is—xenophobic populism which exploits people’s fears of the outsider.”

Those are not my words, but the words of Susan Brown, a leading member of the Church of Scotland and honorary chaplain to the Queen in Scotland, after seeing the consultation paper on the Bill. Susan clearly does not believe in myths, such as that immigrants are a drain on the NHS and the benefits system or that they bring increases in violent crime with them. For her, this is about being the kind of people we would want to be, treating others as we would hope they would treat us and our families were the roles reversed.

Some may argue that strict immigration policies are necessary to protect our borders and our country from the effects of immigration. However, on our NHS staffing, migration is good for the NHS. Migrants are an essential part of the healthcare workforce. They are the consultants, doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners, canteen staff and other people who look after the nation. 13.3% of NHS staff in hospitals and community services in England reported a non-British nationality. Among doctors, that proportion is 20.4%. Many doctors trained abroad and, in March 2019, 20% of GPs in England qualified outside the UK. Immigration is a necessary part of the British way of life.

On healthcare, the demand among migrants to the UK is lower than among the UK-born population, except among in-patients for childbirth. In Scotland, migrants from outside the UK are in general young and have low healthcare needs. Consequently, there is little evidence of increased demand for health services. On benefits, foreign-born people are less likely to receive key Department for Work and Pensions out-of-work benefits than UK-born people. On crime, in Scotland, statistics for individual crime participation tend to show that migrants are less likely to commit crime than observably similar people who were born in the United Kingdom.

I return to Susan Brown of the Church of Scotland, who said:

“What we need is political leadership which acknowledges and allays people’s concerns and promotes the importance of human life and dignity...This means giving asylum seekers the right to work...Establishing safe passage routes or humanitarian corridors to the UK for those that need sanctuary...and...support for individuals to alleviate destitution and poverty.”

In conclusion, I urge the Government to seriously reconsider many aspects of the Bill and to adopt a more appropriate economic and humanitarian approach to nationality and immigration.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jack Brereton.

9.19 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to your elevated position.

Many of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South are shocked and angered by the illegal crossings of the English channel. The integrity of our borders is broken, and my constituents are fed up of seeing people continue to enter the UK illegally. We must act to put an end to the profiteering of criminal people traffickers, for whom illegal routes have become an industry, and we must deter those who seek to make these perilous journeys across the busiest shipping lane in the world in no more than a rubber dinghy.

Clearly, there must be safe routes for those in desperate need. The UK and Stoke-on-Trent have a proud record of helping those in the greatest need, but what my constituents cannot understand is why there should be any need to make illegal journeys to do so: European countries are safe, and those attempting to claim asylum should do so in those countries.

We have seen repeated attempts to game the system, using any legal loophole to do so. There were 16,000 illegal immigrants last year yet, because the system is overwhelmed and repeatedly abused, deportations are declining. The increased pressures we have seen on the entire immigration system put enormous weight on the few asylum dispersal areas. Stoke-on-Trent has seen one of the highest proportions of refugees in the entire country.

Angela Crawley: Does the hon. Member accept the criticism from his former colleague Anna Soubry, who said the Conservative party is now a “Trumpian”, far-right, “populist” party?

Jack Brereton: I do not agree with that. We have absolutely supported those in the most desperate need. It is about making sure we support the genuine ones in those countries and regions. We have supported around 25,000 over the past six years in this country, which is the most in the whole of Europe. We will not take any lectures from the SNP, which talks so much about support for immigrants but does not do a single thing. Glasgow is the only city in Scotland to be a dispersal area. The rest of Scotland does not lift a single finger to help asylum seekers.

Jonathan Gullis: Stoke does all the heavy lifting.

Jack Brereton: I agree with my hon. Friend. Cities such as Stoke-on-Trent are actually putting in the effort.

Angela Crawley: The hon. Member’s statement that Glasgow is the only place in Scotland that accepts refugees is untrue. South Lanarkshire, my local authority, has accepted a number of refugees, particularly after 2014. [HON. MEMBERS: “How many?”] I do not have the numbers, but the fact stated by the hon. Member is untrue.

Jack Brereton: Glasgow is the only official asylum dispersal area in Scotland. Other authorities have the opportunity to come forward as dispersal areas, but SNP-controlled authorities in Scotland have failed to do so. All the pressure has fallen on the minority of authorities that are dispersal areas, while numerous authorities have failed to resettle a single asylum seeker.

The west midlands is currently accommodating 12.26%, an increase on 2019, but all of this is falling on only half of the authorities in the region. In Stoke-on-Trent it is having a significant impact on our overstretched local services.

Stuart C. McDonald: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can join our delegation tomorrow, because what we seek and what the cross-party Home Affairs Committee has advised is that the Home Office properly fund the dispersal system. Every single local authority in Scotland got involved in the refugee resettlement scheme because it was properly funded. I am more than happy to join him in seeking more money for dispersal areas, and we will all then happily sign up to do the job properly.

Jack Brereton: What the hon. Gentleman is actually saying is, “We are happy for authorities like Stoke-on-Trent to continue to pull their weight, and we in Scotland will just sit here, not pull our weight and continue not to support asylum seekers in this country.”

Patrick Grady: The Scottish Government have published the “New Scots” plan to welcome asylum seekers and refugees across the entire country. If the UK Government do not want to give us the money, why do they not give us the power? Then we can have our own immigration system in Scotland.

Jack Brereton: I will make some progress, as I have very little time.

There are currently around 10,000 national foreign offenders in this country. Again, the Labour party will not do anything about it, and it tried to accept murderers and rapists into this country. We in Stoke-on-Trent will not allow that. As I said, the pressure faced by those few who have done the most is totally unsustainable. It saw all resettlement area authorities in the region withdraw from the scheme recently. Since then, we have continued to see attempts to place people, and the latest letter from the Minister—I do thank him for the support he has given—says that there will continue to be procurement in these areas, against our wishes. I totally recognise the urgent need for these areas to house people, but it cannot continue to fall on a few areas of the country. It is time that other areas of the country step up and do what they should in taking a fair share and contributing, as Stoke-on-Trent has and continues to do.

9.25 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: There is only one thing on which the Home Secretary and I would agree today, and that is that we have a failed and broken immigration system that costs far too much money. But that is because of successive Conservative Governments, who have failed it and broken it, and an incompetent and chaotic Home Office that continues to preside over it. When they constantly have to pay out claims for wrongful decisions and they outsource immigration detention and asylum accommodation, it costs money

and causes misery. When more than 50% of those in immigration detention actually end up staying in this country, what an absolute waste. Extending the immigration detention estate will only enrich companies such as Serco and G4S, which is why the plan makes no sense to me. The pandemic has proven that it can be managed in another way. If the Government want to save money, they should simply end immigration detention.

This horrendous legislation, hailed as a solution, does nothing to resolve these issues. It does nothing to create safe routes for refugees, nothing to end the hostile environment, nothing to end the danger of unsafe asylum accommodation and nothing to address the bureaucratic hurdles that leave people without documentation through no fault of their own.

We are living through an age of mass displacement driven by war, poverty and climate breakdown. Under the refugee convention, anyone seeking asylum should be able to claim in their intended destination or another safe country. Asylum seekers are under no obligation to seek refuge in the first country they arrive in, and there are a number of reasons why they may not do so.

At times like this, the Government should not be dodging their moral and legal obligations to accept their fair share of refugees. Instead of creating a fair and humane system, this Bill, coupled with the Government’s new plan, discriminates by distinguishing that whether people are fleeing from persecution is irrelevant compared with how they arrived. Does the Home Secretary realise that a trafficked woman cannot stop and ask her handler to ensure that she arrives under the correct documentation? LGBTQ people and those fleeing political and religious persecution cannot do a Google search to find out what mode might be considered the most favourable. An unaccompanied minor stripped of everything and everyone they know does not have the luxury of ticking the correct box. These people are fleeing conditions some of us could never imagine. These plans will limit the options of those most in need and create a two-tier system that will ruin lives.

It is 100% a misrepresentation to say that the legislation meets our obligations under international law. Do not take my word for it; the House has heard time and again today about the view of the United Nations, and the opinions of those lawyers who the Home Secretary seeks to demonise. I want all those campaigners and lawyers who continue to support migrants’ rights to know that, no matter what is said about them on the Conservative Benches, they are absolute heroes. Long after the Government are done away with, they will be on the right side of history.

This Bill is yet more of this Government’s authoritarian agenda, turning away the most vulnerable. As the late, great Tony Benn once said:

“The way a Government treats refugees is very instructive because it shows you how they would treat the rest of us if they thought they could get away with it.”

Only safe and legal routes will—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Matt Western.

9.28 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations.

[*Matt Western*]

Before I come to the substantive points I wish to raise in relation to the Bill, it is worth reminding ourselves that what we are debating tonight touches on the experiences of some of the most vulnerable people in global society. Facing an ever-hardening legal system, asylum seekers find themselves in what can only be described as a paradox of precarity. The legal system offers asylum seekers little to no support, despite their already fragile and precarious position. That cannot be a satisfactory state of affairs.

I contend that this Bill only serves to entrench that paradox of precarity. While an account of the traumas faced by those who have fled their homeland for fear of persecution is best left to those who have first-hand experience, we cannot overstate the pain, suffering and disorientation faced by many of those who arrive on our shores. Let us reflect on the plight of the Uyghurs, the Rohingya and the Tigrayan people, for it is those groups the Bill will fall hardest on—those fleeing war and genocide.

For a nation whose proud reputation was part-founded on welcoming the persecuted over many centuries, this Government are doing much to trash that. Compare Germany, which accepted 1 million from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in 2015, with the UK promising to take just 20,000—a mere 2%. Our reputation is the reason why our legal system ought to be a bastion of firm, steady protection for those most in need, rather than—as will be the case in the event of the Bill's passage—a contributory force in the erosion of the rights of asylum seekers. Our reputation is the reason why our legal system ought to be a bastion of firm, steady protection for those most in need, rather than—as will be the case in the event of the Bill's passage—a contributory force in the erosion of the rights of asylum seekers.

Jack Brereton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matt Western: I am afraid that I want to let everyone speak this evening.

Let me give three clear examples of how the Bill will contribute to weakened protection for asylum seekers. First, clauses 16 to 20, requiring them to provide evidence supporting their claim by a specific date, appears to be almost entirely arbitrary. Indeed, the Immigration Law Practitioners Association has said that those clauses ignore the practical difficulties faced by many asylum seekers. Secondly, clause 24, which allows the Home Secretary to accelerate appeals when she thinks they would be disposed of expeditiously, grates against both article 34 of the UN refugee convention and the principles of natural justice—the very principles on which our legal system is founded, signed into force by the Attlee Government. It is more than regrettable that the convention appears now to be held in such little regard by this Government. Thirdly, not only will the Home Secretary have a much wider arsenal of powers at her disposal, but the Bill authorises decision makers to decide on the balance of probabilities, rather than on the basis of reasonable likelihood, whether a person claiming asylum has a well-founded fear of persecution.

Let us be clear: this amounts to an unnecessary raising of the legal bar for asylum seekers to succeed in cases. I struggle to see a valid policy reason for such a move, in the light of the Home Secretary's commitment

to upholding the apparently long, proud tradition of providing a home for people fleeing persecution and oppression. The answer lies not in raising the bar disproportionately high for asylum seekers to overcome, but in a more holistic approach to the support offered. It is not just our footballers who see this divisive Government for what it is; the public are more compassionate than the Government, and they seek a fair, compassionate system to provide for those in need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Richard Fuller.

9.31 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What a great pleasure it is to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

For many of my constituents, rightly or wrongly, the success of the Bill depends on whether it stops or clearly limits three persistent and frustrating problems with our immigration and border controls. First, it depends on whether the Bill stops or clearly limits the use of the channel crossing by boat or truck to make a claim for asylum; secondly, it depends on whether the Bill stops or clearly limits the filing, over many years, of speculative further asylum claims—frequently on specious grounds—that clog up our system, crowd out legitimate claims, and generally make a mockery of our legal processes; and thirdly, it depends on whether the Bill stops or clearly limits the opportunity for cherry-picking that leads people to make an asylum claim in the UK rather than in the one or many other safe countries through which they travel.

It is for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Minister to bear in mind that it is on those bases that my constituents will judge the success or failure of this measure, not the rhetoric that accompanies it. To me, however—and, I would say, to some other Conservative Members—there are further aspects that are important. Let me pick up the challenge from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), on the views of those on this side of the House, because there are aspects of nuance and detail that I think it important to bring out.

First, if the assessment system is to be quicker, it is important for the Government to ensure that claimants have much better access to legal advice. Secondly, if the system is to work effectively, there needs to be greater availability of counselling, psychiatric and other medical assessments. Thirdly, we should once and for all have a culture of getting to the truth, rather than the culture of disbelief that has for too many years permeated the Home Office asylum system.

Sir John Hayes: I am intervening for a specific reason. What is actually happening is that the truth is being obscured by repeated claims which many of the people whom my hon. Friend is describing are encouraged to lodge by the unscrupulous lawyers who were given such a plaudit by the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy).

Richard Fuller: My right hon. Friend speaks very wise words.

Let me just say to Opposition Members that there is no monopoly on compassion, and that it does not mean saying that the system must apply to everyone in a particular process. Compassion applies to an individual claim. The importance of our system is that we get to that individual and do not lose sight of him or her. In a previous life as a Member of Parliament, I spoke in a debate on another immigration Bill and bemoaned the lack of compassion in our immigration system. It was encouraging to hear the Home Secretary use the word “compassion” so often, and to hear stories of compassion from other Conservative Members, whether they were about how a council looks after the people who are claiming asylum or about people’s feelings about the system. So there is no monopoly on compassion here, and I look forward to working with Opposition Members in finding ways in which we can make it work more deeply in the Bill.

Stuart C. McDonald: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member, particularly for his stance on immigration detention and his campaigning for time limits on it. The Home Secretary talks about compassion, but at the end of the day—I have said this a few times, but people do not seem even to acknowledge it—the Bill would criminalise people it recognises as refugees, strip them of their family reunion rights, strip them of recourse to public funds, limit the amount of leave that they are allowed here and never let them even apply for settlement. That is not remotely compassionate. We are talking about refugees.

Richard Fuller: I look forward to the hon. Gentleman talking about specifics, because again there was a bit of broad generalisation there. However, one thing that I will say for SNP Members is that at least they have some ideas, whereas 10 minutes into the shadow Home Secretary’s speech he said, “Let me tell you what the Labour party will do”—and in the rest of his speech he came up with one idea, which was to set a legal target for how quickly asylum claims get processed. Is that it? Is that all the Labour party has to offer? I see that it is, so let us work with the SNP.

Let me tell the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East where I think we can work together. Let us have some compassion for victims of slavery; there is plenty of support on the Conservative Benches for that. Let us have some compassion in how we treat children in the Bill; there is lots of support on both sides of the House for that. Let us have some compassion for how the particular issues of women will be affected by the separation of regular from irregular routes. And let us have some compassion, Minister, by ending indefinite detention once and for all.

9.36 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Last week, Swansea celebrated 10 years as a city of sanctuary. We offer a hand of friendship, not a fist of resistance; we are a community of communities, moving forward together in an uncertain world. But the Bill is not a helping hand for those fleeing war and persecution, nor is it a worthy successor to the 1951 refugee convention that Britain helped to produce. Instead, it is a mean-spirited act of national populism to provide more hostile environment for those in genuine need when we have savagely cut overseas aid by £4.4 billion, which will increase refugee demand.

Last year, we had 27,000 asylum seekers in Britain—the 17th highest number in Europe per head of population and the fifth highest overall—so there is not a massive problem of refugees and asylum seekers. That debate has been whipped up as a cynical political exaggeration. Millions of people have been displaced from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, where we have been engaged in war, and we need to take our responsibility in due accord.

The 1951 refugee convention recognised that in fleeing from war and persecution, people arrive irregularly, obviously—they are escaping. The Bill reduces the rights of people who arrive irregularly by boat or lorry, which is a natural way to escape. The plan is to put them into temporary isolated camps so that they do not settle, which will be a magnet for protesters, fascists and the like. They need rehabilitation and settling, not isolation and persecution. People who are not travelling directly or who are delaying will get second-class treatment as so-called group 2 refugees, so they will have to wait 30 months at a time. They will have to wait 10 years before they have any sort of permanency.

What is more, the Bill criminalises people. People could face up to four years in prison if they do not arrive in a regular way, as no one would who was escaping war or persecution. What we should be doing, like the United States—at last—and like Canada and Norway is increasing the number of refugees settled. Ours went down from 5,000 to 3,000, but it should be nearer to 10,000.

The cut in overseas aid will hit people in Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria the hardest and will produce even more problems, but all we can do is create a hostile environment. We are better than this.

9.39 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: Listening to this debate, not for the first time, there has been a real effort to talk down our record and to talk down the generosity of the British taxpayer. Our Syrian refugee resettlement scheme, for example, has protected 25,000 people in the past six years, more than any other European country. That is worth restating. Conservative Governments have done that. Conservative Governments have resettled 25,000 people ahead of the rest of Europe.

I want to take head-on the shallow arguments being made against reform. We need to face reality: right now, it is estimated that 426 million children are living in conflict zones. There is absolutely no way that any country can provide a home and refuge to even a substantial proportion of those children. Millions more live in conditions all over the world that would qualify them for humanitarian relief, and there are tens of millions of refugees. Importantly, there are many, many more people who live in similar circumstances to those already seeking to come here as economic migrants. We cannot help everyone. Labour Members want to pretend that there are no choices to make, and whatever choices we make, it will find some way of saying that those in the Labour party are heroes and that we are the villains because they would have helped just a few more people. It is the same old Labour.

There are millions of people who, if they could get here, would make a contribution and become positive members of our society. A policy is not a failure because an example of that can be found. If Labour got its way entirely, there would still be refugees in camps who would be better off in the UK. It is a vacuous way to attack

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

Government policy on this issue. The question is: are we playing our part? I want to see that we get the most out of the money we spend. For every person who gets here because criminal gangs took their money to get them across the channel, there is someone among the hundreds, thousands, or millions of people who have not done that whom we could offer asylum to instead. For every penny that we spend on housing someone here, we could help many more people in conflict zones.

Who is it that we want to help? We always have to make a choice. Instead of helping the primarily fit, young men of working age who make the channel crossing, we should help the children, the elderly, and the destitute who cannot. I welcome that we will make it absolutely clear that coming here in a boat across the channel is not acceptable. There is only one way to do that, and that is to create a system that takes that into account.

We need to sort this issue out to secure long-term public support for taking in refugees. That is not populism; that is democracy. The public are not stupid. They know that there is a difference between economic migrants and refugees, and they know that boat crossings is a route that favours economic migrants. The public need confidence that the people we help are genuine refugees.

It is important that we do not let our record turn into one of which we cannot be proud. We should keep our decent record, but by using the new system to tip the balance towards those who are the most vulnerable. This shift is a good one. I am someone who cares about vulnerable people and who is proud of our record, and I support these changes.

9.42 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Our asylum system has saved countless lives from persecution, discrimination and conflict. It plays a key role in enabling us to honour our international, legal and humanitarian responsibilities and I am proud that our country, my home, is a place that people in crisis come to for safety.

There can be no doubt that our asylum system is in disarray. This Bill was a chance to fix that. Instead, it will enable the Government to turn their back on some of the most vulnerable people in the world. Over 33,000 people waited more than 12 months for an initial decision last year. That is 10 times the number in 2010. The Bill does nothing to address that shocking backlog, or the discrimination and destitution faced by asylum seekers today. Instead, it will make their lives harder when they seek the safety that they desperately need. This includes one of my constituents here in Vauxhall, an Eritrean national. Since he arrived in the UK, more than 18 months ago, he has been moved to four different hotels while waiting for an initial decision from the Home Office. During that time, he and a friend were subject to a shocking, violent crime. An acid attack led to his friend losing his vision at just 18 years old. How much longer does my constituent have to wait to know whether he is finally free to start to rebuild his life here in the UK? Unfortunately, this Bill does not answer his question.

This Bill creates no commitment to reopen safe routes or resettlement for family reunion. As hon. and right hon. Members have rightly highlighted, after the UK's new resettlement scheme, we settled just 25 refugees in March. The Bill proposes to build on the Government's

hostile environment agenda by criminalising some of the most vulnerable migrants, locking them up in an overseas accommodation centre. That is immoral and should shame us. Our asylum system should not be a soulless, bureaucratic administrative process, or a tick-box exercise. It is about people's lives, and it should therefore involve compassion and understanding. The Bill will make it harder for vulnerable refugees to build their lives. That is why I will support the reasoned amendment tabled by the Leader of the Opposition.

9.45 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: Immigration is one of the biggest issues of concern to my constituents. I will spend a few moments talking about how we got to where we are now. The Labour Government of '97 changed everything. Labour's overhaul of Britain's immigration policies took average net entry into the country from between 10,000 and 20,000 a year, to between 200,000 and 300,000 a year. From then on, the mere claim of asylum was sufficient to be allowed to stay in the country.

That was when Labour and the media created a toxic atmosphere in which merely mentioning "immigration" branded a person racist, so any expression of fact about immigration was made impossible. From '97, Labour legally wove into the very fabric of society something akin to a culture war against the British people and their mainstream values—the same people who value fairness, generosity and compassion for true asylum seekers, and who want a fair immigration system. Those same people have been bullied and abused by the toxic atmosphere created by Labour and much of the media. Since then, tragically, all politicians have failed them—until now. And yes, equally, true asylum seekers have been failed.

Labour's legacy is clear, if just from the numbers. Immigration estimates have consistently shown no resemblance to the actual numbers. The recent resettlement applications have shown some 3 million additional applicants on the numbers forecast, almost two thirds more than the forecasts made by the same quangos that estimate housing need and advise Government. This has been a failure of Labour policy and the civil service of gargantuan proportions. My voters in Dudley have made that very clear to me.

People smugglers have benefited from the UK magnet, and the system has helped migrants become prey to them, putting their lives in danger. Our councils have not got enough houses, but we are asking them to develop green belt. We do not have enough doctors, dentists or school places, but we need more interpreters for them. This colossal failure is what Labour designed and delivered when in power, thinking that it would change society to keep it in power. In some places, that has worked, but in 2019 the British people said enough. They will hold every Labour MP in contempt for wanting to rejoin the EU and bring back freedom of movement.

The Government are making solid progress. We want to be able to protect our poorest, weakest and most vulnerable. The Bill will deliver on our people's priorities.

9.48 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: The Nationality and Borders Bill is anti-refugee to its core. I will fight it every step of the way. It lacks basic humanity and represents an acceleration of the Government's deeply damaging demonisation of migrants and asylum seekers.

The Bill will enable the UK Government to block visas for overseas visitors if the Home Secretary believes that their country of origin is refusing to co-operate in taking back those the Government want to deport. Asylum seekers will be able to be removed from the UK while their asylum claim or appeal is pending, which opens the door to offshore asylum processing.

Those who have fled war, famine, persecution or violence will be blocked at the border, based on the false premise that a refugee who has sought to escape persecution and danger through what the Government call an irregular route to the UK ought not to seek protection, creating a two-tier system regardless of need and criminalising those seeking protection, while failing to end indefinite detention. That is cruel, deeply unjust and unworkable, all from a Government comprised mostly of individuals who have led lives of extraordinary privilege.

The Bill is illegal, breaching commitments under the refugee convention of 1951. Like many places in the UK, my home city of Leicester is forged from a proud history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. We are better for our diversity.

The Bill shows that, far from learning from the appalling treatment of the Windrush generation, the Government are intent on expanding the damaging hostile environment. Asylum seekers who arrive in Britain are often from countries where the UK has contributed to their disruption, either by arming current conflicts or through the enduring legacy of colonialism.

The UK Government have persistently been warned that if they do not open safe and legal routes for people to practise their legal right to claim asylum, deaths at sea are unavoidable. Yet they have proceeded to close the few legal avenues that exist, such as the right to family reunion. Time and again, the Government have chosen to turn their back on those seeking protection from war, climate disaster, torture or other awful acts. The Bill will compound the misery of people fleeing intolerable conditions.

The Government must end the destructive demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers and abandon this deeply damaging Bill.

9.50 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: I start by thanking Liverpool City Council, health projects and all community and voluntary organisations in Liverpool, Riverside for their tireless and invaluable work for the most vulnerable people who have fled unimaginable circumstances. As a scouser, I am proud that Liverpool has a long history as a city of sanctuary and will continue to welcome refugees, even though the Tories have stolen 63% of our central funding in the last 11 years.

The Bill is fundamentally flawed and will result in the Government turning their back on some of the most vulnerable people. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the Bill risks breaching international law. Rather than offering genuine proposals to fix the broken asylum system, it will make the situation even worse. Many asylum seekers are already desperately vulnerable when they reach the UK. They are the victims of war, persecution, humanitarian crisis, modern slavery, torture and sexual abuse. Their mental health deteriorates drastically through years of uncertainty and powerlessness. There is the

separation of families who have been torn apart, with no family reunion rights for the years they are stuck in the asylum system.

Countless constituents have contacted my office, including one who has waited more than three years for a decision. Another, an engineering doctor, who cannot work in his speciality and submitted his citizenship claim in July last year after 15 years in the UK, still has not had a response. Another is a Berti tribe member who faces persecution in Sudan for his ethnicity and still has not had an interview after a year of application. My office has noticed that the delays for asylum decisions get longer and longer.

The Bill not only fails to protect those people in need of safety, but treats them as criminals. All people who seek protection should be allowed to make an asylum claim, no matter how they have arrived. Creating a two-tier system that grants lesser rights to those who arrive in the UK outside so-called official routes undermines the refugee convention.

The Bill does not address the Government's failure since 2010 to competently process asylum applications. It contains no plan to reduce the backlog. Instead, its provisions are likely to worsen wait times for applicants, leaving more people vulnerable, living in limbo and suffering uncertainty and anxiety. Instead of treating people who are fleeing war, persecution and trauma as criminals and forcing them into destitution with no prospect of escape for years, I implore the Government and appeal to their humanity—what little they have—to stop punishing people for seeking protection.

9.53 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to contribute to the debate with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to the Chair and hope you enjoy your time there.

In the little time I have, I want to speak in support of the clauses that create more penalties for those who facilitate illegal immigration and more enforcement penalties. I speak from the perspective of representing ports in my constituency. It is not for nothing that Thurrock's motto is:

"By Thames to all peoples of the world."

In particular, the port of Tilbury has been very much at the heart of our island story of migration for many years, from the Windrush and people arriving in this country from what was then the empire right through to today, when arrivals tend to be of a more clandestine nature.

But there is one thing that unites all those people: hope. People want to come to this country because—let us be frank—it is the best country in the world. Why would people not want to come here? The fact is that it is organised criminal gangs who exploit that hope. People get seduced by the fantasy that if they get here, the streets will be paved with gold, and that all they need to do is to get here and they will be fine. They are the victims of crime and wilful criminal activity around our border.

For me, it is all about going after those organised criminal groups that exploit people who only want a better life for themselves. Hon. Members will remember that in October 2019 I was standing in this very spot talking about the fact that Essex police had found a container with 39 poor souls who had died on arrival in

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

this country en route from Vietnam. I issued the challenge then that we had to go after those people and bring them to justice, and that that was the way to really tackle our illegal immigration. I can advise the House that Essex police have been truly fantastic in prosecuting that investigation. There have already been 10 convictions and there are more coming down the track. I have to commend the energy with which officers throughout Essex police have sought to prosecute that investigation around the world.

Let us not say that this is too difficult. We know that these networks operate across many different jurisdictions, but with determination we should go and get them, because once we start to shut down these criminal gangs, they will move away from trafficking people into our country. Right now they think that this is an opportunity for crime. Let us ensure that, instead of demonising people whose only ambition is to come here, we go after the serious criminals who are exploiting their wish to do so.

9.56 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I make no apology for addressing this Bill through a Scottish prism. Perhaps with the absence of the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), the voices that I have heard from the Conservative Benches have been really quite dispiriting.

There is a toast from the bard in Scotland that contains the phrase “Wha’s like us?” but that toast will never be proposed to the British nationalism riven through the heart of this tawdry Government, no more evidenced than by the tenor, tone and impact of this inhumane anti-refugee Bill. This Government never seek or seem to learn: Windrush; the PM’s betrayal of his own Brexit promises to our EU friends, neighbours and family; and a Bill that is hostile to the world from a Government hostile to Scotland but with the temerity to claim that they speak for us and that we are one nation.

If this Bill achieves anything, it will be to demonstrate how very different we are. What does it say to us in Scotland? It says, “We care not for your identity as a nation.” It says, “You will fall in line; you will fail to meet the refugee convention; you will criminalise asylum seekers for exercising their legal right to seek asylum; you will process traumatised asylum seekers offshore; you will pile pressure on to the judicial system while reducing access to justice; you will retraumatise victims; you will remove hope; and you will decrease protection and enhance exploitation.” It says, “You will do all this not because you want to, but because we say so; your international welcome is not valued by this Government and your international friends are no friends of ours.” Nothing makes the case for independence more strongly than such a murky piece of legislation.

The people of Scotland will reject the UK Government’s divisive, jingoistic nationalism and are revolted by the casual xenophobia it embodies. Successive UK Governments have had no qualms about hostility, invading nations,

instigating conflict and supplying weapons to oppressive regimes the world over in the pursuit of wealth. Despite that profit, there is not a blush when they complain that those they have helped to displace seek refuge on these shores. Those are people in desperate need. They are victims recast as “us” and “them.” The response of providing needed help is not just a matter of basic humanity; it is a fundamental ethical concern. There is no “us” in humanity, and no “them” in humanity. There is no humanity in this Bill and no humility in this Government.

It is time for Scotland to face facts. We were dragged out of the EU against our will and Scotland is being dragged through the gutter by the Tory party yet again. The people of Scotland: wha’s like us? They certainly do not think that it is this shoddy Westminster Government.

Mr Speaker: Excellent—perfect timing.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—
(*Maria Caulfield.*)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For those who were on the list and were not called—there were a few people left—can I just ask for your direction and help? Will those who were not successful today be called tomorrow?

Mr Speaker: First, I do not think that was quite a point of order. I think you want some clarification for tomorrow and, Jim, I presume you must be acting for others and not yourself when you ask that question. I would say that I think those Members who did not get in today will automatically be put on the list for tomorrow, and I hope those who do not want to be on the list will withdraw.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 5 together. I do not think there are any objections to doing so.

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

AQUACULTURE

That the draft Fisheries Act 2020 (Scheme for Financial Assistance) (England) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 15 June, be approved.

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the draft Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) and the Biofuel (Labelling) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 21 June, be approved.

MEDICAL DEVICES

That the draft Medical Devices (Northern Ireland Protocol) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 16 June, be approved.—(*Maria Caulfield.*)

Question agreed to.

Places for Growth: DEFRA Office (Melton)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Maria Caulfield.*)

Mr Speaker: We have Alicia Kearns online—lovely to see you, Alicia.

10.1 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Nowhere in the country could offer a better home to DEFRA than Melton Mowbray. I could finish my speech there, but I suspect the Minister would like me to make my case in a little more detail. My debate this evening is a straightforward one. I am proud that our Government are levelling up our country, but rural areas need levelling up too, and if the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will not take up a rural home, then I ask the Minister: who will?

To make my case, I would like to start by inviting you, Mr Speaker, to learn more about the wonderful town of Melton Mowbray. We are located in the very heart of our country. Our market town is surrounded by the Vale of Belvoir and the welcoming villages of Melton. When one thinks of England's green and pleasant lands, one must surely be thinking of our wonderful area—not perhaps Lancashire, as you may prefer. Our history is long and fascinating, and I will share some of the stories of our town with you today, because they make the case that not only is the food of our nation in our blood, but we are no ordinary market town.

Our livestock market, of which I will speak much today, is mentioned in the Domesday book dating back to 1085. A millennium on, and throughout the week farmers come from as far as Cornwall and Scotland to do trade at Melton Mowbray market. Visitors enjoying great hospitality in Melton is nothing new, because since the middle ages it is Melton where royalty have come to play and to relax. Indeed, in the last 850 years, 16 kings and two queens have visited Melton.

Even the most infamous of kings has a link to our town, for in 1540, as part of his annulment agreement with Anne of Cleves, King Henry VIII gave his former wife a stunning house in the centre of our town, which had previously been owned by Thomas Cromwell and the Church before that. Mr Speaker, that house is now a phenomenal pub, and you and the Minister would be very welcome to come and enjoy phenomenal food and drink there one day.

There is no question but that we are famous for two things in particular—the one and only Melton Mowbray pork pie and Stilton cheese, which was invented in Little Dalby and Wymondham villages in Melton borough in 1710. Until recently, I did not know that we can lay claim to perhaps the most English of all past times—that great thing, afternoon tea. In 1842, the 7th Duchess of Bedford was staying with the Duke and Duchess of Rutland at Belvoir castle and, bored between lunch and dinner, she ordered tea, sandwiches, buns and cakes at 5 o'clock. When she returned to London from her visit, she took the custom with her, and so afternoon tea was born.

Keeping on the aristocratic theme, Melton Mowbray is also where the phrase “paint the town red” originates. In 1837, an eccentric aristocrat by the name of Henry

de la Poer Beresford turned up at the tollgate at Thorpe End and, in his state of extreme inebriation, refused to pay the toll to enter the town. Having been challenged over his refusal, he came across a pot of red paint and proceeded to paint the toll keeper, a local constable and a good deal of the town red.

As those wonderful stories show, the two constants in Melton Mowbray's history are our agricultural and culinary way of life and the extraordinary people who make up our town and borough. Melton Mowbray is a uniquely wonderful, welcoming and generous place, alive with British history, traditions and values and a people proud to feed our country. I will speak much of our farming heritage this evening, but Meltonians are honest and fair people, full of common sense, deeply passionate about our communities and caring for our neighbours.

I secured this debate because on my election I promised to give the people of Melton peace of mind; to create opportunity for us and give our town every chance to succeed; and to deliver a local economy that raises the standards of living for everybody—a fair economy that guarantees that everyone matters and no one is left behind. Like much of the east midlands, Melton Mowbray has been left behind. Through this debate and by working with the Government, I hope to change that, so I shall make the case that DEFRA should open an office in Melton Mowbray.

Melton deserves the chance to succeed. Our town has been identified by the Government as a town ready for levelling up and investment, and we are a tier 2 priority area in the levelling-up fund. Even though we have a strong manufacturing base, our average wages are lower than the national average and not in line with house prices. We are the key centre for regeneration and growth identified in the whole of Leicester and Leicestershire, yet too often we lose out.

The east midlands has the lowest levels of public investment of any region in the United Kingdom. Because of the way the local government funding formula is calculated, both Leicestershire and Rutland suffer from under-investment as rural areas, despite the fact that it costs so much more to deliver services in rural areas. For example, if Leicestershire County Council was funded at the same level as Surrey, it would have an additional £104 million to support the people of Leicestershire. The east midlands also hosts only 5% of the civil service, which is the lowest level in the country apart from Northern Ireland, and only 1% of those civil servants are at the senior civil service level, which is again the lowest level outside Northern Ireland.

Too often, policy is detached from our communities and from the industries and people for whom our civil service regulates and makes policy. It is clear that the east midlands does not have a loud enough voice in policy making, and it is against that backdrop that I am pushing for a DEFRA office in the Borough of Melton. On every score, this project is right for the places for growth programme, right for the country and—it goes without saying—right for the east midlands and for Melton.

I argue that DEFRA needs Melton Mowbray, too, because we need to make rural policy in our agricultural heartlands, not just on Marsham Street, surrounded by the white buildings of Westminster. We should not be reliant on field visits by policy officials to see our incredible countryside and meet farmers and environmentalists.

[Alicia Kearns]

Surely we want DEFRA officials to work from offices where they can see from their window a thriving breeding-sheep auction, as they reflect on sheep welfare, biodiversity or environmental management; where they can pick up lunch from the farmers' market or town food stalls and meet workers from food factories in local cafes and shops; and where green fields abound.

I have heard it said that two cities are in contention for DEFRA's office outside London. I urge the Minister to consider the message that it sends when even our rural policy is set from cities. DEFRA plays a huge role in setting agricultural and food policy for the entire UK, so there is surely nowhere better to call home than the rural capital of food. This Government believe that putting policy makers closer to the experience of farmers, food makers and land stewards will create a more joined-up farm-to-fork environment for policy development and its real-world impact. I agree, so let me set out our offer.

We are an agricultural powerhouse and major food-production economy. Our countryside in Rutland and Melton alone has more than 100 farms of every type—arable, sheep, pig, poultry, beef and even bison. Nearby Rutland is a major centre for bird life and hosts the annual Glastonbury of bird-life festivals. Melton is home to one of the oldest and largest town-centre livestock markets in the country, with everything from alpacas to sheep to cows to peacocks to horses on sale, depending on the market that day. We also host the national traditional and native breeds show.

In Melton, the rate of employment in food and drink-related manufacturing is significantly higher than the national average, with around 3,000 people employed in the sector in 2017. Two thirds of our manufacturing is food related, and Melton was one of the first food enterprise zones in the UK. The Minister will forgive me for tempting to strike awe with my exhaustive list, but here are some of the household brands and outstanding food producers to which Melton is home. Samworth Brothers owns and produces Ginsters pasties, Soreen, Melton Mowbray pork pies; owns the West Cornwall Pasty Company; and is one of the largest sandwich providers for supermarkets in the UK. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mars Petcare owns Pedigree, Whiskas and Royal Canin, and its Waltham Petcare Science Institute is the UK's leading scientific authority on pet nutrition. Belvoir Fruit Farms makes the best elderflower pressé in the world and would be happy to stock Parliament at any time. The famous Long Clawson dairy makes outstanding cheeses, such as Stilton, Rutland Red and many more, and the Arla factory makes even more standout cheeses. Round Corner Brewing has won more global gold medals for its beer than any other brewery in the world over the last three years, including "best lager" in 2019—that might pique your attention, Mr Speaker.

The incredible Brentingby Gin distillery makes outstanding award-winning gins. It stepped up during the pandemic, and rolled out sanitiser for free to care homes across Melton. We have Nice Pies and Brockleby's pies, and the first-class Cidentro cider house. We are even the leading producers of paneer cheese, and of tofu for the Japanese restaurant market. Food is in our blood, and food heritage is who we are. Melton is the Rural

Capital of Food, and our town hosts the national pie awards, the largest cheese fair in England—it concluded this week—a chocolate festival, and the East Midlands food festival. Civil servants would never find themselves short of the highest quality food celebrations.

Our offer extends beyond our existing farming economy. If DEFRA were to open an office in Melton, we could offer educational opportunities to support civil servants. Brooksby Melton College in Melton is an exceptional specialist land-based college, with an agritech centre, commercial farm, rural catering centre and even a quarry. It is an outstanding college. Nearby Loughborough University offers agriculture and related sciences courses for policy officials to undertake. Nottingham University is not that far away, with Sutton Bonington campus for veterinary sciences, one of the leading centres for veterinary medicine in the UK.

Not only does Melton Mowbray have a vibrant food manufacturing and agricultural economy and educational offer, we also have the Vale of Belvoir, which was mentioned in the landscapes review as a potential area of outstanding natural beauty. We are a leading light for diversification of farming and environmental stewardship. We have one of the largest abattoirs in the country, and we have an area rich in environmental leadership. Indeed, it is little known that it was in my constituency that Sir David Attenborough developed his love of fossils. There is much to be explored, and we cover many of DEFRA's policy areas.

But it is not just in policy terms where Melton excels. Let me get down to brass tacks, and the practicalities of our offer. We offer an unbeatable location. Melton lies in the centre of the country, and meets the connectivity, space and logistical needs that the Government have outlined to me. In particular I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Lord Agnew, and the Environment Secretary for the wise words of encouragement they have given me on this subject.

By car, Melton is within two and half hours of 80% of the country. It is just off the A1, with easy access to the M1. It is 20 minutes to Loughborough, 25 minutes to Leicester, 40 minutes to Nottingham, and 40 minutes to Peterborough. By train, London is only an hour and a half away. People can get to Birmingham in an hour and Cambridge in an hour and a half. East Midlands airport is 30 minutes away, as well as Stansted and Birmingham airports. People can go anywhere they need to get to.

Melton offers an ideal place to work for people across six different counties. I find it hard to believe that anywhere else in the country could offer employment to people from that many counties: Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Rutland, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire are all within striking distance. Some would even include Derbyshire, if I can extend to seven counties. This is an opportunity to create rural jobs for rural people.

There are many hundreds of rural villages within a 30-minute drive of Melton Mowbray across Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Rutland and Lincolnshire. Indeed, I represent almost 160 villages in Rutland and Melton alone, all of which are looking for high-quality rural jobs close to home. There is a semicircle of nearby cities that already host civil service offices. It is the perfect opportunity for civil servants to go between different Departments and gain skills.

We are ideally located, and we even have office space ready to be occupied. Both Melton Borough Council and Pera Business Park could house between 500 and 2,500 civil servants almost immediately. Pera has 129,000 square feet already ready, and it would design the office space around the needs of the civil service. Both those sites are in the centre of our town. They overlook the livestock market, town market and train station.

It is also important that the home of DEFRA's new office offers an outstanding quality of life to civil servants and policy makers. In 2020 *The Sunday Times* announced that Melton Mowbray was one of the best places to live in the whole of the UK, so Members will forgive me if I take up the challenge of listing as many things as I can, as quickly as I can. In Melton, we have hundreds of outstanding pubs, including the Anne of Cleves, the Stag and Hounds in Burrough on the Hill and, nearby in Rutland, the Olive Branch in Clipsham, which is this year's best pub in the entire country; Twinlakes, a wonderful children's theme park that my son adores; excellent state and independent schools; a thriving local market and amazing independent shops such as Luna Rayn; vintage classic car nights on Fridays; the award-winning Eye Kettleby Lakes; Ragdale Hall, one of the best spas in the country and one that I will make it to at some point; an iron age hill fort in Burrough on the hill; Belvoir castle, where "The Crown" is filmed, which has an incredible diary of events from fireworks competitions to re-enactments of the civil war and a fabulous shopping and dining offer at the engine rooms; 140 acres of lakes, trails and children's play areas right in the centre of Melton country park; the stand-out Ferneley's farm ice cream, which people travel miles to enjoy; Vine Farm Dairy's milk shed, which is secretly stocked with amazing cakes that I am sure have no calories in them at all; phenomenal garden centres such as Gates—we all know the British people love a garden centre—Melton theatre, with panto when it reopens; and fantastic sports facilities for all the family, from flying across the sky to the two new 3G football pitches that are being built. The pork pie army at Melton Town football club are always looking for more fans, and I am confident that they would welcome civil servants heartily. Of course, we also have nearby Rutland offering incredible outdoor sports on the famous Rutland water.

Those are just some of the things that saw Melton voted the happiest place to live in Leicestershire, with life satisfaction levels at an all-time high. There are so many more amazing businesses and people that I wish I could mention. Melton would be delighted and well-equipped to keep the DEFRA team filled and fuelled with cheese, pork pies, beer, gin and outstanding food and drink alongside the most beautiful countryside, an outstanding quality of life and some of the warmest people in our country.

When I proposed DEFRA's potential move to Melton, I could never have expected the extraordinary outpouring of support from every corner of the community. Institutions and people from every walk of life, from our borough council to farmers, businesses and local religious leaders, have all stepped forward and said, "Yes, this is the opportunity for Melton. This is the right one. We would not ask for any other Department to come to Melton. DEFRA is in our blood. It is the right thing to come to us."

I pay tribute too to all the MPs who would have come to the Chamber this evening, had I been able to join you in person, Mr Speaker—unfortunately, I was pinged by that pesky app. I thank in particular my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), who have all stood behind the proposal and agree that it would bring jobs for their residents. They recognise that the east midlands would benefit from DEFRA coming to Melton. They want those jobs, they know it makes sense, and they know it would offer opportunities for their areas, too.

For too long, Departments have been detached from those they seek to represent, support and regulate. That is what our Government have set out to change. By opening an office in Melton, DEFRA would have the chance to be closer than ever before to every aspect of its work—except perhaps fishing. The Secretary of State may make a pitch to open an office down in Cornwall—or in Scotland—and I would fully accept that alongside Melton Mowbray being the core hub outside London. Policy makers could work in the most beautiful part of the country in a wonderful town, with the Vale of Belvoir and Rutland on their doorstep and with the full backing of the local community.

If we are trying to connect parts of the country and Government in ways that augment the Government's ability to develop policy while boosting local economic growth, there is simply nowhere better for DEFRA to find a new home than Melton borough. The people of Melton need these jobs. They need policy roles. We are experts in agriculture, but we do not have such policy roles in our community. We have people who want to find senior roles, but those roles do not exist. This move could provide them.

The people of Melton are welcoming and generous, and I know that they are waiting with open arms to offer a new home for the hardworking members of our civil service. They are waiting to do their part in this programme of national renewal. They are waiting to offer DEFRA a new home. They are waiting to take up the employment opportunities that it would bring. They are waiting for this to transform our town, and they are waiting to see rural policy made from the rural heart of our nation. They are waiting for the Government to say yes. I very much hope that the Minister will visit—and that you will visit, Mr Speaker—to see the amazing potential that our wonderful town holds and the home that it could offer to the Department and employees alike.

The people of Melton are offering an open hand. I hope that the Government will step forward and, in taking their hand, revolutionise rural policy making in our country and prove that they will level up not just cities but our rural communities as well. That starts with Melton Mowbray.

Mr Speaker: That was a very passionate speech, and how could I not take up the offer to visit? I just say that Handley's, Bowen's and Hall's pies in Chorley might give you a little run for your money. I certainly know that Cuckoo gin and Rivington beers will be there as well. But I want to hear from the Minister; I think the case has been very well put.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker. I feel a trip coming on, perhaps as a duo—don't you?

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing this debate, making such an impressive case for her constituency, and indeed speaking up for her constituents. She is such a champion and a great voice in this place. I am genuinely sorry that she is not here in person tonight, but we know the reason for that. However, she is no less passionate for being on the screen.

I do welcome the suggestion of Melton Mowbray being a possible location for DEFRA and I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's proposals. What a rosy picture she paints of Melton Mowbray, perhaps, Mr Speaker, even rivalling Chorley in Lancashire and Taunton Deane in Somerset. There is no doubting that Melton Mowbray is a hub for both agriculture and food production. My hon. Friend listed a huge range of products, including, of course, the famous pork pies and Stilton cheese. I must say that I am rather partial to a bit of Stilton myself. I did not realise, though, that it is where afternoon tea was conceived. There is such a list of mouthwatering food businesses there that I am slightly fearful for the waistlines of any DEFRA staff in future. We will have to think carefully about that and bring in some exercise regimes alongside.

I know that my hon. Friend has already raised this with the Secretary of State, so she is leaving no stone, or pork pie, unturned. The Government have committed to moving 22,000 civil servants out of London by 2030 under our Places for Growth programme, as I am sure she knows. This is an important part of our plans to level up all parts of the country. She quite clearly touched on levelling up.

The DEFRA group has a clear purpose: to safeguard and enhance our natural environment; to support our food, farming, fisheries and forestry industries; and to sustain rural communities and protect against flooding, animal and plant diseases, and other natural threats. This means that our work is truly nationwide: for example, maintaining flood defences from Skegness to Totnes; visiting farms from Malvern to Melton; protecting our critical national infrastructure; and improving our rural and urban environments in all quarters of the country.

DEFRA is actually already highly geographically dispersed owing to our operating model. Our UK-wide footprint enables close proximity to our customers and stakeholders and underpins our emergency response role. The DEFRA group has 200 locations across the country—I think my hon. Friend will agree that is a significant number—and 85% of DEFRA staff are already based outside London. All our arm's-length bodies are headquartered outside London and are deliberately rooted in places where they are close to the communities we serve and accessible to local labour markets with the skills we need. I am sure she will be aware that the new Office for Environmental Protection has just been located in Worcester, which is exactly the sort of rural place that she is raising the case for. Proximity to the correct and most useful kind of skilled labour force was one of the key things that made that a suitable place. Obviously, there were others, and all the right boxes had to be ticked, but that was one of the issues, as she mentioned.

We now have an opportunity to further strengthen our connection with communities across the country, supporting the levelling-up agenda by having more staff outside London. The east midlands is an important area for DEFRA and our delivery bodies. We currently have over 1,200 staff in the region representing the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Rural Payments Agency and the Animal and Plant Health Agency. At present, there are six DEFRA sites within 30 miles of Melton Mowbray—in Leicester, Derby, Rothley and Sutton Bonington, and with two in Nottingham. Together, they accommodate more than 400 staff from our core Department and delivery bodies. That provides a sound foundation on which to grow our presence in the area, and potentially we can consider Melton Mowbray as a future location for expansion.

Looking slightly further east, we have an even greater footprint across East Anglia, including a cluster of key offices in Peterborough, soon to consolidate into the new Government hub in Peterborough, and two of our delivery bodies—the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee—are headquartered in the east of England. DEFRA is committed to maintaining a strong presence in the east midlands, and we are keen to explore opportunities to connect with our customers and communities in the region.

Melton Mowbray is a key part of our rural economy and agricultural supply chain, as my hon. Friend highlighted, with assets including the Melton agricultural college, numerous major food producers and the food enterprise zone. I commend the work that my hon. Friend has done with the all-party parliamentary group on geographically protected foods. Of course, Melton Mowbray is home to two geographical indications that have already been mentioned—the world-famous pork pies and Stilton. The people and businesses of Melton Mowbray are exactly the customers DEFRA serves daily, so it is right to consider whether more could be done to bring more of DEFRA's public service closer to the communities it serves in Melton Mowbray and places like it. Of course, we must weigh up value for money, the office space available, local labour markets and proximity to stakeholders, along with many other factors.

The Government are committed to making sure that all Departments are looking beyond London, and DEFRA will play a leading role in that effort, ensuring we do our part to level up all parts of the country. My hon. Friend makes a very sound point: levelling up really needs to include rural towns too. I come from a not dissimilar area, and I think she makes a very important point. She also raises the attractive proposition of how lovely it would be for staff to wander out in that amazing market town and see the livestock market in action. I have spent a great deal of time in livestock markets. My husband was an agricultural auctioneer. There is something unique about those places, so I was captivated by the picture she painted of her livestock auction and the myriad things it sells.

I have asked my officials to include Melton Mowbray as a potential location for a new DEFRA office. It will be considered with all other options, and will be subject to the usual disciplines, such as securing value for money, and all the criteria that will have to fit the DEFRA operating model.

On that note, I shall conclude. I thank my hon. Friend for her stellar performance on Zoom and for her work to identify viable options for DEFRA in Melton Mowbray. I really do look forward to discussing this further.

Mr Speaker: We look forward to our joint visit.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 19 July 2021

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Cervical Screening

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

4.30 pm

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Hon. Members will be aware that social distancing is no longer in operation. I remind hon. Members that Mr Speaker has encouraged us all to wear masks. I also remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the hybrid arrangements that we have today. I remind colleagues participating both physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the debate, as I think they have today, and Members are expected to remain for the entire debate, please.

I must also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to each other and to those of us here in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address, which is westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should still clean their places when they leave, to ensure that other hon. Members can come into a place that is clean.

4.31 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 317336, relating to cervical screening.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard, for this really important debate. I apologise for not being able to be there in person today, but I thank the House for these hybrid proceedings because I was pinged last week.

I will begin by putting on the record my huge thanks to Caitlin, who is Fiona's sister, for speaking to me last week about Fiona's case and the way that it has affected her whole family. I also thank Fiona's friends, Melissa Macdonald and Niamh Foley, who started the petition, and all those who have signed it, which led to this debate being held today.

As a woman, I know that we all sort of dread getting the call-up for our smear test. For most women, it is not painful, but it is uncomfortable and awkward. What can someone even chat about when the nurse is having her little look? But why should it be like that? We have all been there; the nurse has seen it all before. It is just not spoken about, so we feel a sense of shame about it. It is time we stopped being so coy about it, because that may well persuade more women to go for screening and ultimately it may save lives.

Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers in women under 35, and 99.7% of cervical cancers are caused by human papillomavirus, or HPV. In recent

years, testing for HPV has meant that it is easier to identify who is at greater risk from cervical cancer at the earliest stage.

During covid, England had an attendance rate for smear tests of 72%, which means that more than one in four women are not going for screening when invited to do so. The wonderful charity Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has a number of ideas to increase the uptake of smear tests, and I suggest that the Minister meets it to discuss ways of increasing the number of women being tested; I know that she has a keen interest in women's health.

I was really moved when I spoke to Caitlin, because I got a real sense of how difficult it must be to lose a sister, especially at such a young age. Fiona was only 30 when she died. She was married to Andrew and was the mother of two young children. When Fiona died, Ivy was only four and Harry had just turned two. As Caitlin said, Fiona used all her strength to stick around for Harry's second birthday.

Fiona was called for her first smear test in 2015, but she was pregnant with Ivy and so was told not to go. When she was called again, she was pregnant with Harry, but there was no follow-up to the first appointment. Fiona never received a reminder to go to her smear test in the interim. This situation is not about someone missing appointments when called to attend them; Fiona went to every appointment that she was meant to go to.

Fiona's cancer was finally diagnosed after a routine smear test in 2018. She did not have any symptoms, but there seemed to be a lot of hold-ups and delays before her cancer was diagnosed. Caitlin mentioned that it could perhaps have been because of Fiona and Andrew moving from England to Scotland that Fiona received her first invitation. That raises questions about communications between the devolved Administrations and about what procedures are in place to make sure that communication between different trusts and devolved countries is clear.

A hysterectomy was performed and Fiona then went through chemotherapy and radiotherapy as a belt-and-braces approach to dealing with the cancer. After that, Fiona had a number of visits to A&E, including one where the doctor later admitted that she knew the problem was cancer and not a hernia, but did not say anything as Fiona was seeing a specialist soon after.

Most of us are not medical experts. We rely on doctors to tell us the truth because we do not know what is going on, and that vulnerability is really exposed when we hear such stories. I know it is extremely rare to hear stories such as Fiona's, and the vast majority of our doctors, nurses and other health service staff really care, but it is shocking none the less.

Before covid hit, cancer services were already struggling due to severe staff shortages. Despite the incredible efforts by staff, a backlog has built up. Relying on current staff, who again have not had a pay rise, to clear the backlog on top of delivering regular services will only lead to burnout. It is just not sustainable. Research from Macmillan Cancer Support in 2017 showed that 2,500 specialist cancer nurses were needed to maintain cancer services. By 2030, we will need 3,700 new nurses—an increase of 124% on 2017 levels. Those figures will also have been hugely impacted by the pandemic. The Government have come forward with their own cancer workforce strategy, which is inadequate, and I implore

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

the Minister to reconsider the plans that they have and come up with something that will really help those living with cancer.

Everything that happened to Fiona came before the pandemic hit last year. We have heard countless times about the delays in diagnosis and treatment that the last 16 months has caused. Approximately 1.5 million smear tests take place every year. With the pressure on the NHS since March 2020, that could mean 1.5 million women missing out on a vital tool in diagnosing cervical cancer.

We know that the rates of covid infection are on the up. Hospitalisations for covid are rising, and some NHS trusts across the UK are already cancelling operations as they are at capacity. The recklessness of so-called “freedom day” in England and the removal of all the measures that have been in place to keep us safe is therefore unbelievable. Putting the immunosuppressed at risk, such as those going through cancer treatment, is downright dangerous, and I am glad that the devolved nations have taken a more cautious approach.

What will the extra pressure on the health service mean? Another delay in getting a smear test. And what will that do to the outcomes for so many young women? What will the Government do to make sure that those women who miss out are not left behind, and to stop a knock-on effect on testing? We are looking at new ways forward. Fiona’s case has highlighted some of the gaps that were there before the pandemic started, and things have only deteriorated since covid hit. We must work together to make sure that cancer services are the best that they can possibly be, and that our cancer workforce is protected and given all the tools that it needs to continue to save lives.

When Fiona got really ill, her daughter Ivy used to ask why mummy had to spend so much time in bed. To stop another family having to answer those questions, I want the Minister to answer the questions that Fiona’s family and friends, and all of those who have lost someone to cervical cancer, need answers to. What procedures are in place to make sure that women like Fiona do not fall through the cracks? How does that work across the devolved nations? What is the current screening backlog? What plans to increase the cancer workforce are currently in place?

Caitlin finished our meeting by saying that any change that could come from this debate—if one life is saved, or if one family does not have to go through what her family have been through—would make it worth it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I call John Lamont, I have to say that even though the attendants have been fantastic in helping with the air conditioning, it is still very warm, so if hon. Members want to remove jackets, they should feel free.

4.39 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard.

I am pleased to speak in today’s important date, which has attracted so much support from my constituents in the Scottish borders, with almost 3,000 signatures

coming from Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk—the highest number across the United Kingdom. This can be explained by the fact that the petition was launched by borderer Andrew Mathewson, who lives in Kelso, in my constituency. As we have heard, Andrew tragically lost his wife Fiona, mother of Ivy and Harry, when she died after battling cervical cancer for 17 months, aged just 30.

I have met Andrew, and I admire the way that he has campaigned tirelessly for cervical cancer screening, in memory of Fiona, and dedicated his work to ensure that other families do not go through what they had to. Fiona’s story is close to the hearts of many people in the Scottish borders who know the Mathewsons, and indeed many people far beyond and across the country, with over 146,000 signatures recorded in total for the petition.

The NHS and this policy area are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and my comments will have a distinctive Scottish slant. Around 850 women die from cervical cancer each year in the UK. Sadly, that is more than two women every day. Yet cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers for two key reasons. First, cervical screening tests check for abnormal changes in sample cells from the cervix. Cervical screening is not a test for cancer, but early detection allows action to be taken to prevent cervical cancer from developing.

Second, the HPV jab is on offer to every child between 12 and 14 in Scotland. For girls, it is designed to protect against types of HPV that cause around 70% of all cases of cervical cancer in Scotland. In most people, HPV does not cause harm and the infection clears on its own, but in some cases HPV infection can lead to cell changes that progress into cervical cancer. Taken together, cervical screening and the HPV vaccine mean that cervical cancer can be avoided.

Cancer Research UK has stated that cervical screening is the best protection against cervical cancer, yet in Scotland it is offered far less frequently than in the rest of the UK. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, women between 25 and 49 are screened every three years, but women in Scotland face a five-year wait between each screening. Over the past year, some women were notified that their waiting time of five years would be extended as NHS Scotland rightly diverted time and resources to tackling covid-19. However, I am pleased that the resumption of cancer services, including cervical screening, is now being treated as a priority by NHS Scotland.

Alarmingly, this transparency from NHS Scotland was not mirrored by the Scottish Government, who failed to reveal that a number of women had developed cervical cancer after being wrongly excluded from the screening programme following a hysterectomy. One of those women tragically died. The SNP Government were made aware of the errors back in a December audit, but waited until the last day before the summer recess to reveal the scale of the problem to the Scottish Parliament.

This debate is not about party political point scoring, but it would be wrong of me not to highlight the concerns of anxious women, their families and the wider public, who were left in the dark by Scottish Ministers who prioritised their political campaign and attempted to avoid scrutiny. These serious errors have affected hundreds of women, with more cases potentially still to be identified.

The crux of this debate on cervical screening is about the opportunity to reduce the number of women who tragically die from cervical cancer. In my closing remarks, I would like to address some ways in which we can reduce this number of preventable deaths. Evidence shows that the women most likely not to attend a cervical screening appointment are those between the ages of 25 and 34. Yet the evidence also indicates that cervical cancer is the most common cancer in women in this age group. Awareness needs to be raised among women. There is a real incentive to ensure that resources are dedicated to this cause, since cervical cancer can be prevented.

One method that has been trialled in London has involved GPs sending text messages about cervical screening appointments, instead of relying on sending letters through the post. Stigma also needs to be addressed: personal barriers such as lack of knowledge about the purpose and benefits of the test, as well as fear and anxiety about the procedure itself, can play a role in women not attending their appointments. Finally, the Scottish Government should listen to the worries of some Scottish women, who say that they are concerned that they would develop cervical cancer within the five years and just would not know about it.

I end by again paying tribute to Andrew Mathewson and his family and friends, who have been at the forefront of this petition and have ensured that we are debating this important issue today. Andrew continues to selflessly battle on behalf of women he does not even know so that fewer families will have to lose a wife, a mother, a sister or a daughter to this cancer.

4.45 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Pritchard, and I am incredibly grateful to be called to speak in this debate on a topic that, as colleagues may know, is extremely close to my heart. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont).

Fiona's story is tragically similar to so many other women's stories across the country, and my thoughts and condolences are with the whole Mathewson family. As elected representatives, we have the great fortune of being able to speak up on a huge range of the issues that matter most to the people who live in our local communities. It is a fantastic privilege, and one that is not at all lost on me, but there are still certain debates that speak to us as people, not just as politicians. I will always be a vocal and loud champion of cervical screenings, and I am grateful that we are taking the time to speak about this important issue today.

We know that cervical screenings are the best way to protect against cervical cancer: the numbers speak for themselves. Indeed, cervical screenings can prevent more than seven in 10 diagnoses. Those who know me well will know that I speak about cervical screenings whenever and wherever I possibly can, mostly because a delayed cervical screening changed my life almost overnight. Like many others, I put off having my first cervical screening at the age of 25 for all the usual reasons: I was too busy, I did not have the symptoms, and I simply had other priorities. After many conversations with friends, most of whom gave me a good telling-off when I shamefully revealed that my screening had been delayed, I booked my appointment and thought nothing more of it.

While most of us will agree that cervical screening is probably not up there with our top 10 favourite things to do on a morning, the test itself is relatively quick and simple, but as many of us will know, the wait for the results—for that NHS letter arriving on our doorstep—can feel genuinely endless. In my opinion, it is the hardest part about being tested.

Fast forward to a few months after the screening, and I was sat in my local hospital undergoing a colposcopy after my initial test results came back abnormal and further examinations were required. I was genuinely terrified. Everyone had told me that a routine screening was nothing to be concerned about: that it would just be five minutes of awkward conversation with the nurse at my local GP practice, and it would be job done for the next three years in Wales. Sadly, that was not the case for me. I was told that I had abnormal CIN 3 cells that, if left undetected and untreated over a number of years, could develop into cervical cancer. We always think it will not happen to us, but there I was at the age of 25, diagnosed with CIN 3 on a large area of my cervix.

The next few weeks were a complete blur. I became obsessed with googling everything I could about abnormal cells, potential treatment and cervical cancer. I became a prolific poster on, and reader of, the excellent Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust forum, and I found comfort in talking to others who had gone through, or were going through, exactly the same thing. Thankfully, the staff at my local hospital were incredible, and almost immediately I underwent LLETZ—large loop excision of the transformation zone—treatment to burn off the abnormal cells on my cervix. I went to that appointment alone. It was one of the most surreal moments of my life and one that, try as I might, I will never forget. After the doctor had finished—which felt like an eternity at the time—she did not look happy. More treatment was needed. She told me that on closer inspection, the abnormal cells on my cervix were embedded deeper and looked more challenging than initially expected. I will never forget those words.

The next stage for me was a cold knife biopsy. Thankfully that minor operation went smoothly, and a few weeks later I got the call that I had desperately hoped for: the clinicians were confident that all the abnormal cells had been removed. The damage was quite severe, and if I had put off that initial cervical screening test any later, the situation would have been very different. The extent of the treatment meant that I was now without the majority of my cervix. Of course, having that treatment comes with risks, such as a slightly increased chance of giving birth prematurely, but by that point I did not really care: I just wanted the nightmare to be over.

I was without the majority of my cervix, but my life was saved. Sadly, for many—as we have heard, tragically, in Fiona's case—that is not the case, and I count my lucky stars that my friends gave me the push I needed to book my cervical screening when they did. After receiving treatment, I attended screenings every six months to ensure the abnormal cells did not return. Even now, years down the line, my screenings are more common than most, and I go on an annual basis.

It would be wrong of me to pretend that I have not been impacted on by the ordeal I went through. The physical scars might be internal, but I will always grapple with the mental effects. Even years on, I still get that nervous feeling in my stomach before I go to my screening.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

However, we have all seen the numbers—my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) touched on them in her opening remarks—and we all recognise the devastation that cancer, in its myriad forms, can have on those suffering and on their close friends and family. It goes without saying that we should be doing everything we can to protect those who may be particularly at risk of developing cervical cancer, and regular cervical screenings are absolutely key if more lives are to be saved.

Although I am pleased to say that there has been progress on specific incentives to encourage more people to attend their screenings, cell changes such as mine often fall through the gaps, along with HPV. HPV diagnosis is still associated with high levels of fear, confusion and stigma and a lack of understanding, despite it being an incredibly common virus. Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust recently surveyed its community of users who have HPV and found that one in two people said they knew nothing about HPV prior to receiving a diagnosis. Interestingly, people with recurrent or persistent HPV report feeling let down by their bodies and anxious about the ongoing and uncertain nature of the condition, and they often feel that there is no support or information for them either. There is clearly a need for increased education when the vaccine is first given, greater awareness of how common it is and how it affects the body, and greater information and support for those affected.

The same goes for cell changes such as mine. Around 220,000 women each year will be told that they have cell changes, and many will be treated to prevent the potential development of cervical cancer. There are opportunities to improve the care that is offered. We know that treatment for cell changes is highly effective at preventing the development of cervical cancer, the impact of which can be truly devastating, but more must be done to ensure that women diagnosed with cell changes are properly supported before, during and after treatment. Research from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust found that 20% of women said the possible impacts and side-effects of treatment were not explained to them beforehand. Even more shockingly, 60% were not told about the different types of treatment that were available to them. It is clear that although progress has thankfully been made on the dialogue around cervical screenings, we still have a long way to go to change the situation more broadly.

I am hopeful that today's debate will send a reminder to those who, like me, put off their cervical screenings. I also hope that by touching on issues such as HPV and cell changes, people can learn about the broader benefits of screening too. Although health is of course devolved to the fantastic Welsh Labour Government, I truly believe that this is an issue that crosses the political divide. Indeed, I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the work that she is doing, including across Government Departments and the devolved nations, to encourage better understanding of the widespread benefits of cervical screening.

4.52 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and an honour to speak in this important debate. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon.

Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and hear her personal story. I am sure we are all glad to see her today.

The petition is a proposal to introduce yearly cervical screenings for all women. As we have heard, the campaign for Fiona's law was launched after the untimely death of 30-year-old mum Fiona from Kelso in the Scottish borders. Cervical screening is unequivocally the best method of protection against cervical cancer, and I think I speak for us all when I say that I hope to see greater uptake of screening. Unfortunately, prior to the pandemic one in four women across the UK did not accept their invitation for screening. The figure is higher in areas such as London and Glasgow, among women under 30 years of age, and among groups who face additional systemic barriers to their attendance—for example, this issue disproportionately affects LGBTQ people, with 40% of lesbian and bisexual women in the UK having been told that they do not require cervical screening. Experience of trauma or violence can also deter women from attending, with 72% of women who have experienced sexual violence delaying or cancelling their appointments.

Most clinicians would largely disagree with the proposal to make cervical screening annual. The UK National Screening Committee sets the eligibility criteria for screening programmes and makes recommendations about changes in order to maximise the benefits and minimise harm. Cervical screening starts at the age of 25, not 18, as HPV is very rare in younger women, with fewer than four cases per 100,000, due to the high uptake of the HPV vaccine. Around 90% of HPV infections are cleared naturally by the body in two years, and many cell changes return to normal without the need for treatment. Research generally suggests that a lower screening age does not substantially reduce cases and can in fact lead to over-treatment, which can have serious implications for physical and mental health, including on the ability to carry a child to term.

A more viable option for increasing the uptake of cervical screening would be to roll out widespread HPV self-sampling, which would allow women to enjoy the comfort and convenience of performing the test in their own homes. Research by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust suggests this would greatly increase uptake, with 47% of women who rarely or never book a test preferring self-sampling to clinician-led screening. Only 9% preferred clinician-led screening, while 50% of women who are overdue for an appointment and 34% of women from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds also preferred self-sampling. Some 63% of those living with a physical disability have noted that their disability made it impossible for them to attend screening. Making self-sampling possible would put the screening process into women's own hands.

For that to be recommended by the UK National Screening Committee, far more research into this procedure is required. At the moment, only a few pilot schemes are being run: one in Scotland, in Dumfries and Galloway, and another in London. It is essential that progress on these vital studies continues. It would be helpful to know whether the UK Government plan to increase support for such schemes, to accelerate studies into the viability of HPV self-sampling nationwide, and to give an estimate of when the necessary research will be collected by NHS England.

While annual cervical screening may not be realistically viable or desirable, we can take concrete steps to ensure that access is widened, risk is adequately assessed and appointments are not missed. I hope the Department of Health and Social Care will take on some of these considerations, especially with regard to advancing the research into, and roll-out of, home HPV self-sampling.

4.57 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to follow the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who spoke with great passion about this crucial issue. Cervical cancer is something that all women fear. It is not only a deadly disease but one, like breast cancer, that strikes at the heart of how we view ourselves as women.

The petition that we are discussing on Fiona's law received more than 146,000 signatures, with many from my constituents. That figure represents a groundswell of people who are concerned that not enough is being done to ensure detection of cervical cancer for women in the UK. We cannot ignore them. To detect cervical cancer early, we have developed highly accurate screening tests that enable women to know whether they have pre-cancerous cells, and if so, to receive the proper treatment. In fact, women will be tested for HPV before they get cervical screening, because 99.7% of all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. Simply put, thanks to our researchers and all the medical professionals across our NHS, tests for cervical cancer are more accurate than ever before.

There is much debate in this country about how early and how frequently women should be screened for cervical cancer, but women are only able to have their cancer detected if the screenings are successfully performed. Research on how often women access existing appointments should give us real cause for concern. We all know that the pandemic has had devastating effects on women's ability to access life-saving cervical cancer screening. Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust estimates that around 600,000 tests failed to go ahead in the UK in April and May 2020, and figures show that cancer screening for women in the 25-to-64 age group—the most vulnerable age group—decreased by nearly 7% from the previous year. These figures are completely unacceptable and show that the recent physical barriers to screening have a strong negative impact on women's access to preventive services.

However, figures also show an equally strong mental impact. Unfortunately, this life-saving smear test remains a source of great anxiety to many. Earlier this year, it emerged that around one in four women eligible for smear tests do not take up the invitation. New research has found that, among those who do not go for their cervical cancer screening, 75% are scared at the thought of going and 81% are embarrassed to go.

The Government must do more to create public awareness about the test. They must normalise it, so that women do not feel embarrassed to seek this vital service, and bust other myths that induce anxiety about it. Perhaps most worryingly, Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has published a study that reveals that women from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are twice as likely to be strongly worried about contracting a

virus at their cervical cancer screening as their white counterparts, and a third more likely to feel unsafe visiting a doctors' surgery than white women.

It is vital that the Government look more closely into the cultural and mental barriers preventing black, Asian and minority ethnic women from accessing life-saving screening in much higher proportions. They must dedicate more resources to learning why women, especially those from minority backgrounds, are not taking up their testing appointments. That is crucial to achieving a reproductive health programme that is not only thriving but equal. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on the work that she is doing.

5.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Pritchard, as I often have in this Chamber, and I very much look forward to the Minister's response. I very much look forward to speaking in this debate on cervical cancer screening.

I stand here to speak on behalf of my female constituents, whom this directly affects, and I speak in complete support of the e-petition, which had 146,000 signatures. Cancer is a tragedy that all of us know only too well. I am sure it has touched the lives of everyone in the room today. I am sure the Minister will not mind me saying that she has been directly affected, and we are very pleased to see her here as a survivor.

We must take every necessary step to catch cases sooner rather than later. The petition for Fiona's law applies to women in England. However, I speak on behalf of my constituents and the women of Northern Ireland. It is estimated that some 3,200 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer every year in the UK. Eighty people in Northern Ireland are diagnosed every year, and roughly 20 to 30 of those women will, sadly, pass away from the disease. The Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland has said that early detection and treatment can prevent seven to 10 types of cervical cancer. As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned, Northern Ireland offers screening every two years. I would like to see it done better. I would like to see it every year; that is the best way to do it. The request is for early detection and treatment as the way to prevent cervical cancer.

It is important to remember that screening is not a test for cancer; it is a test to help prevent it. That is what we are trying to do, and that is why, to assist in preventing cervical cancers, we must do more to ensure that women have screening appointments regularly. Current legislation states that women between the ages of 25 and 49 will be invited for screening once every three years, and those aged 50 to 64 every five years. That is in line with the NHS's long-term plan to detect 75% of cancers at stage 1 or 2.

I cannot stress enough the importance of screening appointments for women. First, I can only imagine that it is not a comfortable or easy procedure to go through, but I do believe that the prolonged interval of three years only increases the anxiety. Secondly, yearly screening would allow for more effective diagnosis, but it also provides an opportunity to make a procedure that a lot of women dread having more familiar and comfortable, if that is possible.

[Jim Shannon]

The UK's leading cervical cancer charity, Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, reports that 51% of women admitted to delaying their screening, that 24% delayed for over a year and that 9%, one in 10 women, have never attended a screening. Those are shocking figures, but they are understandable at the same time. These are lives being lost, and because of the frequency of cervical screening it is getting worse.

There needs to be more communication about screening so that people are aware of what they are going into. That would then provide confidence and increase the numbers attending, which would ultimately result in lives saved: more mothers, more daughters, more sisters, more grandmothers and more wives living longer and healthier lives. My wife went through it. She did not for one second wish to go. She found the whole thing very uncomfortable and, honestly, a little embarrassing. Obviously, we encouraged her. My mother encouraged her, and I think that probably helped—from lady to lady is probably better. She went for the tests and got the all clear.

Cancer of all kinds has destroyed lives and families for too long. We must do all we can to increase early diagnosis, as the petition calls for, especially in the light of the impact of the pandemic, which has seen a further decrease in screening figures. We need to get back on our feet and allow women yearly screenings. I urge the Minister to undertake discussions with the UK National Screening Committee to ascertain why it feels that women do not warrant screenings every year.

To anyone who is offered a cervical cancer screening, I say please go. I say to the Government that the encouragement from the Minister will start here. More must be done to get more frequent appointments, more awareness of the benefits and more discussion around the appointment itself, because there is nothing more promising than the prevention of disease.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I call Mike Kane, there has been a slight adjustment to the call list. I will call Dr Philippa Whitford after Mr Kane, and then Alex Norris.

5.6 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Pritchard. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I add my congratulations to the petitioners on securing a debate in Parliament on such an important topic.

In January 2021, the Minister stated:

“While we do not hold waiting lists for National Health Service screening programmes, NHS England...are confident that no one eligible for cervical screening has missed an invitation for an appointment.”

An invitation is one thing, but being able to book and access a test can be quite a different matter. In the third quarter of 2021, no clinical commissioning groups in England achieved 80% coverage of women invited for a test. I am, of course, aware of the pressures placed on the NHS during the pandemic, and my speech does not denigrate it at all, but 600,000 cervical screening opportunities are estimated to have failed to go ahead in the UK just in April and May of last year.

In October 2019, NHS England commissioned an independent review of adult screening programmes. It highlighted that demographic factors—levels of affluence and deprivation, and ethnic diversity—have a huge impact on whether women take up the tests. For women who live in areas with higher levels of deprivation, such as parts of my constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale East, the coverage of screening programmes is lower than average.

Hologic, a fantastic innovative medical technology company in my constituency, focuses primarily on improving women's health and wellbeing. It specialises in high-volume population screening. We know that more than 99% of cervical cancer cases are preventable and that, alongside HPV vaccination, cervical cancer screening is one of the most effective ways to prevent that cancer.

There are opportunities to improve screenings, both for clinicians and for patients, by adopting new innovative screening technologies. One such method is using HPV mRNA testing for primary cervical screening. The tests provide significantly higher clarity and would safely reduce the number of women who require a colposcopy, thereby reducing unnecessary fear, anxiety and stress for the women involved. It would also reduce the pressure on an already overburdened system, save the NHS an estimated £15 million a year, and potentially prevent 30,000 unnecessary colposcopy procedures.

Currently, just 54% of all samples in England are processed using that form of testing, meaning that 1.5 million women in England do not have access to the technology. England should move towards a system in which mRNA HPV primary screening is the gold standard used by all labs. With better co-ordination within NHS England, cervical screening would, for example, be commissioned by the same part of the NHS as colposcopies, enabling clinicians to work more effectively together and have a positive impact on patient experience and outcome.

Another innovative technological advance is digital cytology. This advanced imaging technology, used to identify lesions and pre-cancerous cells, which stores cervical images using cloud-based technology, would help maximise screening capacity, enabling any cytologist with capacity in the network to access a particular image. That would provide a much more flexible deployment of the workforce, would speed up time from result to treatment if necessary, and provide physical efficiencies, such as less need for storage and for the transportation of cervical images and slides.

Rolling out such technologies would save not only money and time, but would, in time, reduce the stress on women and girls at a worrying time, as has been pointed out today, as well as reducing the need for unnecessary gynaecological procedures. It would also provide a streamlining of these lifesaving services. I would welcome any comments that the Minister has about those suggestions.

5.10 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. First, I want to extend my sympathy to Fiona's family and friends, who were moved by her loss to set up the petition in her name. I have seen at first hand the impact of cervical cancer, as one of my friends

lost her beautiful and vibrant daughter at the age of just 28 to this horrible disease. As a breast cancer surgeon for more than 30 years, I know the devastation caused by the death of any young woman.

Before we go further, I want to emphasise that any woman with symptoms of vaginal discharge or bleeding should not wait for a screening appointment, but should go and see her GP. There is usually a simple cause, but it is always important to get checked out.

Although the petition specifically calls for annual cervical smear tests, what we are all actually trying to achieve is the prevention and eventual elimination of cervical cancer, as called for by the World Health Organisation last August. For that we have to understand the cause of cervical cancer, and that is where our knowledge has developed considerably. We know that 99.7% of cervical cancers are caused by high risk strains of human papillomavirus, or HPV, and that is therefore the target of our efforts. This is through a two-pronged strategy, providing protection to the younger generation through vaccination against HPV and using more sensitive polymerase chain reaction testing to detect HPV on cervical smear samples to identify those at increased risk.

The HPV vaccine was introduced for young teenage girls in 2008 and initially included those up to 18 years, so that they would be vaccinated before leaving school. Research from the Scottish cervical screening programme in 2017 reported a reduction in the presence of HPV in the smears of vaccinated women from 30% to 4.5%, and by 2019 demonstrated an 89% fall in grade 3 cervical intraepithelial neoplasia—the cell changes that can evolve into cervical cancer if left untreated. That dramatic reduction in CIN 3 among the first cohort of vaccinated girls gives great hope that we will see a fall in cervical cancer in that age group in the coming years.

The vaccine is now also provided to boys, both to protect them from other HPV-related cancers and to provide additional protection to women by reducing how many men carry HPV in the first place. It is vaccination against HPV that really offers the chance to eliminate this terrible disease by the end of the decade. To achieve that, we need to vaccinate 90% of all teenagers, and our uptake rates have drifted below that level over the past five years. Some of that is likely due to fears that the vaccine was associated with health issues such as chronic fatigue or regional pain syndromes. However, a review by the European Medicines Agency found that those conditions were very common among teenagers generally, and there was no increase among those who had been vaccinated.

To reduce the risk of cervical cancer, we need to get rid of the stigma of HPV and ensure that all women and young people understand its importance in the development of cancer. It is a very common virus, which, in the vast majority of cases, causes no harm and is cleared by the body's own defences, but some strains pose a higher risk of causing malignant change. After vaccination, the other critical approach to preventing cervical cancer is, of course, screening itself, but here too the focus is now on detecting HPV as the driver of cervical changes that can eventually lead to cancer. Classical cytology, which looks for abnormal cells within cervical smears, does not pick up every case, while PCR,

about which we have heard so much during the pandemic, is more sensitive in detecting HPV and identifying the women at higher risk.

The UK National Screening Committee has therefore recommended changing to a two-step testing procedure, with the cervical sample tested for HPV first and then cytology performed on those samples that contain virus. Currently, that is carried out on one sample, which is collected in the traditional way—a clinician having to visualise the cervix directly. If the sample contains HPV, cytology is carried out on the cervical cells. If any changes are found, the patient is referred to a gynaecologist for a colposcopy, where the cervix is examined and biopsied to assess the grade of cell changes.

If the woman is HPV-positive but has no cell changes and therefore would never have been highlighted under the old system, she will undergo repeat screening the following year; if the virus persists after two years, even without cell changes, she will be referred for colposcopy. By focusing on the presence of the virus, women carrying HPV and at higher risk are provided with more intensive follow-up. It is the UK National Screening Committee that has recommended that women who are HPV-negative and therefore at very low risk are offered routine repeat screening every five years, from the ages of 25 to 65. That system has been fully rolled out in Scotland since March last year, but I highlight that the same approach is planned across all four UK nations once the PCR testing and data systems are in place.

Screening remains vital in detecting cervical cancer and its precursors in women who did not have the opportunity to be vaccinated against HPV. But uptake is at a 20-year low, with just over 70% of women attending overall. Attendance is even lower among younger women and those from minority ethnic groups or more deprived communities, as well as among lesbian or transgender people, who may mistakenly think that they are less at risk of HPV infections. The challenge is there for how to engage more women to take part in cervical screening. Changing to annual cervical examination might actually cause more women to withdraw from the programme.

HPV is found in only about 10% of cervical smear tests, so carrying out a simple vaginal swab to test for HPV could reduce the number of women who have to undergo a formal cervical smear with direct visualisation of the cervix. That would avoid the need to use a speculum and reduce the discomfort, which puts some women off taking up future appointments. It would also greatly reduce the difficulties experienced by those with physical or learning disabilities. Indeed, disabled women have been campaigning for years about the fact that those with the greatest physical difficulties often struggle to take part in screening at all.

A team at Dumfries and Galloway health board in Scotland established a trial in 2012 in which over 5,000 women took vaginal swabs themselves as well as getting a formal cervical smear done in the traditional way. That demonstrated both the accuracy and acceptability of this approach and the team is working with the Scottish Government to consider making that part of our routine screening programme. The UK National Screening Committee is still evaluating that approach, but research by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust suggests that

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

this simpler method of sampling could get more women to engage and take up HPV testing as the first step of screening.

The issue is particularly important among groups that currently have a much higher risk of cancer but a lower engagement with a screening programme. NHS England has now begun a trial offering self-administered HPV swabs to 31,000 women in parts of London who have failed to attend their routine appointments. My one gripe with that excellent project was that the publicity and social media around its launch described the tests as self-administered smear tests instead of explaining that they were simple vaginal swabs, which a woman should easily be able to carry out at home. That caused a lot of consternation among women, who wondered how on earth they were meant to ensure that they visualised, or took a sample from, their own cervixes. It could put some off from trying to take the sample in the first place. Describing them as smear tests could also lead someone who is HPV-positive to fail to attend their GP practice for formal assessment, if they are under the mistaken impression that they have already had a cervical smear.

The NHS project in London is designed to engage those who have not taken up their routine invitations, but I hope that simple vaginal swabs to test for HPV will eventually become a routine step available to all women—whether self-administered in the privacy of their own home, or by a clinician in their local GP practice. HPV vaccination holds the potential to drastically reduce the number of young women who are even at risk of cervical cancer, but screening will always be important in order to detect cell changes or early cancer, and all of us need to encourage high uptake of both vaccination and screening. Although I recognise the anguish that led Fiona's family to start the petition, I hope they can see that our understanding of this terrible disease and its cause opens up new and better approaches to eliminating cervical cancer in this coming decade, so that other families do not suffer the loss that they are going through.

5.21 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I would not normally make the Front-Bench contribution for the Opposition virtually, but I am afraid that I, too, have been pinged by the NHS app, so I am beaming in live from Nottingham. I thank my fellow pingee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for securing the debate through her role on the Petitions Committee. The points that she made about testing have been a common thread throughout the debate, but she also mentioned the impact of covid, which I will reflect on shortly.

The petition has received close to 150,000 signatures, which is frankly an incredible effort. As well as showing the strength of feeling on this important topic, it is a physical demonstration of the legacy and impact of young mother Fiona Mathewson, who tragically lost her life to cervical cancer last April, at the age of 30. I send my best wishes to the Mathewson family—Andrew, Harry and Ivy. I lost my father to cancer when I was Harry's age, and I know the impact that it has on a

family. I hope the Mathewson family can take comfort from the incredible campaign that they have run, and from the way that they have been able to turn such awful grief into positive action. It is because of them and because of Fiona that we are here today. I hope they have seen that across the debate all four countries of the UK have been represented with very thoughtful and impressive contributions, starting with their own Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). He mentioned the twin giants of prevention—screening and HPV jabs. I, too, will reflect on those.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) was very generous with her personal experience, and we are glad that it has had the ending that it has had. It might make people watching the debate think about a screening they have missed, whether it relates to their cervical health or otherwise. That is a really important lesson that people have taken from her, and I know that she inspires people in that way.

Important points were also made by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) around health equity, particularly in the lesbian and bisexual community but also around those who suffer from sexual violence. We really must ensure that we tailor our messages and the way we contact people, in order to understand their different circumstances. They may present in different ways or need different support, and we would always want that support to be available to them.

As always, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) brings her experience as a senior oncology pharmacist to the debate. She knows much about the impact of cancer on people's lives and how to design cancer services. When we talk about covid in the cancer space, we generally talk about missed screenings, the backlog or late presentation, but she made an important point about the mental impact. It is hard for me to imagine what it is like to be called for a smear test, but she talked about hurdles getting in the way and said that this is very big hurdle that can make people set it to one side. That point was very well made and linked to what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said about the importance of effective communication.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) talked about the importance of brilliant British science, which is something we have seen clearly over the last 16 or 17 months. We need to back our brilliant British science companies, in order to get the best possible outcomes for ourselves here in Britain, and around the world.

As we have heard, every year in the UK around 3,200 people get cervical cancer and Cancer Research UK estimates that 857 people died of cervical cancer in 2018. While the incidence rates have not fallen significantly in the last two decades, the good news is that mortality rates have continued to fall, especially among older patients. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the mortality rate has dropped from 10 women per 100,000 to approximately 2.5 per 100,000. That is significant progress that has saved the lives of many women.

The NHS cervical screening programme is a huge part of this, with the NHS estimating that it saves 5,000 lives a year, which is truly wonderful. In 2019, HPV primary screening was added to the programme, replacing cytology, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire

(Dr Whitford) said—a major step that the NHS believes has the potential to eliminate cervical cancer by spotting earlier those 14 types in the HPV infection that combine to be the main cause of cervical cancer.

Earlier diagnosis makes such a difference; quite simply, it saves lives. Where the cancer is diagnosed at stage 1 or 2, one-year survival is over 90%, which drops to 75% at stage 3 and 50% at stage 4. Data from the National Cancer Intelligence Network also shows that the cervical cancer three-year relative survival rate is higher among people diagnosed by screening than by any other route. If there is a message to come out of today's debate it is the importance of screening.

We know there is scope to improve in this area. Exciting new advances using mRNA, gene therapy, artificial intelligence, combination therapies, robotics and many more, such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, will transform our care in cancer. As we restore services affected by the pandemic, we should not be looking to restore what we had 18 months ago, but to embrace new developments and build new pathways of care.

On screening frequency, which this petition relates to, cervical screening in England is offered to the cohort aged 25 to 64. While routine screening is now offered every three years up to the age of 49, and every five years between the ages of 50 and 64, the UK National Screening Committee has recommended that for those who test negative for high-risk HPV, the interval can be extended to five years. I understand that this will be implemented once necessary IT developments allow it. Can the Minister confirm when that is likely to be?

I fully sympathise with and appreciate the arguments for more screenings that have been made in the petition. Any lives saved strengthen the case far more than anything I can say, but I strongly believe that it is right that this decision is made by the experts on the UK National Screening Committee and not by us politicians. Where clinical evidence supports their decisions to screen at the intervals they say and not to extend testing to 18-year-olds, which I know there have been calls for, then we support that.

Beyond that, the Government must do more to increase take-up and ensure that all those eligible for a cervical smear test attend their appointments when they are invited or as soon afterwards as possible. We must also ensure that preventive measures, such as the vaccination, get out into secondary schools and are fully taken up. I would be interested to hear the Minister's reflections about further plans to develop this, because we know we are not getting it quite where we want to.

The aim is for 80% of women to access their test, with 75% being considered acceptable. In the year prior to the pandemic, it was 72%, a little bit up from 71.9% the year before. That is not where we want it to be and we must do something different. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower said, the pandemic has worsened the situation.

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust estimates that around 600,000 cervical screenings failed to go ahead in the UK in April and May 2020. NHS England's own data shows that no clinical commissioning group screened over 80% of eligible women in the third quarter of 2021. These numbers are people who could be living either with high-risk HPV or with cancer itself and do not

know it yet. I hope that the Minister will expand on the data to paint a fuller picture of the situation as she sees it and to share with us the steps for how these services will be caught up, so that we can reach those who have missed out.

To conclude, those who raised this petition deserve real commendation for their excellent efforts. I am sorry that perhaps the evidence is not pushing us in the direction that they have encouraged us to take. However, I hope that when Harry and Ivy are teenagers, they might look back on this debate—perhaps wondering why we are all beaming in from different parts of the country, in our own bedrooms or in other rooms in our homes—and see that this was a galvanising moment for politicians to come together across Great Britain and Northern Ireland to improve screening rates and the uptake of the HPV vaccine. I also hope they see that, as we went forward, we embraced improvements in technology and cancer care, and that, as a result, we got more and more brilliant outcomes for women in this country. I hope that when they look back in many years' time, they will be very proud of their role, and the role of their family and their friends, in achieving that.

5.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

First, as I think everybody else has done, I thank those who initiated this petition in Fiona Mathewson's memory, and I join others in extending my sympathy to Andrew, to Ivy, to Harry, to Caitlin and to Fiona's broader family, as well as to the 3,000 individuals in Kelso and across the borders who signed the petition.

Like other hon. Members, for example, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), I know how frightening it is to be given this kind of diagnosis, but I can only imagine the impact on Andrew and the loss that he feels. However, if I may say one thing, it is that this debate today is in itself a huge legacy for Fiona, because we are discussing sensibly what we need to do to help women. We are talking, as many people have said, about something that is often seen as a little bit embarrassing. In response to the points by hon. Members that we must improve take-up, I could not agree more. However, we will not achieve that by not talking about some of the challenges that exist.

Cancer screening is crucial and I thank each and every Member who has shown their support for it and contributed to today's debate. It was eloquently introduced by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), as the Petitions Committee allowed us to have this conversation across the United Kingdom. The simple fact is that screening saves lives and that is why we need to drive uptake. As we have heard, screening can prevent cancer from developing. It can catch cancer earlier and, as we know, the earlier people are diagnosed the better the outcomes, because there is a greater chance that treatment can be successful.

Thanks to the tremendous work of dedicated screening staff up and down the country, the NHS cervical screening programme reaches about 4.6 million women in England every year and currently saves about 5,000 lives. However, we have heard repeatedly that only about 70% of women actually take up the opportunity, for a plethora of reasons.

[Jo Churchill]

If everybody did attend, that number of lives saved would be closer to 7,000. More lives would be saved, so when a woman receives an invitation to attend a screening appointment, I encourage her to go.

As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, if you notice anything amiss, such as bleeding after sexual intercourse, between periods or during menopause, discuss it with a medical professional. Do not wait—it is your body and just treasure it. I say that because screening is one tool, but that knowledge of yourself is another tool that you have to access treatment quickly. NHS services are open, safe and ready to help you. That is another thing that has come through: I want to reinforce the fact that the NHS is open and the services are safe. You must come forward when your invitation for an appointment.

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) talked about some of the challenges faced by the lesbian and bisexual community in accessing appointments, but we also need to recognise some of the challenges faced by our trans community, especially trans men, in accessing appointments. Many of them are not sent reminder letters because of administrative policies at GP services. Will the Minister look into that to ensure that everyone with a cervix who is eligible to attend a screening receives a reminder?

Jo Churchill: Indeed I will. I would be happy to write to the hon. Lady, because I have looked at that issue. If there is a chance that someone may have abnormal cells, they should get them checked out. The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) spoke about making sure that we reach those communities who would not necessarily come forward, for a number of reasons.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) spoke, as several did, about using technology better, and about the challenges of screening and the health inequality that there is in certain communities in access to screening. I have met NHS England several times about that, to think how we can use that technology and different avenues—I will speak in a minute about the self-sampling sample.

We have to think differently about how we encourage women, because not every woman will come forward in the same way. We have different pressures on our lives at different times. Perhaps we are not as good at the younger end, because people think, as the hon. Member for Pontypridd said so eloquently, “I didn’t think it would happen to me.” Perhaps they have a young family or are busy at work. All those things mean that we have to make it as easy as we possibly can to access screening wherever you are and in whatever form suits you, because there are also cultural barriers for some not only to cervical screening but to breast screening, where they are hesitant to come forward.

Jim Shannon: I referred to my wife, who had some difficulty making the appointment. What she did was talk to my mum. I feel women talking to women is much easier. We should not always push to the back of the queue, for instance, a family member having a substantial discussion. Sometimes it starts with a discussion, before they go to the hospital. It very important to have family members around to support and give advice.

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more. We heard earlier that a good group of friends can give someone that nudge when they are feeling a little hesitant. As Members said, it is not the greatest outing of an afternoon, but it can be one of the most important appointments that you may keep, so I urge you to keep it.

I want to assure all women that screening staff are excellently trained to ensure that they feel reassured and comfortable. For those who feel anxious, there is information available online to help them plan their appointment. As many have done, I would like to commend the work of Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust in raising awareness about what cervical screening entails and how important it is.

Let me turn to the nub of the debate—why screening is not offered on a yearly basis. Currently, cervical screening in England is offered to individuals between 25 and 49 every three years, and between 50 and 64 every five years. For those aged 65 and over, screening is offered if one of the last three results detected any abnormalities. Although health, including how screening is delivered, is a devolved matter, the debate has shown that wherever we are in the country, we need to ensure that health is a priority. We automatically transfer data on a woman’s history to the devolved authorities in Northern Ireland and Wales. I think it was the hon. Member for Gower who raised the question of how we work with devolved authorities: that information goes automatically to Wales and Northern Ireland, but it is still a manual process with Scotland, and work is in progress to make sure we get there.

As I have said, this matter is devolved, but as others have said, we all follow the expert advice of the UK National Screening Committee. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire pointed out how important it is that we follow the advice of a central body, and in 2015, the UK NSC recommended that a test for HPV be used as the primary screen, because 99.7% of cervical cancers are caused by the high-risk HPV types. I could not agree more with one hon. Member—I apologise; I do not remember who it was—who said that we should talk about HPV in a normal, non-stigmatising way. We should have a conversation: it is important that we talk about those things that affect our bodies, to enable people to seek treatment and do something about them. If HPV is detected, you are referred for further testing. Cells are tested for abnormalities and, if present, you are tested again to see if treatment is necessary. If not, a follow-up appointment is always made for the following year, and if HPV is not detected no action is required, because it is highly unlikely that any abnormal cells are present and the chance of developing a cancer within five years is very small.

That process has been in place since December 2019, and since March 2020 in Scotland. It has made cervical screening more effective, improved detection rates and, crucially, requires women to be screened less frequently: there is a very salient point that the more often something is required, the risk that it is not taken up becomes greater. Making sure that we have the best tests at the best time interval, advised by the experts, is how we will proceed. However, that is not to say that all the technologies aptly described by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, as well as others that are available, are not being looked at all the time in all these areas. If there is a positive from the pandemic, it is that we have moved forward in many areas of technology, and as several Members have said, we need to harness that.

Given the strong link between HPV and cervical cancer, the national HPV immunisation programme is a key way to save lives. Introduced in 2008 and extended to boys in 2019, those vaccines have already led to dramatic reductions in HPV infections in England, and it is hoped that immunisation will eventually eradicate HPV and save hundreds more lives each year. The past year has been a challenging one, but as soon as the pandemic hit, we charged those in charge of the scheme with making sure that they had caught up with HPV vaccinations in schools by this August. They have used schools, community centres, and so on to make sure we do not fall behind on what is such an essential part of the programme—we know about the protection that it gives.

I do, however, acknowledge that screening is not perfect: HPV infection or abnormal cells can be missed, and can develop and turn into cancer between screening tests. That is incredibly rare, and the science supports the hope—I have this hope—that with the introduction of HPV testing and vaccination, many more cancers can be detected and prevented. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) spoke of self-sampling, as did others. I am incredibly interested in this proposal. The YouScreen trial currently taking place in London is sending home-testing kits to some of those who have not taken up the offer of screening, making sure that we offer it to women who might find other environments difficult to be part of—because of time or a whole range of reasons—and who may prefer to do a simple swab test in their own home. That is what this trial is designed to do. It is particularly targeted at disadvantaged groups who may not have attended screenings.

As I say, there are busy lives, there is embarrassment and there are cultural barriers, so making sure we push that forward is important. There are plans for a nationwide trial to offer self-sample kits to women as an alternative to a nurse taking the sample. I have asked my officials to keep me informed of the trials. I eagerly await the UK NSC's analysis once the trial is complete, and the subsequent recommendations on how self-sampling may be incorporated into the cervical screening programme.

I think we all agree on the need for women to come forward. I thank hon. Members for the tone of the debate and for how everybody expressed their concern that we make sure that we get to those women. I reassure people that, while we did indeed cancel those invitations early on in the pandemic, there is currently no national backlog of people waiting for an invitation to the NHS cervical screening programme. We have been working with and supporting providers to work above pre-pandemic levels to manage diagnostic backlogs. Waiting times for some appointments have increased in some areas, and in those areas specifically we are working with Public Health England's screening quality assurance service and the relevant clinical commissioning groups. The problem is not everywhere, but I am aware that there is a problem in certain parts of the country.

I thank everyone for their contributions, and I express my sympathy—I know I speak for each and every Member here—to Fiona's family and friends. The most effective way to prevent deaths from cervical cancer is for as many women as possible to attend their routine appointments, as opposed to yearly screening. Cervical screening undoubtedly saves lives, so once again: when you receive the invitation, please go, and if you notice any worrying symptoms in the meantime, contact your

GP. NHS services are open, safe and ready to help you and help keep you safe. You have to help us by attending, so that the screening programme reaches as many as possible and we can drive that rate up to the sort of levels that mean we can prevent each and every woman from having what is, in effect, a preventable cancer.

5.48 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi [V]: I thank the Minister for her response. I also thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for his contribution. As Andrew Mathewson's MP, he made a heartfelt contribution on behalf of Fiona's family and all her friends. In the really powerful and very personal speech of my great friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), we heard about the serious risks that missing a screening can cause. Her story is a stark reminder of the importance of keeping appointments and being tested regularly.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) touched on many of the groups that are less likely to attend their appointments and the Government's duty of care to improve messaging to those in harder-to-reach communities. In fact, in her intervention on the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd highlighted the fact that non-binary and trans men should not miss their cervical screening appointment, and that it is important to record biological sex on medical records to ensure that that does not happen.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was very clear in his message that screening is not a test for cancer but a test to prevent cancer. That is a really important message to get across to all women. My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) highlighted the fact that not one trust in England achieved 80% coverage of the test. He highlighted the work of Hologic, a cutting-edge company in his constituency that specialises in high-volume population screening. We need to take full advantage of that resource when beating cancer.

I echo the call of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford): if you have vaginal discharge or bleeding, go and see your GP—not your MP—and do not wait for an invitation. She also mentioned the 30% to 4.5% reduction as a result of the HPV vaccine. She noted the difficulties that physically disabled people have in attending their cervical smears. The Minister spoke about the self-sampling project that is going to be rolled out nationwide, which is going to be key to getting as many women as possible to attend cervical screening tests. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) drew on his vast knowledge of health issues and made a powerful case for building back better our screening capabilities and using all of the available technological advances that have been mentioned today.

In conclusion, I thank the Minister for her comments. I am glad that Members, cross-party and from all of the devolved countries of the UK have been able to discuss this issue sensibly. The bottom line is that we must improve take-up and we must talk about it, because screening saves lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 317336, relating to cervical screening.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Would colleagues please leave the room via the door marked “Exit” and observe social distancing? Thank you again to our excellent technical teams.

5.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Amnesty for Undocumented Migrants

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

6.15 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Hon. Members should be aware that social distancing is no longer in operation, but I remind you that Mr Speaker has encouraged us to wear masks. I also remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of Westminster Hall debates, and Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. Members participating virtually should leave their cameras on for the duration of the debate and must be visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks at westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 567681, relating to an amnesty for undocumented migrants.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. The petition calls on the Government to “grant an urgent Amnesty to Undocumented Migrants living in the UK.”

It attracted 103,440 signatures, and I thank each and every one of those people for participating in our democracy by signing the petition, which has led us to debate this very important issue.

It is clear that covid-19 has added a bit of impetus to the decision to sign the petition. There has been concern about the ability of undocumented migrants to get access to a vaccine, which is of benefit both to them and to the wider society, because we know that people are less likely to transmit the virus when they have had the vaccine. That seems to have given the petition a bit of added impetus, because having an unstable existence is made even more challenging through covid-19. As for many things, covid-19 has made a challenging situation more challenging, so I can understand the decision of 103,440 people to sign the petition.

In terms of what the petition calls for, it is as simple as granting an amnesty to all undocumented migrants living in the UK, except those who have a criminal record. The petition was quite clear that if someone has a criminal record, they should not be the beneficiary of the proposed amnesty, but I have to say that there is not much more detail than that. I assume that the petitioners want to treat every undocumented migrant the same, regardless of whether they are someone who has been living here for over 10 years and who has put down extensive family roots, or somebody who, quite frankly, arrived here last weekend on a dinghy from Calais. That is something that the petition is missing, because there is no clarity. I can only assume that the petition is essentially referring to every single undocumented migrant. I also assume that it would be a one-off amnesty for all undocumented migrants, but I am unsure about whether the petitioners wish it to be something that happens routinely—for example, every five or 10 years. That is also not clear. What is clear is the desire to regularise the status of all undocumented migrants, which is what we will be debating today.

The arguments in favour of the petition are clear. There are many individuals and families who have come here as undocumented migrants. Some may have come illegally in the first instance. Some may have come here legally, but the legal time that they are allowed to be here has expired and they are looking to regularise their position. It is a combination of both of those. However, there are many who are making a positive contribution to our country in difficult circumstances. At the moment, it is a very challenging situation for them.

There is also an argument that, by regularising their status, it actually leads to their paying more taxes, which is beneficial to the taxpayer. I have some sympathy with the argument that says we should treat people a bit differently if they have been here for 10 or 12 years and have put down extensive family roots. Is it really realistic, or likely, that the Government will deport migrants at that stage? It is incredibly unlikely. If we are of the view that it is incredibly unlikely that we are ever going to deport migrants in those circumstances, there does seem to be a strong argument that we should regularise their status, and perhaps an argument could be made for an amnesty. However, in terms of the arguments against, and in relation to the petition, I simply cannot support treating a family who may have been here for more than 10 years the same as somebody who came here last weekend in a dinghy.

We also cannot make assumptions about every single person who is in the undocumented migrant category. The reality is that there will be some people who have come into this country through an illegal route. We do not know whether they are genuine refugees; it is impossible to know whether all of them will be. Among them there will be some economic migrants, so ultimately those individuals would likely be the beneficiaries of the blanket move as suggested by the petition. That is something that I cannot support.

If we were to support a blanket amnesty for every single undocumented migrant, it would be impossible to sustain that position while at the same time not being in favour of open borders. I find it very difficult to understand how you could support an amnesty—and potentially have one regularly, every five or six years—and not support open borders. As a Member of Parliament of this country, I would never support open borders. It would put unsustainable amounts of pressure on our public services. There would be all sorts of problems with social integration if migration was unmanaged to that extent. It would also limit our country's ability to show compassion towards the most genuine refugees and to have a laws-based, rules-based immigration system that allows us to welcome the brightest and the best who want to come to this country to make a positive contribution. More to the point, it would be a slap in the face for all of those people who have moved to this country legally and who have followed the—often cumbersome—rules. They have followed them. They have done their side of the bargain. They have moved here legally. This would be a slap in the face to them.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Does the hon. Member know that a lot of the people that we are talking about, undocumented migrants, have come here legally? They are undocumented not through any fault of their own. Does he accept that?

Tom Hunt: With the greatest respect to the hon. Member, I did make the point that the proposal would apply both to those who may have entered the country illegally and to those who may have entered legally but for a fixed period of time that has expired. Yes, it is a mixture. That is why I am against a blanket amnesty. It would be a significant movement away from the case-by-case approach that the Government are currently taking, which takes into account the differences between cases and the nuances of different circumstances. An amnesty would not do that.

Yes, some of the individuals who would benefit from an amnesty would be those who came here legally but whose time has expired, who are struggling with the process, who have been here for 10 years and who are making a positive contribution. However, it would also include those people who have shunned the laws of our country, who have deliberately come here illegally and who, frankly, have no more right to be here than the families or individuals who are patiently waiting to come here legally. That is the reality of the situation.

We are also talking at a time when the Government are dealing with the significant challenge of the illegal crossings from Calais—

Anne McLaughlin: Will the hon. Member take an intervention on that?

Tom Hunt: No, I am not going to take another intervention. That is a situation in which individuals, regardless of their circumstances, are knowingly deciding not to engage with the legal process for claiming asylum or to immigrate here in a legal way, but to shun that legal approach and come here in an illegal manner. The danger of a blanket amnesty is that it would send out a message to all of those people who come over illegally and fuel an evil trade in human lives. It would potentially make the situation a lot worse. The money fuelling this evil trade in human lives would increase and potentially more lives would be put at risk, because if we adopted a position such as the one set out in the petition, which is very close to an open borders immigration policy, essentially the message would be: “Once you're in, you're in. So get over here, ignore the processes, because it's worth the risk”. The risk is very real; it could lead to the loss of lives.

Anne McLaughlin: Would the hon. Member be surprised to hear then that his own Prime Minister has toyed with the idea of exactly what is being called for in this petition—an amnesty for anybody who has been here for a certain period of time? The Prime Minister has also talked about it recently.

Tom Hunt: With the greatest of respect, if the hon. Member has read the motion in the petition, she will see that that is not what this petition is calling for. It mentions nothing about being here for 10 years. Essentially, it is a blanket amnesty for every single undocumented migrant. People across the political spectrum have floated and supported the idea of a limited amnesty targeted at those who have been here, say, for over 10 years. As I said earlier in my speech, I believe there are some merits in those arguments.

However, this petition is not calling for such an amnesty; it is calling for a situation that sits very closely to an open border policy, in my view. I think it would lead to chaotic results, unintended consequences,

[Tom Hunt]

unsustainable pressure on public services, problems with social integration and, as I also said earlier, it would limit our capacity to promote a compassionate, generous, rules-based immigration system and approach to refugee resettlement, which could benefit this country and which, I believe, is supported by the majority of people in this country.

That is sort of the wider picture. Of course there will be examples of where the status quo fails individuals and individual families, and we need to work with that system to improve its efficiency and how quickly it deals with these cases, so that it can turn them around as quickly as possible and get people the outcome they need as soon as possible, so that they can plan their lives with certainty. Of course, that is something that I support.

However, the current Government position is that if someone has been in the country for a long period of time, there are opportunities to regularise their status. Nevertheless, I think it is appropriate and fair that that is done on a case-by-case basis, because we cannot make huge generalisations with regard to those who come under the category that we are talking about today, because the motors vary and the circumstances vary enormously.

In conclusion, although I sympathise with the reasons why people have signed this petition and their concern about the circumstances that many people face at the moment, the petition is not focused enough in what it is calling for. To me, it is calling for a blanket amnesty for every single person, many of whom have come here illegally and shunned the legal process. It would be a slap in the face for those who have come here legally, and there would be serious unintended consequences.

If the hon. Members taking part in this debate believe in this petition as it stands, they should run with that policy in a manifesto in a general election. There would be a resounding answer from the British people, namely that they would not support this proposal. The vast majority of people in this country see the benefits of immigration and are compassionate towards refugees, but they want a rules-based system and this petition would fly in the face of that.

For all those reasons, I would be unable to support this petition, but I am glad that this subject will have a good airing today. Having looked at the call list, I predict that perhaps we will hear some arguments being raised that are different to those I have raised. There probably will not be much reiteration of the arguments I have just made, until perhaps the end of the debate.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I will put on an informal time limit of five minutes at the moment and we will see where we get to with that.

6.28 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

Undocumented migrants are not some enemy of the state; they are not a risk to this country. The vast majority of them are desperate people who are keen to work and secure a future for themselves and their families. It is with that in mind that they must be given the legal right

to live and work in the UK, which will give them the chance to prosper in this country and stand on their own feet, rather than being treated like criminals.

It is obvious that the majority of undocumented migrants are in some form of work, albeit illegal and, in all likelihood, exploitative. I strongly believe that such migrants will have undoubtedly honed their skills and developed their knowledge and experience since they first moved here, and that they are all desperate to contribute to this country. At a time when UK employers are suffering from the most profound labour shortage in a generation, we should turn to a hard-working, talented and resilient resource that already exists here in the UK—undocumented migrants.

Far from the picture painted of them by some Members, a recent Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants survey estimates that 82% entered through legal routes and later fell out of status. According to the research, a migrant on the 10-year route to settlement will have paid £13,000 in application fees by the time they are granted indefinite leave to remain. The sheer cost and complexity of this broken system forces those who are here legally to then become undocumented. Once they fall out of status, it is extremely difficult and unlikely that they will receive it a second time.

This bewildering system limits the life chances of our most vulnerable and puts them at risk of rank exploitation from rogue employers and those who seek to prey on the defenceless. Under the Government's hostile environment, their situation has become even more precarious.

I was shocked and disturbed by the report of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism last week, which showed that most GP surgeries in the UK refused to register undocumented migrants in spite of NHS policy. Not only is that position cruel and denies them the help that they desperately need, but it holds back our aim of vaccinating every adult in the UK and of beating this hideous disease. That policy puts us all at greater risk. I wrote to the Home and Health Secretaries on that point, which they ultimately agreed with, so pressure must now be put on the GP practices.

Amid the despair, there is still great hope among migrants. During the recent annual refugee week at the end of June, I took part in a Working West London employment event hosted by East London Advanced Technology Training, which offers training and skills development courses for refugees and migrants. I met a group who were crying out to contribute to this country, and I could see the rich array of skills, talents and passion that they have to offer.

Migrants play an important role in our society and are a statement of who we are. Not only are they people with aspirations and hopes, but they represent our values and demonstrate our humanity and decency. To the majority here in the debate today and the 100,000 people who signed the e-petition, it is clear that the Government must urgently reform our immigration system to prevent people from falling out of status, and must simplify the routes to regularisation. A commitment to an amnesty by the Government could only ever be the beginning of this, which should be swiftly followed by a fundamental reform of our immigration system and by ditching the hostile environment.

That change is not just the right thing to do. It will benefit this country and everyone living here. The Government must show some flexibility, pragmatism and humanity—principles that have long been at the heart of British policy making—and give undocumented migrants the chance to truly succeed in and contribute to our society.

6.34 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) [V]: It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. My speech will be quite short.

Most migrants to the UK have taken the trouble to apply properly through our immigration system. Here in Gravesend we live with highly successful immigration—notably, the Sikh community. But a blanket amnesty is not sensible if it applies to every undocumented migrant. Potentially, this proposal would allow tens of thousands of people—more perhaps—who are in the UK illegally to regularise their status. I entirely sympathise with their desire to build a better life, and I might do exactly the same thing myself if I were in their circumstances, but an amnesty like this would do nothing to reduce illegal immigration, which is what we are trying to do, and it would act as an additional pull factor to those wishing to come to the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) points out, an amnesty like this is akin to having open borders. It means our immigration system would no longer be rules based. He raises the interesting point that if the Labour party put this in an election manifesto, it might not be a vote winner.

Finally, I entirely support any effort to attract undocumented people to vaccination centres without fear.

6.36 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for opening the debate and laying out the strongly-held opinions on both sides of this debate.

It is important for us to have a sensitive and nuanced debate on this important issue, because there are hundreds of thousands of undocumented people in our country. If we do not engage with or discuss this subject, we create bigger problems for our society. I want to focus on those who face severe exploitation because they have found themselves as undocumented migrants in our country.

I have no truck, as I am sure most in our country do not, with those who are deliberately and wilfully flouting our legal system and breaking the law in this country. However, I am interested in what we can do to protect and support those who arrived in this country, often through legitimate means, according to the JCWI, and found themselves becoming irregularised.

In many of our constituencies, there are countless examples of people facing violence or being trafficked, and of women facing domestic abuse. They sometimes arrived on spousal visas and then faced huge amounts of exploitation. Although people who face domestic violence can apply to stay in the UK even if their spouse does not sponsor them, they often do not pass many of

the requirements, because if they do not have police reports and so on, it is difficult to prove to immigration officers that they have faced domestic abuse and violence.

This is a complex area for those who face exploitation and who are vulnerable. I have met many individuals who have faced those sorts of issues and, although we may have different views about the text of the petition, it is important to build a consensus around those who are particularly vulnerable and who should be given an amnesty.

Since the pandemic began last year, the issue of what we do with undocumented migrants, what healthcare provision they get and whether they have access to covid vaccines affects all of us. That is why it is a no-brainer to look at some of these issues carefully and to think about how they benefit us as a society, in terms of healthcare and protection for all of us. We have already heard about some of the issues around vaccination programmes and people being fearful about going to get vaccinated. Many GPs require people to register with them in order to access vaccines. There are one-off vaccination offers to undocumented migrants, but that is not comprehensive. On the public health benefits for the whole of society, to combat the pandemic we need to ensure that the estimated 800,000 to 1.2 million people who, according to the JCWI, are undocumented in our country, are given protection.

What should we do going forward? As the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) said, as recently as earlier this year the Prime Minister said that when people have been here for a very long time and have not fallen foul of the law, it makes sense to try to regularise their status. When he was Mayor of London, he talked about an “earned amnesty” for some 400,000 people who live in the capital. It is important that we look at how to address this issue in a sensible way that does not lead to a pull factor, which many have raised concerns about.

We want a managed migration process with legitimate routes for people to come here to make a contribution, whether to study, to work or to join family members, while recognising that some people came to this country over the past decade and beyond and, for different reasons, have found themselves in the irregular status category but did not break the law. Those are the people I am particularly concerned about—those who then fell foul of the system. I hope that we will look at how to protect people who have been exploited and trafficked and who have faced huge challenges in our country, and at opportunities for them to make a contribution to our economy, given that they have been here for a long time.

Although I do not agree with the exact wording of the petition, it is important that we look at how to protect those who have huge vulnerabilities and ensure that, in the middle of a pandemic, those who are not documented have access to vaccination programmes, testing and treatment for covid.

6.42 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie.

My constituency of Feltham and Heston had the fourth highest number of signatories to this e-petition, reflecting—[*Inaudible.*]

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Can you speak up a little? I think there is something wrong with your microphone. We cannot hear you well at all.

Seema Malhotra: Is this any better?

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): That is better, yes

Seema Malhotra: My constituency of Feltham and Heston had the fourth highest number of signatories—*[Inaudible.]*

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, we simply cannot hear you. Try again, and if it does not work, we will come back to you.

Seema Malhotra: My constituency of Feltham and Heston had the fourth highest number of signatories to this e-petition, reflecting in my view—*[Inaudible.]*

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Again, I am sorry, but the sound is not working. We will have one of the engineers get in touch and we will come back to you. I call Ruth Cadbury.

6.43 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hosie. I think this is the first time I have served with you in the Chair—it is a great pleasure to do so.

The e-petition on undocumented migrants has been signed by over 900 of my constituents. It notes that:

“Undocumented Migrants are suffering in silence, with no access to adequate Financial support, or any help.”

I know from my casework and from listening to hon. Members’ speeches so far that, sadly, that assessment is far too accurate. Not only are they suffering in silence; their suffering is made worse by the careless, heartless and reckless Home Office, which continues to inflict a hostile environment on so many. They face long delays, irrational and inconsistent decisions, and inadequate legal support, especially for those with low or no income. Many of the people affected are victims of modern slavery. They are adults who came over as small children, or children joining the only family members they know are alive in this world.

The petition says that these people want to be able to “live their lives as normal human beings and pay tax to help the UK economy”,

and we know that migrants who have legal status and are taxpayers are more likely to be net contributors to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs than the average person in our population. I am not saying that I agree with all the wording of the petition, but it is really important that it is debated today.

As the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants makes clear in its recent survey, 82% of people in the UK who are undocumented arrived through a legal route, so I will start by addressing the extortionate and unfair immigration fees that impact not only those who are undocumented, but all those who have to navigate our immigration system here in the UK. People accept the concept of paying a fee to cover the cost of the service, but it is simply unfair for the Home Office to charge excessive fees that go well beyond the cost of providing the service. The fees are disproportionate

compared with those of other countries: the average cost of a regularisation application in France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Germany is less than a tenth of its cost in the UK, and the cost of applying for permanent settlement in the UK is 20 times more than the average cost in those countries.

The Government keep increasing those fees. In 2014, the cost of a limited leave to remain application was £601; it has now risen to over £1,000 per person. For many applicants, that cost is multiplied by the number of people in their family. I know from listening to people locally that the costs are having a huge impact, and the JCWI rightly cites the high cost of fees as a major reason why people remain undocumented. These fees leave families in limbo, with the JCWI noting:

“Families who are unable to raise thousands of pounds every few years are at risk of losing their status and becoming undocumented, or forced to choose which family members maintain their status while others cannot.”

However, this debate is not just about fees, but about a wider system that is set up to create a hostile environment for undocumented migrants. We hear a lot of warm words from the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and junior Ministers about the Home Office’s change since the appalling Windrush scandal, but the hostile environment that the Windrush generation faced is still impacting so many people here in the UK, and the net number of people it ensnares only seems to be expanding.

Just this morning, we read in *The Guardian* of a Spanish woman who was less than a year old when she arrived in the UK. She has been sacked from her job in a care home because she is unable to prove she has a right to work in the UK. She applied for settled status before the deadline for EU citizens closed, but she is still waiting, and her employer has said that it was forced into this action because of the fines it faced. Of course, she will not be eligible to claim benefits until this is sorted out. This is yet another example of the awful hostile environment—a hostile environment that I fear is now going to impact on the millions of EU citizens living in the UK, including many in my own constituency.

I will finish by focusing on the real impact that these decisions and actions by the Home Office have. It is easy for us to become focused on numbers, but every number is a story of a family pushed into hardship, unable to pay bills or to cover the cost of food, and left in limbo. Many of these migrants have children who are UK citizens. We know that undocumented migrants experience domestic violence at three times the average national rate, yet the Government recently rejected an amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill that sought to provide support to migrant women suffering from abuse. Once again, the Government’s rhetoric does not match the reality. This Government cannot claim to be compassionate or just until they end the hostile environment faced by my constituents and many others around the country.

6.48 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I congratulate the well over 100,000 people who signed the petition to secure this important debate. Indeed, many of my constituents have contacted me to raise their concerns, and more than 2,100 of them have signed this official petition.

In essence, those people are saying that they reject the Home Office's hostile environment, and that what we need is a fair, transparent system that provides a safe harbour for those fleeing war, genocide, domestic abuse, violence and other forms of persecution—a system that has at its heart our true British values of compassion, justice and humanitarianism. They highlight that the UK system of asylum and immigration is mired in crisis. Although I am not advocating a policy of open borders, we do need a fair, rules-based asylum and immigration policy.

A recent report makes for grim reading. The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants published a report called "We Are Here" just a few weeks ago. I am sure the Minister has read it. The report looks at the routes by which people become undocumented. Often a small error, a period of illness, bad advice or mental problems can lead to someone becoming undocumented and entering a Kafkaesque nightmare of impossible bureaucracy, social exclusion and exposure to the criminal underworld. These are people who are bewildered, disoriented and traumatised and who often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and the system makes things worse for them.

We know that people without access to benefits and work are coerced into criminal activity or forced into dangerous work, but the pandemic has highlighted that, shamefully, undocumented migrants are also denied access to basic healthcare. The JCWI reports that they are scarred by the whole experience and are scared of seeing a GP, going to hospital or getting a covid vaccination, for sheer fear of arrest. I do not need to tell the Minister that this creates a danger to public health for everyone. There is obviously a huge unmet need for vaccinations. Is it not clear that the only people who the current system helps are criminals? We are fuelling exploitation and rewarding organised crime groups and people traffickers.

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants has set out a series of entirely sensible policies: namely, new and simplified routes to status based on five years' residence; British citizenship for children born in the UK; making visa renewals automatic and affordable; and scrapping the illegal working offence and creating a route to status through work.

What have the Prime Minister and his Conservative Government proposed instead? It is hypocrisy, backtracking and hostility. The Prime Minister himself advocated the creation of a migrants' amnesty when he was the London Mayor in 2008. In 2016, as Foreign Secretary, he called measures to give amnesty to undocumented migrants who had lived in the UK for longer than 10 years "economically rational", but after raising so many people's hopes, and when he has the opportunity as Prime Minister to make a real difference and ensure that it is easier and simpler for those who are undocumented to become regularised, he has done nothing for the last two years. It is just not fair for those who could make a huge positive contribution through taxes to our Exchequer, and who have to suffer excessive Home Office fees, as hon. Members have already highlighted, to have their hopes falsely raised and then cruelly dashed.

I hope the Minister will have the confidence to deviate from the notes prepared by Home Office officials and to engage with those points with the seriousness that they merit. He can end the uncertainty, which has devastating

consequences for the lives it affects. Undocumented migrants who have been here for several years deserve clarity.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): We will go back to Feltham and Heston and see whether we have any more luck.

6.54 pm

Seema Malhotra [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie.

My constituency of Feltham and Heston had the fourth highest number of signatories to the petition, reflecting the humanity of our local community and our rich history of immigration and diversity. With over 150 languages spoken in Hounslow alone, our diversity is also our strength. Neighbours, colleagues, business owners and key workers come from all over the world and contribute to our local economy.

This important debate is focused specifically on action to support undocumented migrants. I support the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for consensus on how we move forward. Caritas Europa defines the challenge well, saying that while the fight against irregular migration has dominated the political agenda for years, undocumented migrants remain a sizeable population in Europe. The lack of regular resident status often goes hand in hand with a huge amount of suffering and vulnerability. Referred to as undocumented migrants or people without papers, these people may find themselves in a protracted limbo situation, living on the margin of society under continuous stress and anxiety, their basic rights often disregarded. As has been said, hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants are being blocked from booking covid vaccinations, despite Ministers saying that everyone should have access to vaccines regardless of immigration status. As a result, we are all less safe.

This issue is not without complexity, but we cannot be without humanity and compassion. The current system locks people out of vital services—often families with children. Research conducted by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants shows that 82% of respondents to its surveys entered the UK through legal routes and later fell out of status. Expensive and stressful reapplication processes, which can cost more than £12,000 by the time genuine cases are granted indefinite leave to remain, push families into enormous debt that lasts for years. These extortionate fees are not a deterrent. Instead, they push people into exploitative work. These are people who are ambitious to do well for themselves, their families and their adopted country.

That was the case with Navin—not his real name—whom the JCWI noted became undocumented after he was wrongly advised by a lawyer that his leave was still valid. He intended to rectify this when right-to-work checks meant that he lost his steady job in a restaurant. He could not afford to pay the fees required to regularise the status of his entire family, leaving them all undocumented. He took on cash-in-hand work at a car wash. He was regularly underpaid or simply not paid at all, and feared that social services would take his children away if they found out about his situation. He said:

"My kids were born here, and I don't know where else I would go. I've got nothing back in Mauritius at all, no family, no one I know. I left when I was young, a long time ago. Here I have my life, my family."

[Seema Malhotra]

In so many cases, falling out of status is due to situations outside the control of the migrant. JCWI's research found that this can happen for a variety of reasons too, including relationship breakdown, domestic violence, poor legal advice, inability to pay those extremely high fees, or a simple mistake. However, once the migrant falls out of status, it can be difficult to obtain it again. The impact of falling out of status results in people being trapped in limbo. As in these stories, the vast majority of undocumented migrants have been settled in the UK for more than five years, or indeed 10, and arrived legally. The UK has the second largest number of undocumented migrants in Europe behind Germany. The insecurity and, often, destitution of these families has worsened through the pandemic, with many also dependent on food banks.

This intractable problem needs a different approach, which is why I believe it is time that the Government reformed the current system to create a simplified route to regularisation, so that migrants can access services, rent a home, work and pay taxes, and live a life free from fear. Addressing the damagingly high application fees alongside simplifying the process is an approach that has been taken in Ireland. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, there are also precedents for an amnesty policy intervention. It is interesting that Greece, Italy and Portugal all implemented amnesty programmes in recent months. There is also clear economic evidence that if undocumented migrants can move out of informal employment and into more secure jobs, there are many benefits for wider society. According to *The Economist*, studies in America suggests that citizenship for its 11 million undocumented immigrants could boost the economy, with GDP rising up to \$1.5 trillion over 10 years.

In conclusion, undocumented migrants clearly need a different way so that they and their families can move forward. The JCWI powerfully remarks that

"once someone becomes undocumented, the criminalisation of their everyday lives drives them into exploitation. Their voices are silenced, and they are unable to...tell anyone about their plight. Under the Hostile Environment, almost everyone who should keep them safe...is part of the system of immigration enforcement and surveillance trying to rip them away from their families"

and their homes. We need a sensitive, long-term solution to the undocumented migrants crisis. As a first step, we should simplify the process to make it easier for those who are undocumented to become regularised, and reform the extremely high fees, which mean that people cannot pay for visa applications. Surely, in the interests of our economy and effective administration, which covid now demands, and in the interests of humanity, there needs to be a much better answer to the issue of undocumented migrants.

7 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) on securing this important debate, although I disagree wholeheartedly with what he had to say.

I congratulate the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition calling for this debate, including the more than 1,200 Leicester East residents. Although I wholeheartedly support the petition's call for the urgent

regularisation of undocumented migrants, with a safe pathway to citizenship after five years, I suggest politely that its use of the word "amnesty" is not quite accurate because it implies wrongdoing. The reality is that in nearly all cases undocumented people are not criminals but have simply fallen through the cracks of the Government's callous hostile environment policies.

Last year I tabled an early-day motion calling on the Government to take immediate action to ensure that leave to remain is granted to undocumented migrants, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status, so that they can access healthcare, food and housing. The issue came to a head when it became clear that undocumented migrants would be left out of the vaccination programme. It was clear to many that we were only ever going to be as safe as the most vulnerable among us. Earlier this year, I pushed again, including with another early-day motion calling for undocumented migrants to be granted leave to remain so that no one is excluded from that necessary protection. Such exclusionary practices are not only morally abhorrent; they also undermine the whole purpose of a vaccine. While people and institutions discriminate, the virus does not. The only way for the vaccine to be effective is by ensuring that everyone is protected from the virus.

Most migrants enter the UK through legal routes. As we have heard, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants estimates the figure to be 82%. Every two and a half years, a migrant must pay thousands to stay. A migrant on the 10-year route will have paid £12,937 in fees alone. They will have been denied legal aid to seek legal advice about, or appeal the refusal of, their applications. If at any point they are unable to submit the right application at the right time and with the required fee, they will become undocumented. This is deeply unjust.

There are an estimated 1 million undocumented workers who lack any entitlement to support from the state and who are, therefore, entirely without funds to feed, clothe and house themselves and their families. For a demographic who already face uncommonly difficult challenges in their daily lives, the pandemic has only deepened fears over how to maintain an income, remain healthy or even stay alive.

Many undocumented people are destitute and live in the shadows, fearful of what would happen to them if they identified themselves. They cannot access healthcare, emergency shelter or food, nor report or seek protection from domestic violence, sexual assault, exploitation and other awful abuses. Following the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, the invisibility in which undocumented migrants are required to live has led to many of their human rights being effectively denied by the criminalisation of their right to work and to rent housing, while limiting their access to healthcare, contravening article 25 of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights. For people forced to endure this level of instability, it is impossible to comply with any Government guidance on self-isolation and social distancing. It is morally and practically imperative that the basic needs of all those living in this country are met.

The tragic irony is that many undocumented people who live in constant fear of the British state work in the frontline services that the Government have been at pains to praise and even clap for during this crisis. We must ensure that all workers, regardless of their immigration

status, are valued and protected as we rebuild our economy and society. It is essential that the Government take immediate action to ensure that leave to remain is granted to everyone in the UK, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status. All migrants, regardless of status, ought to be granted rights that respect their humanity and allow them to live with dignity and fully participate in society.

Hate crime has more than doubled since 2013, so it has never been more important for the Government's demonisation of migrants to end. Together, we can build a society in which everyone is valued, no matter their country of birth. More than ever, what is needed is status now.

7.6 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie.

Human beings are not illegal; first and foremost, they are humans. For me, that has to be the starting point of this debate and any debate about immigration. Over the last few days, I have been contacted by dozens of people from across Luton North asking me to speak in this debate, and I was glad to see that 446 people from across my constituency had signed this petition online. That shows the strength of feeling among many of my constituents, and our unifying belief in human rights, in particular for women and children who are fleeing from some of the most horrific circumstances across the world.

When someone is locked out of the system and shut out of safe and legal routes through the immigration system, they are unable to get a job, rent a home, open a bank account or obtain a driver's licence. It is not an easy life. People living here who have come from abroad are considered temporary for a decade and must reapply for the right to remain in their homes and jobs every two and a half years. As we have heard already, each application costs thousands of pounds per person. At present, a migrant on the 10-year route to settlement will have paid £12,937 in application fees by the time they are granted indefinite leave to remain.

I am sure most Members here will have seen in their inboxes and casework the impact that this situation has on people's family life and wellbeing. The 10-year route to settlement is the default rate for most categories of visa holders. If at any point during the 10-year period the visa holder is unable to submit the right application at the right time, they will be classified as undocumented. Research by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants found that that can happen for a variety of reasons, including relationship breakdown, domestic violence, poor legal advice, a physical or mental health crisis—for the applicant or one of their relatives—an inability to pay extremely high fees, or just a simple, honest mistake.

In this pandemic, we are currently seeing how the ability for everyone in this country to access healthcare is crucial to our country's collective wellbeing. As a principle, healthcare should be free at the point of use in our country. This virus does not care what someone looks like or where they come from. If someone is living in poor conditions, or is too scared to get the vaccine because of what might happen to them or because they might leave a paper trail for the NHS, this virus will catch up with them. I pay tribute to all the vaccination hubs that are reaching out specifically to these overlooked groups.

In my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hate crime, I and Lord Sheikh have been taking up the difficulties that undocumented people have faced during this pandemic, specifically around vaccination. I welcome the early announcement by the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment that people will not need an NHS number or a fixed address to get a vaccine. However, those are not the only barriers for people reaching out for help. I wrote to him in March to ask how his Department was actively reaching out to that incredibly hard-to-reach group. I am still waiting for a response, but perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that. I appreciate that everybody is busy, but from March is a long time to wait for a response to a letter from an APPG.

This debate is ultimately about our values as a country. I am not a fully-fledged football fan, but I am a fan of our England team because of who they are and what they represent—the kind of England that stands up for and alongside one another. But do our Government reflect that? Do our leaders treat other human beings as equals? Over the last 11 years we have seen a hostile environment for people from overseas grow in our country—a hostile environment where vans were driven around neighbourhoods, where people's aunts, nans, grandads and uncles have lived for years, telling them to go home or face prosecution; a hostile environment where as many as 170,000 NHS heroes from overseas are still waiting for the refunds they were promised by the Prime Minister for the charges they have to pay to use the NHS that they work in and support; and a hostile environment where a person from overseas whose first language is not English is more likely to have contracted covid and more likely to have ended up in hospital over the last year.

Even today, a Bill being debated in the main Chamber would see our country turn its back on some of the most vulnerable people in the world. It risks breaching international law and lowering our global standard as a country even further, and it undermines global efforts to support victims of war and persecution, while criminalising even the Royal National Lifeboat Institution for saving people from drowning in the English channel. What have we become? A human being is a human being, and our responsibility to others is not determined by what passport somebody holds.

One of Luton's strengths is its diversity. One can visit the whole world in one street. A dear friend of mine coined a phrase: "One town, many voices". That is very true of where I live now. Our Government could learn a lot from Luton. It is time the Government stopped the divide-and-rule style of politics, because we are all the poorer for it.

7.12 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: Before I comment on the speeches so far, I want to mention this. Today I visited the Crowne Plaza hotel in my constituency, which has housed asylum seekers for the last year. This weekend a young Sudanese man died at the hotel. I will not name him because I am not sure whether his family have been contacted yet, but I want to send my condolences and sympathy to all his friends that I met today. It exemplifies the precarious nature of the life of many of the people who come here to seek safety and security. We are not sure of the cause of death. There were reports this morning about the large

[John McDonnell]

numbers of young men who come here and go on to take their own lives. We need to learn some lessons and approach the issue with compassion. I have listened to all the speeches, and I do not think I can add to any of the recommendations that have been made, bar one.

All I can do is bring my experience to the debate. Sometimes these debates are no longer rational. They are delivered by emotions, including the emotions that I feel. I have been dealing with asylum seekers in my constituency for over 40 years, as an activist campaigning for our local law centre, or as a Greater London Council councillor, and then as the local MP. I have met hundreds of asylum seekers and hundreds of families. Their lives undocumented have been scarred and sometimes broken by the asylum system that we now have.

As others have said, the system is complex, slow, incompetent, inefficient, brutal and inhumane. And it is expensive, especially for those living in poverty because they have been forced by the hostile environment on to the margins of our society and because there is no access to legal aid. As someone has already said, most of the people we are talking about came legally into the country and went into the process but dropped out. In my experience, people drop out in many instances, first, because of appallingly poor legal advice, with people being ripped off and given expensive legal advice that was going nowhere, and, secondly, because of the huge mental health issues that they have faced, both through their suffering in their country of origin and in their travels here, and when they arrived here—a place where they thought they would find security and succour.

The issue around the fees is important because by criminalising work for these people, it means that they are exploited. In the cases I have dealt with, because work has been criminalised it forces them into illegal work, being ripped off and often not being paid. I have dealt with many women who have been exploited sexually as a result of their vulnerability, because their work is illegal. In some instances, when they have gone to the authorities and reported it, they have been picked up as an illegal. That is why people do not report and often do not identify the perpetrator of some of these appalling acts of exploitation and, in some instances, sexual violence.

I therefore agree with all the proposals that have been put forward by my hon. Friends. Some Members who have spoken today may not accept an amnesty. It has worked elsewhere, as others have said, and I think it should be considered, just as the Prime Minister considered it when he was the Mayor of London. I welcomed the statements that he made then. If people cannot go as far as that, my hon. Friends the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), along with others, have set out a number of reforms that are readily available to us and could transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who are living in our communities. They come here for safety and security, but they also want to contribute to the society of their host community.

One further reform that I would like the Government to consider is the scrapping of no recourse to public funds, because it is forcing people into destitution, exploitation and, in many instances, situations of vulnerability that put their health and their lives at risk. The plea from the people who signed the petition, nearly 4,000 of whom

were my constituents, is the same that others have made in the debate today, which is that this system is not working, even on the Government's own terms, because 99% of people are not intimidated by the hostile environment to return their countries of origin because they are so vulnerable there. If the system is not working, even on the Government's own terms, now is the time for reform, and it is needed urgently because people are suffering and, as we have experienced today in my constituency, people are dying as well.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Anne McLaughlin, who has eight minutes.

7.17 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): It is an absolute joy to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, even though we are not speaking about anything particularly joyous today.

I have just come from the House of Commons Chamber where right this minute, as we debate the suffering of undocumented migrants on these islands, the Nationality and Borders Bill is getting its Second Reading. It is a horrible piece of legislation that will discriminate against those who, according to the refugee convention, to which we are signatories, enter the UK legally but by boat. It will give preferential treatment to those who have been fortunate enough to be able to use the very few safe and legal routes.

The debate today is about undocumented migrants, stuck in legal limbo and trying to find a route to resettlement. What we are hearing is that even when migrants use those safe and legal routes, the state often continues to neglect, to discriminate and to punish, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. A number of Scottish National party colleagues and I supported an early-day motion tabled by the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on the regularisation of undocumented migrants in May this year and many of my colleagues have spoken regularly about these issues.

As others and I have said, there can be numerous reasons why someone is undocumented. They might not be able to get legal advice or life might have got in the way, for example through a bereavement or an illness, theirs or that of someone close to them. They might make minor mistakes on their application. A friend of mine sent a copy of her wedding certificate instead of the original. Yes, it was her mistake but, instead of allowing her to rectify it, she had to go through the entire palaver again, including paying these fees again.

As several hon. Members have said, another big reason is that many are simply unable to pay the extortionate application fees, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). It is also worth noting that some hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), spoke about people being trafficked to these islands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has spoken repeatedly about the costs for children registering their right to British citizenship. Most people would be surprised to hear that children born here are not automatically citizens. Indeed, they used to be, but that was repealed by the British Nationality Act 1981, which came into force in 1983. At least in 1983, a fee of just £30—that is equivalent to £100 today—was charged to register a

child as a British citizen. That really raises the question about why the Home Office currently charges more than £1,000 for a migrant child, or even a child born here of migrants, to register. I appreciate that that is under review at the moment, but only because the courts are forcing the Government to look again.

I want to share the story of Paul—that is not his real name, of course—who is a constituent of mine from Nigeria. He was on minimum wage, so he was just getting by and no more, but he was doing a really good job of keeping a roof over his son's head, and making sure that he was healthy and educated—all the things a good dad would do. He realised that his leave to remain was due to be renewed or considered, so he went to apply, only to discover that the cost was more than £2,000, which would have required him to save up £1,000 for every year of his leave to remain. That is just not possible on the minimum wage.

Paul's leave to remain then expired, so he became an undocumented migrant, but he was doing nothing wrong. His employer had to let him go because he did not have the right to work. He had no recourse to public funds—I completely agree with what the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said about that—leaving him with no food, no electricity and rising rent arrears. He did not know what to do. He had no choice but to send his son to live with his mum.

By the time I met Paul, he was in a terrible state. He had been unable to face responding to the letters from his housing association, which was ready to evict him. When I contacted those at Spire View Housing Association, they could not have been more helpful. Reassured by the fact that I had had a meeting with the Minister to plead Paul's case, they agreed to pause proceedings, and they then gave him money to get food and electricity. I really thank them for that, but it was all so unnecessary, as we have heard many times in the debate.

Here is the other problem: Paul got two and a half years' leave to remain after the fee was waived. The first year of that was spent in lockdown, so understandably, he is still unemployed. In around a year's time, he will again have to apply for an extension, and he will have to find another £2,500 or hope that the fees will be waived, but there is certainly no guarantee that they will be. If they are not, he will yet again be an undocumented migrant. With the best will in the world, if he gets another minimum wage job, it will not be possible for him to pay back his rent arrears, which have been clocked up through no fault of his own, and save that amount of money.

Paul's was the first case that I took to the Minister, who sorted it out, to his credit. I thank him for that, but we cannot keep going to the Minister with every single case. That said, I will take this opportunity to highlight the case of another constituent, who contacted me at the weekend to say that because of an error, the fee for his wife's spousal visa had been taken twice. He was told by the Home Office in November that it would be refunded within six weeks. He is still waiting. Last week, he was told for the umpteenth time that it would be with him in six weeks. To add insult to injury, each phone call he makes costs him £5 because of the 65p a minute charge. He really needs that £2,000. The Home Office agrees that it owes it to him, and I hope that when the Minister responds, he will offer to look into this urgently, as he did with Paul.

I can see you looking at me, Mr Hosie, so I will sum up. I urge the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt)—I went on holiday to Ipswich last year—to read what the Prime Minister actually said about the notion of an amnesty for undocumented migrants. As welcome as some form of amnesty would be for those who are currently battling for the right to remain, the system as a whole needs reform. The hostile environment is alive and kicking. After an amnesty, we would bear witness to a whole new generation of migrants being subjected to this endless cycle.

Let us reform the whole system root and branch, and save ourselves and them all this unnecessary grief. Otherwise, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) asked, what have we become?

7.24 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the 103,440 people who signed the petition, including 447 from my constituency of Enfield, Southgate, enabling the debate to take place. I thank the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for leading the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

It is not often that I find myself speaking in a debate in which the Prime Minister has a different view from the official Government position, but this is one such time. On previous occasions, both as Mayor of London and as a Cabinet Minister, the Prime Minister stated his support for having an amnesty for undocumented migrants. Whereas the Government say that the immigration rules already provide for undocumented migrants to regularise their status, and that such provision would unduly reward those who have not complied with immigration law, that fails to recognise the reality of the situation. There are tens of thousands of people in the UK who are undocumented, and the Government are either unaware of them, which smacks of incompetence, or unwilling to deal with the problem.

As the Prime Minister pointed out in a radio interview on LBC in 2013, when he was Mayor of London:

"If you have been here for 10 or 12 years, I'm afraid the authorities no longer really pursue you. They give up. Why not be honest about what is going on? Ultimately, you have got to reflect reality. Otherwise they are not engaged in the economy, they are not being honest with the system, they are not paying their taxes properly and it is completely crazy."

Expanding on the topics that the Prime Minister touched on, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants points out in its excellent briefing for the debate that, according to its research, 82% of those who are undocumented arrived in the UK via legal routes and have fallen out of status. That point was made passionately by my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra).

The first point I wish to make is that the current immigration system, and its cost, is a factor in people becoming undocumented. Many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), mentioned the cost of making applications to become regularised. The prime route for acquiring indefinite leave to remain is 10 years of continuous residency, but people have to apply first for temporary leave to remain for two and a half years, then keep renewing it until they have acquired the 10 years. Applying for leave to remain is expensive—a successful applicant

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

under this route will have had to pay a total of £12,937 in fees. The application process is very complex, and lots of evidence is required to be submitted. If someone slips up just once and does not submit the correct forms during the 10 years, they will become undocumented. As a consequence, adult undocumented migrants will be able to regularise their status only by applying for indefinite leave to remain, but they qualify for ILR only if they are aged 18 to 25 and have lived in the UK for over half their life. If they are over 25, they have to show that they have lived in the UK for more than 20 years and prove that they have strong ties to the UK and cannot relocate to their country of origin. Talk about making it tough for people to regularise their status. It smacks of a continuation of the hostile environment that was used mercilessly against certain sections of the community.

With undocumented migrants being denied access to work, accommodation and health services, they are easy prey for those who want to exploit them. As a consequence, they are driven underground, do under-the-counter work and are totally dependent on the shady individuals whom they now serve. The exploitation of migrants was excellently commented on by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). As the Prime Minister pointed out, if tens of thousands of undocumented migrants are working but not paying taxes, it will impact on the economy, so it is in everyone's interest to ensure that urgent action is taken to regularise their status. It is not just the economy that would benefit—so would our public health, as it was only last week that we heard that, in some parts of London, undocumented migrants were being turned away from GP surgeries, where they were trying to get vaccinated against covid, because they are reluctant to give their names and addresses, for fear of being arrested. Meanwhile, those who were turned away are not putting just themselves at risk. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) pointed out, they risk spreading the virus among the wider community.

The Home Office does not know even roughly how many undocumented migrants are present in the UK, and it was heavily criticised for that by the Public Accounts Committee in its September 2020 report, "Immigration enforcement". Another problem that the Government face is that they have hollowed out the immigration enforcement system. As such, they have effectively outsourced the service to the general public, leaving it up to landlords, employers and the NHS to notify the Government if someone is undocumented. The National Audit Office last did an estimate of the number of undocumented migrants living and working in the UK in 2005, and it put the figure at 430,000. There has been no official assessment of the number since then, so not only do the Government not know the scale of the problem, but even if they did and these figures are still accurate, they could not do much about it.

Can the Minister tell me whether the Home Office has made any assessment of the number of people who are currently here and are undocumented, and what the Government's plan for tackling this issue is? The Minister will no doubt say that anyone who is here and is

undocumented is here illegally, but if the Government know this, what are they doing about it? Even the Prime Minister does not believe that the Home Office will detain and deport 430,000 people, so we have a perfect storm of the Government being aware of a problem and being unable and unwilling to deal with it, with tens of thousands of people living and working in the UK undocumented.

The petition proposes an amnesty for all undocumented migrants, but a more comprehensive approach would be to focus on an accessible "route to regularised" system and meaningful reforms to stop people from falling out of status, as mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). This will offer a longer-term solution to the problem. I note that the Irish Government are currently looking at new plans for a fairer pathway to regularisation for undocumented migrants with a period of four years' residency in Ireland. The current methods of regularising status in the UK are onerous and cumbersome, and need an urgent overhaul. In addition, the exorbitant level of fees for visas is scandalous, and clearly another barrier designed to make it harder for people to regularise their status—a continuation of the Home Office's malevolent hostile environment.

I therefore ask the Minister whether, as this problem is not going away any time soon, the Government will make it easier for undocumented people to have their status regularised, and what the long-term plan for addressing the problem is. It is surely in all our interests that the basic needs of everyone here are met, and that—undocumented or otherwise—everyone can contribute safely, openly and without fear to our communities. For that to happen, we need to see change.

7.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for opening this debate—opening a petition debate is always quite a challenge, compared with others. It has been an interesting debate, and I will attempt to respond to the points that have been raised. However, I hope colleagues will appreciate that with eight minutes in which to speak, it is unlikely that I am going to cover the full gamut of our immigration rules and our position in this area.

My first point is to reflect on comments I made at the Dispatch Box last year at the start of the pandemic. I made very clear that for those approaching the NHS in relation to covid-19—either exhibiting symptoms and therefore looking for treatment, or looking for vaccination—the information they give will not be used for the purposes of immigration enforcement. Their status will not be checked: that is not a relevant consideration if they are approaching the NHS for treatment. We not only encourage people to come forward for vaccination, but have facilitated those who have arrived irregularly to access vaccination services. Given some of the stuff that exists on the internet about this, and given some of the comments we have heard throughout the debate, I want to make very clear that such treatment is in line with how those people would have been able to access vaccinations if they had been a UK national, now that vaccination is available to everyone over 18. From a

Home Office perspective, the NHS's operations to tackle the pandemic are not items that we will look to use for any purpose of immigration enforcement.

It might be helpful if I set out some of the background on the issue we have been debating today. First, it should be noted that the definition and coverage of this group is complex: the term "undocumented migrants" often interchanges with "illegal" or "irregular" migrants. As evidenced in this debate, it can include illegal entrants, who have perhaps arrived in the back of a lorry; overstayers who have stayed beyond the term of their visa; failed asylum seekers whose claims have been declined; those not adhering to the conditions of their stay; and even those who remain in the UK without status, but whose situation is temporary and who intend to leave in short order. For today, I will include all of those groups in our definition.

Secondly, there is no current, reliable and accurate estimate of the number of those without status who are resident in the UK. As my shadow, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), touched on, the last official Government estimate was made in the mid-2000s, when the population was believed to be around 430,000. In 2009, a report by the London School of Economics estimated that the number of irregular migrants was around 618,000. An obvious part of the problem in formulating an accurate estimate is not just calculating and agreeing on the different groups this population involves but the fact that, for obvious reasons, many of them will not come into contact with the Home Office or make their presence known here in the UK. The petition proposes an immediate amnesty for all those groups provided that they do not have a criminal record.

Sarah Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will not, as I have less than five minutes and this has been a lengthy debate.

The Government remain committed to an immigration policy that welcomes and celebrates people who are here legally but also deters illegal immigration. We want to encourage people with skills and potential from around the world to make the UK their home and help make the UK a dynamic global economy, but we must not reward those who exploit the system and break the rules. We must also prevent the abuse of benefits and services paid for by UK taxpayers and disrupt the criminals who exploit and profit from the vulnerable, who will be tempted to use dangerous and irregular routes to get here if they can see a clear reward at the end of it. That is right both for the British public who pay for welfare services and for those wishing to visit and settle in the UK who played by the rules.

The Government recognise that we have a responsibility to help the vulnerable and have established several schemes and programmes to assist those most in need. One example is the work that we have done to resettle genuine refugees fleeing directly from regions of conflict and instability and to provide the necessary support to help them build a life in the UK and integrate as self-sufficient members of our society. In the past six years, the Government have offered protection to 25,000 people in this way—more than any other country in Europe in that period—through a planned resettlement scheme. That is in addition to welcoming a further

29,000 people through refugee family reunion between 2015 and 2019. We have also recently introduced a new pathway to citizenship for British national overseas status holders and their family members facing draconian new security laws in Hong Kong, with an estimated 5.4 million people potentially being eligible for the scheme.

We believe that a fair and balanced system is about guaranteeing integrity in the UK's immigration system. We must support those in need, but we must also make sure that there is a cost for those who intend to break the rules, as have Governments of all colours since the introduction of our modern immigration system, despite some of the comments we have heard today.

The proposal to offer amnesty to all those without permission to be in the UK undermines the integrity and effective working of the UK immigration system. To recognise the stay of those who have wilfully and deliberately broken our laws is first and foremost an affront to those who have done the right thing and migrated here lawfully and contributed by paying visa fees and the immigration surcharge. An amnesty for those not playing by the rules could prove divisive for those groups who feel an injustice when they have complied with our policies, and it is safe to say that it is unlikely to build public confidence in the migration system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich said, it would certainly be interesting to see the public reaction if such a policy were included in an election manifesto.

The debate is about not just the impact of those ignoring our migration rules and refusing to leave but making sure that the public feel that there is confidence in the system. Why would someone bother to apply for status or renew their visa if they knew that they could just stay and be granted that status anyway? A point ignored by the petition and by some Members is the fact that the immigration routes already provide for undocumented migrants who have not broken the law except for by remaining in the UK without lawful immigration status.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I have less than two minutes, I am afraid. I appreciate that you wanted to give people time, Mr Hosie, but as the Minister I have only eight minutes to wind up, which is pretty short.

People who fear the situation in their country of origin may choose to claim asylum, and there is no cost to that. Those with qualifying family members who are present and settled in the UK can apply under the family rules, for example where there is a qualifying partner and insurmountable obstacles to family life continuing outside the UK. The private life rules provide for those who have been in the UK for a particularly long time to regularise their status. That said, we are in the process of reforming our immigration rules and, as many Members may be aware, I have met the group We Belong to discuss the current process for those who arrived here as children or were born here but did not qualify for British citizenship. We aim to simplify the settlement rules in the near future, as part of our wider work on the new migration system, which will include some changes in response to the points raised by that group, and we will reduce the number of people ending up on the 10-year route to settlement. We accept that too many people are on that route.

[Kevin Foster]

I have had to give a fairly short summary of the Government response, but we do not believe that granting an amnesty, as proposed by this petition, would be appropriate. It would undermine the rules—actually, it would make the whole creation of rules pointless if people could just ignore them and get status anyway.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Tom Hunt for a brief winding-up speech.

7.39 pm

Tom Hunt: Thank you very much, Mr Hosie, for chairing this debate so expertly. I thank the Minister for his response and every other participant for making this debate pretty well-tempered and balanced.

Anne McLaughlin: So far.

Tom Hunt: The hon. Lady should not worry. As I was saying, it has been a pretty balanced debate in which we have heard both sides of the argument. I also think that there is a shared concern for the individuals in question. However, this is a very complicated issue, with unintended consequences.

It seems to me that very few Members agreed with the petition's call for pretty much a blanket amnesty for every single undocumented migrant. However, I think there is space somewhere for a very important debate about how we can potentially do something in this area.

Obviously, one of the real concerns is what amnesties might mean in terms of encouraging future illegal crossings. In some respects, if the Opposition supported the Bill

going through Parliament today and if that Bill were enacted, as I hope it will be, they might think that the public were in a much better place to have a debate about a reasoned amnesty and pathway for citizenship because there would be public confidence that, in doing so, we were not fuelling illegal crossings from the continent. That may be, at some point, where we get to: if there is confidence that we have a rules-based immigration system and we are confident that we are in a better position to tackle illegal crossings and make determinations about the people who aspire to live in our country, perhaps at that point we could have that important debate about amnesties.

Actually, there are some shortcomings when it comes to an amnesty for those who have been here for over 10 years. I said that I saw some of the arguments in favour of that, but it is a complicated issue.

Clearly, though, this has been a productive debate. This issue needs to be debated much further; I am sure that it will be. Again, I thank the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition. Hopefully, they will feel that, at the very least, the issue—in a general sense—has had a good airing and been thoroughly debated today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 567681, relating to an amnesty for undocumented migrants.

7.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 19 July 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Companies House Corporate Targets 2021-22

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Callanan, has today made the following statement:

I have set Companies House the following corporate targets for the year 2021-22:

Complete and up to date data

Ninety seven per cent. of companies on the register will have an up-to-date confirmation statement.

Digital service availability

Digital services will be available for a minimum of 99.9% of the time.

New services

Develop a new online journey for submission of confirmation statements.

Develop a digital filing capability for insolvency transactions.

Customer satisfaction

Be in the top quartile of public service organisations for customer satisfaction.

Diversity

Increase the number of staff recruited to Companies House from under-represented groups by 10%.

Delivering value

Manage expenditure within budgetary limits.

Spending with small and medium businesses

Fifteen per cent. of spend will be spent directly with small and medium businesses.

[HCWS191]

Covid-19 Business Regulatory Easements

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The challenges faced by the UK, and other countries across the world, since the pandemic began have been substantial and many businesses have experienced unprecedented disruption. In the face of the threat of the virus the Government acted rapidly to provide support to protect businesses, individuals and public services across the UK, and have adapted their economic response as the pandemic has evolved. Our plan for jobs has supported jobs and businesses with over £400 billion of economic support, from generous employment support schemes to tax cuts, deferrals, loan schemes and cash grants.

Alongside financial support, the Government took the extraordinary step of temporarily relaxing a wide range of rules and regulations to make it easier for businesses to continue working through the disruption caused by covid-19. These easements cover a variety of areas, including capacity market easements, competition, and the suspension of liability for wrongful trading, among others.

As we have successfully progressed through the stages of the road map we have reduced many of the restrictions that have been in place over the last 15 months. And the progress we have made on the road map means that many of the rules that were relaxed can be reinstated.

While the phenomenal vaccine roll-out has offered every adult some protection against the virus, and the crucial link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths is weakened, the global pandemic is not over yet, and cases are currently rising across the UK. This means that vigilance must be maintained and people will be asked to continue to act carefully to manage the risks to themselves and others. There will still be high levels of infection and illness and therefore disruption to lives, businesses and the economy.

We are therefore retaining or extending some of the regulatory easements. This is necessary where they continue to provide flexibility to businesses while they feel ongoing impacts from covid-19, including on workforce absences, and where relaxed rules will enable them to recover, helping to reinvigorate the high street and boost consumption.

We will be publishing the details on the easements that will expire or be retained on www.gov.uk shortly.

The relaxation of these rules will be reviewed again in autumn at which point the Government will consider the status of these measures for further extension, permanent retention or expiry.

Ministers will continue to review the measures at regular intervals as needed thereafter to provide certainty to business and ensure that the appropriate regulatory environment is in place as required. A separate process is being taken forward for the measures protecting businesses from eviction, insolvency and debt recovery, which has been outlined in an oral statement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on June 16.

Better regulation framework impact assessments

The Government introduced a significant amount of emergency legislation responding to covid-19 and we recognise that there may be a risk that current better regulation framework requirements might lead to disproportionate administrative burdens on Government Departments, particularly on the retrospective validation of temporary emergency legislation that is extended to be in force for 12 months or more.

For emergency covid-19 legislation which is exempt from the business impact target (BIT) under the “civil emergencies” exemption we have decided to relax the administrative requirements set out in the better regulation framework for full impact assessments to be undertaken and scrutinised by the Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC). This relaxation of the policy requirement covers time-limited measures only. As a matter of policy under the framework, impact assessments are still expected for other emergency measures which are not temporary, even if they are non-qualifying measures under the “civil emergencies” exemption, and so not legally required to be supported by an impact assessment. Such impact assessments are to be submitted to the RPC in the normal way. The statutory requirement for measures exempted in this way from legal requirements for IAs to be verified as such by the RPC remains.

This adjustment of requirements will remain in place in advance of the wider reform of the better regulation framework completing.

[HCWS192]

Hospitality Strategy: Reopening, Recovery, Resilience

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): On Friday, I published a hospitality strategy to support this vital sector.

The hospitality sector contributes significantly to the economy and plays a leading role in supporting local communities, high streets and city centres across the country. However, it has been one of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic.

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on a sector that exists to bring people together was always going to be significant. That is why the Government's £352 billion package of support included specific and targeted help for hospitality businesses. Despite this, over the course of the pandemic, hospitality businesses have largely been operating at a loss.

To support the sector's bounce back, we have developed a forward-looking strategy that sets out the Government's long-term vision to help businesses on their road to recovery and beyond. This will sit alongside and support other Government strategies and plans, including the build back better high streets strategy and tourism recovery plan.

We have worked closely with sector partners and businesses to develop an ambitious vision for the sector which reflects the aims of returning the sector to its pre-pandemic health, supporting wider economic recovery and creating thousands of resilient and dynamic businesses for years to come.

The strategy recognises the vital role that hospitality businesses will play in the UK's economic recovery, to society and the levelling-up agenda.

[HCWS190]

DEFENCE

Loss of Secret Documents: Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): On Friday 16 July 2021 my noble Friend the Minister of State, Baroness Goldie, made the following written ministerial statement in the House of Lords:

On 28 June, the Minister for Defence Procurement noted that an investigation had been launched into the loss of MOD classified documents; and undertook to inform the House of its conclusions. That investigation has now concluded. The investigation has independently confirmed the circumstances of the loss, including the management of the papers within the Department, the location at which the papers were lost and the manner in which that occurred. These are consistent with the events self-reported by the individual. We are confident that we have recovered all the Secret papers. The investigation has found no evidence of espionage; and has concluded there has been no compromise of the papers by our adversaries. The individual concerned has been removed from sensitive work and has already had their security clearance suspended pending a full review. For security reasons, the Department will be making no further comment on the nature of the loss or on the identity of the individual. The Department takes protection of its information extremely seriously and will continue to take firm action in response to such incidents.

[HCWS194]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Identity and Attributes Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government are today publishing a public consultation on enabling legislation to strengthen digital identity use for the whole economy.

More and more people, in all walks of life, are using products and services online. People expect these transactions to be simple, quick, safe and personalised. However, people in the UK often still have to use a combination of paper documents issued by Government, local authorities and the private sector—and a mixture of offline and online routes—when opening a bank account, claiming benefits, starting a new job or applying for a school place. And these steps often need repeating for each new transaction.

Voluntary online authentication, identity and eligibility solutions can increase security, ease of use and accessibility. They are central to transforming the delivery and efficiency of public services and people's ability to operate confidently in an increasingly digital economy.

The Government are committed to realising the benefits of digital identity technologies without creating ID cards. We have committed to put in place the necessary framework and tools so that digital identity solutions enhance privacy, transparency, confidence and inclusion, and that users are able to control their data, in line with the principles published in the 2019 call for evidence response.

In our response to the call for evidence, we committed to enabling businesses and individuals across the economy to use digital identities securely and with more confidence. This is only achievable by putting in place a legal framework and regulatory infrastructure.

The consultation DCMS is publishing today follows up on that commitment. It sits alongside the UK digital identity and attributes trust framework, which was published as a first draft in February 2021, opening the way for legislation. Digital identity legislation is needed to underpin a governance framework in law, to enable Government to allow checks by industry against data it holds, and to create confidence in the validity of digital identities. We have worked extensively with industry, civil society, and academia to get to this point.

The consultation sets out our plans to create a digital identity governance framework. Creating a governance system which can build trust in digital identities is vital. This trust will drive innovation and growth in the UK economy and good governance will ensure that the digital identity and attribute principles are upheld.

We are also consulting on our intention to create a permissive legal power for Government-held attributes to be checked safely and securely by non-public sector organisations for eligibility, identity, and validation purposes. This will allow digital identities in the UK to be built on a greater range of trusted datasets and ultimately provide people with a choice of how they use this data to prove their identity.

Finally, we are proposing to establish in law that digital identities and digital attributes can be as valid as physical forms of identification or traditional identity documents.

This builds on our commitment to enable the use of digital identities in as many areas as possible and to build confidence in their validity.

Further details can be found in the consultation, available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/digital-identity-and-attributes-consultation>.

A copy of the consultation will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS197]

EDUCATION

School Rebuilding Programme

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I am confirming details of the next 50 schools to benefit from the 10-year school rebuilding programme announced by the Prime Minister in June 2020. I am also confirming the launch of a public consultation on the approach to prioritising schools for future places on the programme.

The school rebuilding programme forms part of the Government's plans to build back better, supporting teachers in England to deliver a high-quality education, so that pupils gain the knowledge, skills and qualifications they need to succeed.

It is also an important commitment to investing in construction sector jobs and skills, including apprenticeships and T-Level placements, helping drive growth as we recover from the covid-19 pandemic. The programme will have a continued focus on modern methods of construction and provide opportunities across the industry, including for small and medium-sized enterprises.

As with the first schools announced in February, this second group of schools have been prioritised based on the condition of their buildings. The projects include primary and secondary schools, as well as special and alternative provision schools. This also represents a substantial investment in schools in the midlands and north of England, with 32 out of 50 projects located in these regions.

The new school buildings will be energy efficient designs with high sustainability standards that will be net zero carbon in operation and mitigate the risks of climate change.

The 10-year programme will continue to target school buildings in the worst condition across England, and today we have published a consultation on the approach to prioritising schools for the long-term programme. Responses from this consultation will help to shape the way we identify the buildings most in need of replacement or significant refurbishment. The consultation will be open until 8 October 2021.

Alongside the rebuilding programme, the Government have committed £1.8 billion in financial year 2021-22 for maintaining and improving the condition of the school estate.

Further details, including lists of the school rebuilding projects have been published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS199]

Three-year School Funding Settlement

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today I am confirming provisional funding allocations for 2022-23 through the schools, high needs and central school services national funding formulae (NFF). The allocations distribute the final year of the three-year school funding settlement that the Secretary of State for Education announced to Parliament on 3 September 2019. Core school funding increased by £2.6 billion in 2020-21, and is increasing by £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, compared to 2019-20.

These allocations are part of the annual funding cycle. They are separate to the three major interventions we have made to support education recovery in response to the covid-19 pandemic—over £3 billion in total. All of that support for recovery will be provided on top of the funding allocations announced today for local authorities and schools.

Funding through the schools NFF is increasing by 3.2% overall in 2022-23, and by 2.8% per pupil. The NFF will distribute this funding based on schools' and pupils' needs and characteristics. The main features in 2022-23 are:

The core factors in the NFF (such as basic per-pupil funding, and funding for additional needs such as deprivation) will increase by 3%.

The funding floor will ensure that every school is allocated at least 2% more pupil-led funding per pupil compared to its 2021-22 NFF allocation.

The minimum per pupil funding levels will increase by 2%, compared to 2021-22. This will mean that, next year, every primary school will receive at least £4,265 per pupil, and every secondary school at least £5,525.

Support for small and remote schools (through the "sparsity" factor) will receive a further increase. In 2022-23 the additional funding that such schools can attract is rising to up to £55,000 for primary schools, and up to £80,000 for secondary schools—in both cases, a £10,000 increase from 2021-22. We are also moving to using road distances instead of straight line distances when measuring a school's remoteness. This will significantly increase the number of schools attracting this funding. As a result, the funding allocated through the sparsity factor is increasing from £42 million in 2021-22 to £95 million in 2022-23.

High needs funding is increasing by £780 million, or 9.6%, in 2022-23—following the over £1.5 billion increase over the last two years. This brings the total high needs budget to £8.9 billion, an increase of over a third since 2019-20. The high needs NFF will ensure that every local authority receives at least an 8% increase per head of population, with some authorities seeing gains of up to 11%. This vital extra resource will continue to help local authorities manage their cost pressures in this area, while the Government remain focused on completing the cross-departmental review of the SEND system to ensure that it supports children and young people with SEND as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Central school services funding funds local authorities for the ongoing responsibilities they continue to have for all schools. The total funding for ongoing responsibilities is £284 million in 2022-23. In line with the process introduced for 2020-21 to withdraw funding over time based on the historic commitments local authorities entered into before 2013-14, funding for these historic commitments will decrease by 20%.

The provisional NFF allocations published today will be updated, based on the latest pupil data, to produce final allocations in December that local authorities will receive through the dedicated schools grant.

Local authorities will continue to use that funding to determine final allocations for all local mainstream schools. In parallel with the changes being implemented for 2022-23, the Government are in the process of consulting on how we complete our reforms to the schools NFF in the longer term—whereby funding allocations for individual schools are determined by one single national formula, rather than 150 separate, different, local authority formulae.

[HCWS200]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccines

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): The independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has published its advice on the vaccination of children and young people. Her Majesty's Government (HMG) has accepted this advice and all four parts of the UK expect to follow the JCVI's advice and align their deployment in each nation.

JCVI's advice is based on currently available data and is kept under review as new data emerges, the JCVI has advised that the Government:

- Maintains the existing eligibility criteria for 16 to 17-year-olds;
- Offers vaccination (for operational flexibility) to all 17-year-olds who are within three months of turning 18;

- Offers vaccination to 12 to 15-year-olds with the underlying health conditions specified below:

- severe neuro-disabilities,

- Down's syndrome,

- underlying conditions resulting in immunosuppression, and

- those with profound and multiple learning disabilities, severe learning disabilities or who are on the GP learning disability register.

- Offer vaccination to 12 to 15-year-olds who are healthy but are household contacts of individuals (adults or children) who are immunosuppressed. The purpose of this is primarily to protect the household member who is immunosuppressed (16 to 17-year-old household contacts are already offered vaccination).

Through the covid-19 vaccines programme, we have administered over 80 million vaccine doses in the UK, with recent Public Health England data suggesting that this has prevented between 6.4 and 7.9 million infections and between 26,000 and 28,000 deaths in England alone. The vaccine is the most effective way of protecting the most vulnerable and minimising hospitalisations and deaths. An early estimate from PHE suggests that in adults under the age of 40 a single dose of the Pfizer vaccine is 61% effective against symptomatic disease, and 72% for a single dose of the Moderna vaccine.

For children and young people, the risk of serious outcomes from covid-19 is much lower than for older people and we recognise that decisions on vaccination for this group are therefore much more finely balanced than for adults. The JCVI has been clear that for those children and young people with specified health conditions the balance of evidence is that they will benefit from vaccination.

With the deployment to these new groups of children and young people those out, I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG has taken on in relation to further vaccine supply via this statement and attached departmental minute containing a description of the liability undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses to the population increases the statutory contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme for the only vaccine currently authorised for use in those aged under 18, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

It has been and remains the Government's strategy to manage covid-19 until effective vaccine/s have been deployed at scale. Willingness to accept the need for appropriate indemnities to be given to vaccine suppliers has helped to secure access to vaccines with the expected benefits to public health and the economy alike much sooner than may have been the case otherwise.

Given the exceptional circumstances we are in, and the terms on which developers have been willing to supply a covid-19 vaccine, we along with other nations have taken a broad approach to indemnification proportionate to the situation we are in.

Even though the covid-19 vaccines have been developed at pace, at no point and at no stage of development has safety been bypassed. The MHRA approval for use of the currently deployed vaccines clearly demonstrates that this vaccine has satisfied, in full, all the necessary requirements for safety, effectiveness, and quality. We are providing indemnities in the very unexpected event of any adverse reactions that could not have been foreseen through the robust checks and procedures that have been put in place.

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when other covid-19 vaccines or additional doses of vaccines already in use in the UK are deployed.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal.

[HCWS201]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Developing Countries Trading Scheme: Consultation

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): This morning, the Department for International Trade will be launching a public consultation on its new Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS). Post-Brexit Britain can now take a more ambitious, generous, and pro-growth approach to trading with developing nations. The proposed scheme aims to grow trade with lower-income nations, supporting jobs and growth across the globe and at home.

This consultation will make sure that the public, business, civil society, associations and other interested stakeholders can have their say on the Government's approach to preferential market access for developing countries.

We intend this new scheme to be best in class, and have studied programs in Canada, the US, Japan and the EU, before designing a uniquely British offer which backs growth, enterprise and ambition.

This is a major opportunity to grow free and fair trade with developing nations, allowing them to diversify their exports and grow their economies, while British households and businesses benefit from lower prices and more choice. The new UK scheme will mean more opportunity and less bureaucracy for developing countries, for example by simplifying rules of origin requirements for the least developed nations.

The UK currently operates a similar scheme rolled over from the EU, but as an independent trading nation can now take a simpler, more generous, pro-growth approach to trading with developing countries. It would apply to 70 qualifying countries currently and include improvements such as lower tariffs and simpler rules of origin requirements for countries exporting to the UK.

For example, this could mean lowering tariffs on products including rice from Pakistan and trainers from Nigeria. Bangladesh and Vietnam demonstrated that increasing trade through schemes like this one have helped them grow their economy, improve living standards, and drive down poverty.

For instance, Vietnam's exports to the UK more than tripled between 2009 and 2019 while poverty rates plummeted from more than 20% in 2010 to an estimated 5.9% in 2020. Today, it is a fully-fledged FTA partner. We want more developing countries to follow in their footsteps.

The online consultation opens today on www.gov.uk and will be live for eight weeks. It will be accompanied by an information note that sets out details of the existing UK preference arrangements. The new Developing Countries Trading Scheme will take effect in 2022.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/designing-the-uk-trade-preferences-scheme-for-developing-nations>.

[HCWS193]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements: 2020 Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): The role of the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St. Andrews agreement, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and PSNI in handling national security matters.

His Honour Brian Barker CBE QC, the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me his report for 2020. What follows is a summary of the main findings of the report covering the period from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020.

His Honour Brian Barker states:

2020 was a most difficult year, overtaken by, and then submerged under, the covid-19 pandemic. It opened with good news: a functioning Executive and Assembly re-emerged after a three-year gap, in parallel with the publication of "New Decade, New Approach". It closed, still under the shadow of the virus, with the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

The dominant focus faced by the community throughout was to cope with the uncertainties of lockdowns, and the consequences of the unpredictable spread of the pandemic; a combination that led to considerable unforeseen pressures and understandable anxieties in all quarters.

The last visit to Northern Ireland that I was able to make was in February for a Northern Ireland Committee on Protection (NICOP) meeting. The subsequent lockdown, the medical and social emergency and no predictable future pathway made any subsequent planning and conducting of the usual types of personal briefings and interviews impossible. The alternative approach adopted was to receive regular briefings from members of MI5 and PSNI during virtual NICOP meetings.

Dissident republican activity during the year was somewhat reduced due to enforced life pattern changes and continuing pressure from the security forces, as their leadership took stock. The number of incidents fell slightly compared with 2019. The overall picture in this area, sadly, had changed little. The threat from both dissident republican groups and loyalist paramilitaries remained, and some areas of the community continued to be subject not only to terrorist activities but also to unacceptable criminal acts and attitudes at a level which has almost come to be regarded by many as normal.

Nevertheless, a number of operations were successfully concluded and were marked with high profile court appearances of senior participants and the imposition of significant sentences. A major success was the co-ordinated arrest in mid-August of 10 individuals who have since been charged with a variety of terrorist offences following a long running and carefully co-ordinated joint operation between MI5 and the PSNI. Incarceration of key individuals will be a serious blow to dissident republican operations with the resulting loss of leadership and planning capability.

My meetings with senior members of MI5 and PSNI were restricted to virtual contact through secure links in the latter part of the year. It was apparent that the many extra health and operative difficulties faced by MI5 since April, in order to continue to function at the expected level, had been overcome. Benefits gained from regular meetings at senior level with PSNI and the continuing strides made in overall co-operation with a variety of agencies had led to significant resulting successes in the field. The overall impression was of effective co-operation having gone up a level, as working partnerships were strengthened and respective responsibilities better understood.

The dire circumstances faced by the PSNI on the ground, coping externally with administering changing regulations and internally with infection and shielding, had required a change in posture; but adaptation had been impressive and results and control overall had been encouraging. The decrease in activity had led to a sharp decline in arrests under terrorism legislation, compared with the previous year, but there had been an increase in the recovery of ammunition and explosives. The traditional marching events, following leadership advice and public appeals, were severely curtailed.

I was pleased to note that the Policing Board were able to appoint a new chair and vice chair in April and I look forward to the opportunity of meeting them. In the course of the year the Board published their new corporate plan and the new stylised policing plan 2020-2025. Their human rights advisor was asked to examine the challenges and response of PSNI to community activity (including Black Lives Matter demonstrations). The conclusions were generally positive given the difficulties, although with some reservations.

The annual statistics published in November for 2019-20 show that the powers of stop and search under section 47a of the Terrorism Act 2000 were not exercised. There were 179 premises searched under warrant under section 37 Schedule 5 of the same Act. There were 128 (down from 146) persons detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act and 125 (98%) were held for 48 hours or less. 17 persons were charged with a total of 39 offences including two charges of murder, one charge of attempted murder, 15 charges of firearms offences, eight charges of drug offences and six charges of explosive offences.

A total of 26 (down from 34) persons were disposed of by non-jury trial, 18 of whom were found guilty of at least one charge. A total of 13 (down from 17) non-jury trial certificates

were issued by the DPP. There was a total of 14 (up from six) persons convicted in the Crown Court under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Terrorism Act 2006 or the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008. There were 465 (down from 1515) examinations carried out by police officers under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, all of these were examinations of persons, 34 of which resulted in a detention. No compensation or agency payments were made under section 38 schedule 4 of the Justice and Security (NI) Act 2007 where property was broken, destroyed or damaged or other private property rights interfered with.

The extent of my investigations, regrettably, have had to be extensively curtailed. However, in coping with extraordinary difficulties, I have good reason to believe that both MI5 and PSNI have maintained high standards and motivation and have achieved commendable results. The two major dissident republican groups undoubtedly suffered severe setbacks in what was a very successful year for the security forces. The danger remained of some sort of reactive show of strength, which fortunately did not materialise; and the minor groups continued to maintain a low profile. Police and prison officers continued to be regarded as legitimate targets and still had to face unacceptable risks. In pockets of the community intimidation continued, and although the figures for paramilitary shootings and beatings dropped, it continued to be concerning.

My conclusions, restricted by the exceptional conditions, in relation to annex E of the St. Andrews agreement are as follows:

Further to reinforce this comprehensive set of safeguards, the Government confirm that they accept and will ensure that effect is given to the five key principles which the chief constable has identified as crucial to the effective operation of the new arrangement:

a: All Security Service intelligence, relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI.	Clear evidence of successful collaboration. There is compliance
b: PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter terrorist activities relating to Northern Ireland.	Regular and effective top-level meetings. There is compliance.
c: Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures.	There is compliance
d: The great majority of national security CHIS in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing handling protocols.	There is compliance
e: There will be no diminution of the PSNI's responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing Board's ability to monitor said compliance.	The new leadership of the Policing Board is now in place and the human rights advisor has been asked to investigate and provide reassurance to the Board. I look forward to a good working relationship with the new HR advisor.

[HCWS196]

Petition of Concern Mechanism: Third Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): I am laying before both Houses of Parliament the third report by the UK Government on the use of the petition of concern mechanism in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As part of the New Decade, New Approach deal upon which devolved government was restored in Northern Ireland on 11 January 2020, the UK Government committed to undertaking such a report every six months.

This report covers the period from 12 January 2021 to 11 July 2021, during which no petition of concern has been lodged against any motion in the Assembly.

The fact that there have been no uses of the Petitions of Concern since the restoration of the political institutions is a positive reflection of the conduct of business within the Assembly. However, I want to take this opportunity to reinforce the importance of a stable, mature, functioning Executive and Assembly that is focused on addressing the issues that really matter to their daily lives.

The next UK Government report on the use of the Petition of Concern will cover the period from 12 July 2021 to 11 January 2022.

The UK Government are standing by their commitment to bring forward legislation that provides the necessary reforms to the petition of concern mechanism. The Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill has reached the Commons Report stage in its passage through Parliament. Once this legislation has completed its passage through Parliament and received Royal Assent, it is crucial that the Assembly reflects the detail of these reforms in its Standing Orders to ensure the full implementation of these aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal.

[HCWS198]

TRANSPORT

Light Rail: Financial Support

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Light rail is a lifeline for many communities across the UK. During the pandemic, the Government have provided significant levels of financial assistance to the light rail sector through the Light Rail Revenue Grant and the Light Rail Restart Revenue Grant, supporting six light rail operators and local transport authorities in England outside of London, with over £200 million in funding since March 2020.

To date, Light Rail Restart Revenue Grant has funded up to 100% of pre-covid service levels, ensuring key workers have continued to be able to travel easily and safely as well as ensuring the public could access necessary amenities. Critically, as restrictions are lifted and passengers return, the light rail sector is important in helping local economic recovery, thereby supporting the Government's levelling-up agenda.

To encourage passengers back, light rail services should be as available as they were prior to the pandemic. Without support, however, it may not be possible for operators to maintain the services they have provided up until now.

I can therefore announce that a further £56 million in financial support in the form of recovery funding has been made available for the light rail sector. Funding operators and local authorities from 20 July until the end of this financial year, this will succeed the Light Rail Restart Revenue Grant which ends on 19 July. This

funding will support operators in adapting their commercial offerings to ensure the longer-term viability and self-sustainability of the sector and is intended to be the final tranche of covid-related support.

[HCWS195]

Petitions

Monday 19 July 2021

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

St Ilids Meadow postal round

The petition of residents of the constituency of Ogmore,

Declares that the postal round at St. Ilids Meadow, Llanharan be made a permanent postal round rather than one which is overtime only.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Royal Mail to make the postal round at St. Ilids Meadow, Llanharan a permanent postal round.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chris Elmore, *Official Report*, 18 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 653.]

[P002663]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):

The Government's objective in relation to post is to ensure the provision of a sustainable, efficient, accessible, and affordable universal postal service in the United Kingdom.

Royal Mail is a privatised business, fully independent of the Government. The Government therefore is not involved in the day-to-day operations of Royal Mail and does not play a role in handling or resolving matters relating to Royal Mail's services.

Royal Mail has nevertheless advised the Government that that there has been a reduction in service levels in areas served by Pontyclun Delivery Office, including St. Ilid's Meadow. However, the combination of declining absence levels and a recent recruitment drive are contributing to restoring service levels. A new management structure at Pontyclun Delivery Office and a revision of the postal operation to address the property growth in the area will allow Royal Mail to continue to improve service levels.

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Occupation of East Jerusalem

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the residents of Sheikh Jarrah in occupied East Jerusalem are facing dispossession and forced evictions from their homes; further that Israel's illegal occupation of East Jerusalem has facilitated discriminatory laws against Palestinians who now have little recourse to the law and face the constant threat of dispossession and displacement; further that the SNP strongly condemns all breaches of international law and violence and supports the European Union position of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders; further that the International Criminal Court must be able to do its duty and urgently conduct a full investigation; further that the Israeli

Government must reconsider its position of non-cooperation with the ICC's impartial probe; and further that this illegal occupation cannot continue with no investigation and repercussions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the International Criminal Courts' investigation into the illegal occupation of East Jerusalem and to take the necessary steps to reach a peaceful resolution to the current violence.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 19 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 822.]

[P002665]

Observations from The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):

The UK's opposition to evictions of Palestinians from their homes is long-standing and well known. The Geneva Convention, which applies to all occupied territory, including East Jerusalem, prohibits demolitions or forced evictions absent military necessity. The practice causes unnecessary suffering to Palestinians and is harmful to efforts to promote peace. We urge Israel to cease such actions permanently. We are monitoring court proceedings around Sheikh Jarrah and will continue to make our views on the issue clear.

The UK is helping fund legal aid for Palestinians in 96% of ongoing cases. We remain particularly concerned about the further demolitions in Humsa Al Bqai'a. The UK has publicly called on Israel to end these demolitions and we will continue to raise this with the Israeli Government. The British Embassy in Tel Aviv has reiterated the UK position in meetings with the new Government of Israel.

As the Foreign Secretary made clear during his visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) on 26 May, settlements are illegal under international law and damaging to peace efforts. The UK has condemned decisions by the Government of Israel to advance the construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank, which causes serious damage to a viable Palestinian state and calls into question Israel's commitment to the two-state solution.

We continue to urge Israel to cease such actions permanently. UK Officials at the British Embassy in Tel Aviv continue to raise the issue regularly with the Israeli authorities and repeatedly call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law.

The UK's long-standing position on the middle east peace process is clear and has not changed: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 lines with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. Our position was reflected in our support for UN Security Council resolution 2334 and we continue to urge Israel at the highest level to halt settlement expansion immediately.

The UK's position is that the status of Jerusalem should be determined in a negotiated settlement, and ultimately the shared capital of both states.

We continue to strongly support scrutiny of the situation in the OPTs.

We regularly engage the UN Security Council, working closely with European and regional partners, as well as the US.

The UK is a proud friend of Israel. We stand up for Israel when it faces bias and disproportionate focus. However, we do not hold back from voicing or raising concern about Israel's actions when warranted.

The UK remains resolute in its commitment to Israel's security. We condemn Hamas' indiscriminate and abhorrent rocket attacks against Israel and the Israeli people. Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence. In exercising this right, it is vital that all actions are proportionate and in line with international humanitarian law.

The UK is a strong supporter of international criminal justice and accountability. The UK is a strong supporter of the ICC and we respect the independence of the Court and its officials. We do not consider that the ICC has jurisdiction in this instance as the UK does not currently recognise Palestinian statehood.

The situation on the ground demonstrates the urgent need to make progress towards peace. We are actively

working with partners to support a durable ceasefire and to encourage the parties to address the drivers of conflict. The UK remains committed to the two-state solution as the best way to bring peace and stability to the region, and ensure a comprehensive and permanent solution to the conflict.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 19 July 2021

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Future Trade Deals: Human Rights

The following is an extract from International Trade Oral Questions on 15 July 2021.

Mr Jayawardena: On the point the hon. Gentleman made towards the end of his question, there has been much talk about global Britain this week and trade is the route to prosperity, for Britain and her friends around the world. Although others may be content with offering only handouts, we are determined to give our friends a hand up. So having taken back control of our

trade policy, I can confirm that we will be looking to go further than the EU and we will be setting out our plans and launching a consultation on this very soon.

[Official Report, 15 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 527.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Jayawardena: On the point the hon. Gentleman made towards the end of his question, there has been much talk about global Britain this week and trade is the route to prosperity, for Britain and her friends around the world. Although others may be content with offering only handouts, we are determined to give our friends a hand up. So having taken back control of our trade policy, I can confirm that we will be looking to go further than the EU and we will be setting out our plans and launching a consultation on **the generalised system of preference** very soon.¹

¹*[Official Report, 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 10MC.]*

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**not later than
Monday 26 July 2021**

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