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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 25 October 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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Eastwick and Gilston neighbourhood plan group to get their voices heard is a David and Goliath challenge. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to listen to and trust local people, and will he meet me to discuss this project and how it can provide a live case study for the design of future planning reform?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is thanks to the work of organisations such as the Hunsdon, Eastwick and Gilston neighbourhood plan group that we involve local communities in making these uniquely sensitive decisions. As we consider our plans for the future, one thing we want to do is to make sure that the voice of local people is integrated more effectively into planning decisions.

David Johnston: The two district councils that Wantage and Didcot cover are in the top 10 areas of England for houses built, but in the bottom third for infrastructure. People would be less unhappy with the house building if it came with more GP surgeries, the reopening of Grove station and better roads. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, as he reforms planning, there will be a greater emphasis on improving infrastructure to support the population that the houses come with?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Across the country, many people would welcome new housing development enthusiastically if they had the assurance of knowing that there was sufficient investment in infrastructure to ensure that public services and other utilities were there for them so that additional pressure was not applied unequally. His argument is correct, and it has been incorporated into our thinking about the future of planning reform.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his new role and look forward to seeing him at the Select Committee next week. I do not know whether he has had the chance to read yet the Select Committee's review of the planning reforms. May I suggest that local plans need to be at the heart of a plan-led system, indicating where development is likely to happen? To do that, local plans need to be simpler, easier to understand and get more people involved in the process so that there is real community buy-in to them. Finally, even when local plans are in place, there still needs to be an opportunity for local people to be able to comment on, object to, and, where necessary, influence the outcomes of individual planning applications.

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a very distinguished Select Committee Chair. At the danger of establishing a treacly consensus right from the very beginning, may I say that I entirely agreed with the first part of his question? As for the second part, I certainly welcome that direction of travel.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today, York has been voted Britain's most popular city. However, if we get planning wrong, we will embed inequality into our city. The governance structures over projects such as York Central are currently in the wrong place, so they will not deliver for the people in my city. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss York Central, as I have met many of his Ministers, so that we get the governance structures right for the future?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady. It is important to recognise that we want to work with York to ensure that there is a local plan in place, but it is also the case, as she knows, that this Government are investing in York, deploying more resource and bringing more civil servants to the beautiful city that she represents. I hope that we can continue, in that consensual manner, to deliver for the people of York.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his role. I also welcome his replies to hon. Members, as he said that, effectively, the Government's developers charter is being reviewed. I have not seen the right hon. Gentleman torpedo something so effectively since he sunk the Prime Minister's leadership bid in 2016. But we know that, like Lazarus, the Prime Minister came back. Will the Secretary of State therefore take this opportunity to confirm that the Government's wholly unpopular and disastrous planning reforms will never return?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for taking me back to the halcyon days of 2016; it was not so much a torpedo being launched as an unexploded bomb going off in my own hands. As the former Member for Kensington and Chelsea, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, pointed out, one of the things about committing political suicide is that you always live to regret it.

On the hon. Lady's broader point, it is only fair to say that the planning White Paper was mischaracterised by many. There is so much that is good in it, but it is important that we listen to concerns that were expressed in order to ensure that an already powerful and compelling suite of proposals is even more effective.

Domestic Abuse Victims: Safe Accommodation

2. **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Justice on increasing the supply of safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims.

[903780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): My Department works with others across the Government to tackle this serious issue. I am pleased that on 1 October the new duties in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 came into force to require local authorities to provide support for all victims who need safe accommodation. We are supporting councils with £125 million this year to help them to deliver on those duties.

Claire Coutinho: One of the really important parts of breaking the domestic abuse cycle is providing safe spaces for the women who need them to go to. I welcome the millions of pounds that the Government have invested in this area, but in East Surrey we have created an innovative local financing model, with the work of Surrey County Council and Reigate and Banstead Women's Aid. Will the Minister meet us in order that we can explain how we have created this model, so that it could be recreated elsewhere?

Eddie Hughes: I am huge admirer of the work of Women's Aid across the country. During the summer, I was delighted to have the opportunity to visit Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid to see the excellent work that it does. Of course, I would be delighted to join my hon.

Friend in a visit to Reigate and Banstead Women's Aid to see the innovative work that it is doing to provide more accommodation.

Building Safety

3. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve building safety. [903781]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The Government's landmark Building Safety Bill will drive the most significant regulatory, cultural and behavioural improvements to building safety in a generation. In addition, as the House will know, we are investing £5.1 billion of taxpayers' money to remove unsafe cladding from high-rise buildings, with a new tax and levy on industry. We will offer further support to leaseholders in buildings between 11 metres and 18 metres high.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome the action taken so far, but it is not fast enough or far enough for the thousands of leaseholders in Putney who are trapped in a perfect storm, with some living in unsafe buildings and many more caught up in a crisis of confidence in building safety. They cannot sell their homes, yet through no fault of their own, they are forced to pay thousands in ongoing costs for waking watch—or sleeping watch, as they call it—and insurance, before we even get to the costs of remediation works. They need Ministers to get a faster grip of the situation and solve the crisis. Will the Minister agree to Labour's plan for a building works agency to find, then to fix, fund and, crucially, certify these buildings as safe; and then pursue those who are responsible for the costs, not the leaseholders?

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Lady will know that through the building safety fund we have now distributed £734 million for 689 identified buildings—identified by local councils and communities, which are best placed to do this—with the result that 65,000 homes are now in the process of being remediated. Ninety-seven per cent. of buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding have been remediated or are in the process of so being. Of course we want to speed up the process and of course we will work with developers, local authorities and fire and rescue services to make sure that the work is being done. It is being done, it shall be done: she can be assured of that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): How will the building safety charge benefit leaseholders living in North West Leicestershire?

Christopher Pincher: The building safety charge is a charge to ensure that the building safety regulator—the most important and powerful regulator of building safety in the world—will be responsible for ensuring that through the life cycle of the development of a building, from design to construction through to its operation, it will be safe. We will be ensuring that there are accountable persons for those buildings who will be responsible for them. We will make sure that the cost that falls on individual leaseholders will be sensible and as limited as possible. My hon. Friend can be assured that that cost will be transparent so that they can see exactly what they are paying for.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): First, let me pay my respects to Sir David Amess. He was a tireless campaigner for building and fire safety, chairing the exceptional all-party parliamentary group on the subject. I last met him only a few weeks ago to discuss the omissions in the Building Safety Bill. His loss will be greatly felt in these crunch weeks of the Bill's passage.

I also welcome the new Secretary of State to his role. He has been brought in by the Prime Minister he tried to torpedo to sort out the building safety crisis. Given his reputation for getting things done, expectations really are very high.

In the spirit of David Amess, I offer my commitment to help to resolve this crisis, because it is now urgent and getting worse. Every day, more innocent homeowners receive new and enormous bills for remediation, their insurance costs soar, and lenders will not lend. Does the Minister agree that we face an important, and closing, window to bring forward any necessary legislation? Will he work with us and campaigners to put into law the protection of leaseholders from any remediation costs and bring forward a comprehensive plan to resolve this?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question and the spirit in which it was asked. I certainly associate myself with her remarks about our late friend Sir David Amess.

During the passage of the Building Safety Bill, which is currently in Committee, a number of amendments have been tabled. Nine amendments tabled by the Opposition and have been withdrawn, and only one has been divided on. That is an example of the collegiality that we have managed to establish as this very important Bill progresses through Parliament. Of course we want to make sure that leaseholders are not exposed to unfair costs. That is what we have been working towards since the Grenfell disaster, and we shall continue so to do. The hon. Lady's support in helping that endeavour will be gratefully received.

Lucy Powell: It is good to hear that that is what we are working towards, but it has been some time now and this does need enacting in law as the only way to ensure protection.

Can I give the Minister, in the same spirit, some gentle advice as someone who has been dealing with these issues for many years? He will not get resolution on this issue by rehashing some of the previous failed approaches like naming and shaming of developers, nor will it be dealt with by just looking at the symptoms of the problems such as insurance, as pressing as that is. Does he accept that he must tackle the problems at their root: namely, I repeat, by protecting leaseholders in law, as the Government promised; and bringing forward a comprehensive plan to assess, fix, fund and certify all tall buildings by overseeing risk assessment and removing the 2020 consolidated advice? We have the fund, but it simply will not work without dealing with those two fundamental issues, so will he do all this before the window closes firmly?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question and how she couched it. She will know that we have committed to raise a significant amount of funds through a residential developers property tax and a tall building levy, which will ensure that buildings that

need to be remediated are remediated, so avoiding costs falling on leaseholders. In the Building Safety Bill, we have made it absolutely clear that we expect building owners to pursue every route to find funding before passing on any cost to leaseholders. If building owners do not do that, the costs they may impose can be challenged in the tribunal. We are looking at further evidence we have received on the prevalence of cladding in the 11 metre to 18 metre building cohort. That will help us finalise our decisions, and we shall bring them forward in due course.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister has been very accessible, and I have had conversations with him over this issue, but I am still not clear what people can do if they have already been stung with costs in respect of remediation. To go to a tribunal is a gamble, because legal costs may be incurred. Can he give further thought in his approach to this matter to how to get money back for people who have wrongly been charged when they are merely innocent leaseholders?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged, as ever, to my right hon. Friend. He is right. We have met on a number of occasions to discuss these issues. I will not labour the point about the public funds we have already expended on remediation or the plans we have to bring forward further support for those who find themselves in this very difficult and distressing situation. I will always talk to him and consider the thoughts and ideas he presents.

Supported Accommodation: Care Standards

4. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the regulation of standards of care in exempt supported accommodation. [903782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Supported housing plays a vital role in delivering better outcomes for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. My Department has been working with local authorities on several pilots focused on improving the quality of accommodation and support for people in exempt accommodation. We have given more than £5 million to five councils, including almost £2 million to Birmingham City Council. The pilots concluded in September, and we are assessing the findings to decide our next steps.

Steve McCabe: I am aware of the pilots, but the Minister must know that in more than 150,000 exempt accommodation premises across the country, vulnerable people are living in the most appalling circumstances. The regulator recently judged that the largest provider in Birmingham was non-compliant, while it is costing the taxpayer £110 million in Birmingham alone. For how much longer does he think the Government will be able to tolerate this state of affairs?

Eddie Hughes: It is important that we consider the fact that there are some excellent providers of supported housing across the country, and I say that with a vested interest, because I worked for one of them in Birmingham before I came to Parliament. Although I fully appreciate that the number of units of supported accommodation in Birmingham has doubled from approximately 11,000

to 22,000, it only takes a small percentage of rogue landlords to create a significant problem. As I said, we will continue to work closely with the council and Sharon Thompson, the councillor responsible there, to ensure we come up with a solution. I respect the hon. Gentleman tremendously, and I look forward to working with him on this issue.

Devolution Across the UK

5. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What plans his Department has to increase devolution across the UK. [903783]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This Government plan to expand, augment and increase devolution across the United Kingdom, and we have already begun discussions with areas interested in county deals, and we will be setting out next steps in the levelling up White Paper.

Nigel Mills: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. In the east midlands, we look with some envy at neighbouring regions that have elected mayors and have successfully attracted more investment. I urge him to make progress on an east midlands elected mayor. In the meantime, if he cannot do that, Derbyshire stands ready for a county deal and would appreciate being a pathfinder.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Expanding the model of combined authority mayors and a greater level of devolution are at the heart of making sure that local communities have strong leaders who can make a decisive difference, not least in the economic sphere. I know that Derbyshire County Council is now under exemplary Conservative leadership and we hope to be able to build on that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his place. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 fundamentally undermined the devolution settlement and was explicitly rejected in Holyrood and the Senedd. He claimed again today that he seeks to augment devolution, so can he explain how riding roughshod over democratically devolved Parliaments does that?

Michael Gove: We never ride, roughshod or otherwise, over the devolution settlement. I have two things to say: first, I hope that we will shortly receive news from the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the allocation of funds under the Act's financial assistance power through the levelling-up fund. I am pleased to say that a number of SNP MPs—the hon. Lady's parliamentary colleagues—as well as SNP councils, have backed bids to that fund. It is great to have locally elected representatives on the ground supporting the financial assistance power of the Act and the vital importance of working together. Secondly, although of course I will not interfere in the devolution settlement, there is a contrast between our approach, where we devolve more power to local government in England, and that of the current Scottish Government, which takes power away from Scottish councils.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Across Lancashire, we are ambitious about having a county deal—with a mayor, I hope—but levelling-up bids must come first. Can the Secretary of State give some clarity about the timing of the second round of those bids? In Rossendale, where we are working with our levelling-up board on a plan, we need to know the timeframe.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is right: east Lancashire is one area that we will focus on in the coming months. Much more needs to be done, and he has been at the forefront of ensuring that the voice of the whole of the north of England—not just that of east Lancashire—is heard clearly in Whitehall. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be in a position to share details of the next round with the House a wee bit later.

UK Community Renewal Fund

6. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the UK community renewal fund on communities with high levels of deprivation. [903784]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): We are committed to ensuring that the community renewal fund reaches those most in need. To achieve that, we identified 100 priority places across Great Britain based on an index of economic resilience measuring productivity, household income, unemployment, skills and population density. Other places were also able to bid and the assessment process considered both the strategic fit and the deliverability of bids.

Justin Madders: Could the Minister tell us, when the pilots have concluded, how the shared prosperity and community renewal funds will interact with levelling-up bids? In future, will there be an overlap? Will it be possible to bid for both? On the levelling-up process, will he meet me to discuss Ellesmere Port's excellent and ambitious levelling-up fund bid?

Neil O'Brien: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. As he knows, the community renewal fund is intended to act as an innovative source of funding to try new ways of doing things as we move on from EU structural funds, and to enable us to start working on new ideas ahead of the levelling-up fund.

Support for Towns

7. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support towns. [903785]

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): The Department is investing billions in regeneration across the whole UK as part of the Government's central priority to level up and unite our country. Programmes such as the £3.6 billion towns fund and the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will help to achieve that by supporting the renewal of our towns and cities, including in my right hon. Friend's constituency of Harlow, which has been awarded a £23.7 million town deal.

Robert Halfon: I am pleased to report to the House that almost 8,000 new apprentices have been taken on in Harlow since 2010. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best example of levelling up is providing young people with the skills they need to climb the educational ladder of opportunity? To that purpose, will she, my constituency neighbour, support our bid of £20 million to the levelling-up fund to provide vital regeneration for Harlow to help our town to grow and evolve?

Kemi Badenoch: As a fellow Essex MP, I am delighted that so many apprentices have taken their step towards a career in my right hon. Friend's constituency. I know many of them will have come from my own constituency next door in Saffron Walden. It is fair to say that we both agree that equipping the next generation with the skills to compete and succeed is integral to levelling up. Having said that, I cannot comment on individual bids to our levelling-up fund—I suspect I will be saying that quite a lot during this afternoon's session—but I will say to him that we are determined to help Harlow transform local skills and infrastructure, capitalising on his brand-new hospital, science park and, of course, the £23.7 million town deal.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If the ministerial team are serious about levelling up, they must look at towns and their sustainability. As the Minister is travelling around, will she bring her team to visit Huddersfield, where we have committed to being a sustainable town with health and wellbeing at its heart, using the United Nations sustainable development goals to deliver in a meaningful way?

Kemi Badenoch: I think the hon. Gentleman and I are in agreement about the importance of sustainability. I would be delighted to find out more about what is happening in Huddersfield. I will have my officials check my diary to see when time will be available.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Shipley was delighted to receive £25 million from the towns fund, and Bingley in my constituency is another town in urgent need of support. The Secretary of State talked about the timing of the levelling-up fund. Will the Minister confirm whether the criteria for the next round of bidding to the levelling-up fund will be the same as for the first round of bidding, and will she look favourably upon a bid from Bingley to the levelling-up fund?

Kemi Badenoch: At the moment, we are reviewing the first tranche of the levelling-up fund, so the criteria for the second and future tranches will be decided in due course, but I can tell my hon. Friend that we have heard his plea. We shall be looking, as we will across the House, at all the pleas from people who would like to see more from the levelling-up fund.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister will join me in welcoming the bold and ambitious plans to transform our town centres in St Helens borough—in St Helens, Newton-le-Willows and Earlestown. We have reached an innovative partnership with the English cities fund and the private sector. The missing part of the jigsaw are the Government. We want a hand up, not a handout, so will she guarantee that the levelling-up fund will be based on need and on the merit of the proposal?

Kemi Badenoch: I think that goes without saying. Yes, of course, we recognise that many places would like to see additional funds from the levelling-up fund, but we will evaluate the strength of the bid from the hon. Member's constituency. That will be taken across with everybody else's bid, and those most in need shall get what they require.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that the city of Stoke-on-Trent was born out of the five towns—or the six towns, depending on whose course of history you took—but unfortunately Burslem and Tunstall, the two towns I am pleased to represent, have vanity projects such as Ceramica and an out-of-town retail park right next to the high street—both built under former Labour administrations—with both high streets suffering as a result. Does my hon. Friend agree that the £3.5 million levelling-up fund bid for Tunstall, which will go a long way to regenerating our high street, Tunstall town and the baths, plus the high streets task force, will help us bring these towns back to life?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes. *[Interruption.]*

Houses in Multiple Occupation: Local Authority Powers

8. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What plans his Department has to strengthen local authority powers on regulating houses in multiple occupation. [903786]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I hate to interrupt private conversations, but we have equipped local authorities with robust powers to regulate both the standards and the management of houses in multiple occupation, or HMOs. These include mandatory and additional HMO licensing, civil penalties of up to £30,000, rent repayment orders and, for the worst offenders, banning orders. Local authorities also have planning powers to limit the proliferation of small HMOs within their area, and of course we will continue to monitor closely this part of the housing sector.

Janet Daby: I recently held a public meeting arising from the many concerns expressed by local residents regarding HMOs that have been developed, and more HMOs that are being developed, in a particular area. The issues they were very much concerned about were antisocial behaviour and poorly developed conversions of houses into HMOs. I am aware of a young person paying £1,000 to rent a single room in one of those HMOs. The councils can put in place article 4, but that takes 12 to 18 months, on the basis of the Government's agreeing to it. My residents want to know: what more can the Government do to support them, and to give local authorities the regulation they need to act earlier?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question, and she is right that in Bellingham, Downham, Grove Park and Whitefoot, article 4 restrictions are in place. We have provided more than 180 authorities with further funding for enforcement powers, and she will know that her council can bring to bear a range of powers to ensure that HMOs are properly maintained. The conditions that can be imposed on mandatory licences include that gas safety is properly recognised and electrical appliances are in order, that fire and smoke alarms are properly installed and maintained,

and that the property ought to be improved. Her local authority has all the tools it needs, and we will keep the issue under review. I am always happy to talk to her and other colleagues about this matter.

First-time Home Buyers

9. **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help first-time home buyers. [903787]

18. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help first-time home buyers. [903797]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The Government are committed to helping more people own their own home. We offer several schemes to support first-time buyers, including our recently launched First Homes programme, which provides discounts of at least 30% on first homes. Our Help to Buy and shared ownership schemes also offer affordable routes into home ownership.

Anthony Browne: Greater Cambridgeshire, the city and South Cambridgeshire combined, is planning to build 49,000 new houses and flats over the next 20 years, which is as many as already exist in the city of Cambridge. In South Cambridgeshire district that amounts to 53% more house building than the Government assess is needed, and it will double the amount of house building over the next 20 years. Will the Minister confirm that that unprecedented house building bonanza is not being imposed on South Cambridgeshire by the national Government, but that it is an active decision of the local planning authority, South Cambridgeshire District Council?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on behalf of his constituents. Of course we need more homes to be built in the right places, and there are parts of our country where the cost of buying or renting a home is many multiples of local household income. However, he is right: local housing need is not a binding target, and local authorities have responsibility for working out what their local target should be, and agreeing that with the Planning Inspectorate. Although we welcome ambitious local authorities, they have an absolute responsibility to set their own housing targets.

Sir David Evennett: I appreciate the Minister's response to the question. We all recognise that we need a mix of housing provisions for the market to thrive, but does he agree that home ownership remains a huge aspiration for many of our constituents across the country, and that schemes such as Help to Buy have been a vital tool in supporting thousands of first-time buyers on to the property market?

Christopher Pincher: My right hon. Friend is right. Every time we poll people, more than 80% say that they want the opportunity, the right, and the dream of owning their own home and having a stake in their community and country. That is why the Help to Buy scheme has been so important. Just a few weeks ago we announced the 300,000th Help to Buyer, Sam Legg and his partner Megan, who live in Asfordby in Leicestershire. They said that without Help to Buy they would not have been able to get on the property ladder. We want more Sams, and we want more Megans.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Many first-time buyers thought that they had bought the home of their dreams, only to discover that it was rendered worthless because they are caught up in the cladding scandal. Earlier this month, one of my constituents received a service charge bill for £103,000 to fix cladding for which they are not responsible, and requesting sums of money that they do not possess. It is reported that the Secretary of State, who I welcome to his post, has been told by the Prime Minister to “sort out” the problem. It is evident to all our constituents affected that the measures that the Government have announced thus far, which I support, are insufficient to bring this nightmare to an end. When will we see a comprehensive plan to help those leaseholders?

Christopher Pincher: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right: there are many people caught up in a terrible situation. That is why we have already spent more than £5 billion of public money on remediating the highest-rise buildings, and we will be bringing forward further proposals to deal with some of the other issues that he identifies. Fundamentally, this issue needs to be brought back into proportion. If we look at what Ken Knight and Judith Hackitt have said, there are far too many lenders and insurers that have been risk averse and have been ascribing zero values to property where no EWS1 form and no remediation, or very little remediation, is necessary. We are working with that sector to make sure that we fix it, and we will.

Devolved Administrations: Relations with UK Government

10. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Government’s relations with the devolved Administrations. [903788]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): My assessment is that they are really not bad at all.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I tend to disagree, but I will accept it anyway.

The chief of staff to the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), said recently that the democratic mandate for a second Scottish independence referendum was “clear” and apparent. He also said that support for Scottish independence rose from the very moment the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) became Prime Minister. That is being driven mainly by opposition to the Government’s Brexit policy and the perceived relative handling of the covid-19 pandemic by the UK and Scottish Governments. Would the Secretary of State care to tell the House and the people of Scotland why he thinks continuing to dismiss Scotland’s democratic rights will strengthen the Union?

Michael Gove: Scotland’s democratic destiny was asserted in the 2014 referendum, when a majority of people voted to remain in the United Kingdom. The strength of the United Kingdom is visible daily. In just a week’s time, the dear green place that the hon. Gentleman has the honour to represent—Glasgow—will be home to COP26. One of the things about COP26 is that we

would not have that global climate change conference in Glasgow if Scotland were not in the United Kingdom. We would not have a billion-pound-a-year Union dividend if Scotland were not in the United Kingdom, and indeed we would not have the hon. Gentleman’s mellifluous tones gracing this House if Scotland were not in the United Kingdom.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): This Government are committed to at least one new freeport in Wales. I chair the Anglesey freeport bidding consortium. Can the Secretary of State reassure my Ynys Môn constituents that he is working with the Welsh Government to ensure that there is at least one new freeport in Wales?

Michael Gove: Freeports are one of the many advantages that all the nations of the United Kingdom can enjoy as a result of our departure from the European Union. Freeports will allow investment in every part of the United Kingdom, and I am looking forward to working with partners in Wales, and indeed in Scotland and Northern Ireland, to make sure that we can seize the opportunities that Brexit provides for our coastal communities.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I feel I should doff my cap at the munificence of this Parliament towards Scotland.

Devolved Governments are not involved, consulted or considered in trade deals; Scotland is shut out of carbon capture and storage, despite the hot air of Better Together promises; and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 undermines the last two decades of the devolution settlement. In what ways does the Secretary of State think that bypassing the democratically elected devolved Parliaments shows that this Union is indeed a partnership of equals?

Mr Speaker: Secretary of State—briefly.

Michael Gove: I meet weekly with First Ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. If the hon. Lady were privileged enough to be able to observe those meetings, she would see that they are like a nest of singing birds. They are festivals of cordiality. I recognise that the SNP needs to keep its activist base happy with the recitation of these grievances, but the reality is that those who serve in the Scottish Government know that we in the UK Government are their friends and partners, and Scotland has no better friends than the other citizens of the United Kingdom.

Regeneration in Towns and Cities

11. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support regeneration in towns and cities. [903789]

15. **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support regeneration in towns and cities. [903793]

17. **Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support regeneration in towns and cities. [903796]

21. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support regeneration in towns and cities. [903800]

23. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support regeneration in towns and cities. [903802]

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): The Department is investing billions in local growth funds—including the towns fund and the levelling-up fund, which I mentioned earlier—to deliver regeneration across the UK as we level up across all parts of the country. Our high streets strategy, published earlier this year, outlined our vision for supporting thriving places. We have an ambitious agenda for improving opportunity, living standards and public services, and for renewing pride for the whole of the UK. That will be set out in our upcoming levelling-up paper.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. Supporting cities such as Stoke-on-Trent, so that we level up opportunity and get the investment we need, is vital. Will my hon. Friend have a chat with the Chancellor and the Secretary of State about supporting our levelling-up bids through this week's Budget, so that we get the investment we need in Stoke-on-Trent?

Kemi Badenoch: I recognise that hon. Members from Stoke-on-Trent are very keen and have thrown their full support behind the levelling-up bids that have been submitted. The bids are being assessed in line with the published assessment process. The outcomes of the first round will be announced this autumn, as we have said, but I cannot comment specifically on his bid.

Holly Mumby-Croft: Does my hon. Friend agree that initiatives such as Conservative-run North Lincolnshire Council's policy of two hours' free parking are incredibly important for supporting our high streets and town centres? I extend an invitation to her: if she wishes to make use of one of those free parking spaces, we would be very glad to show her our ambitious levelling-up plans.

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend: parking policies are important in supporting high streets to thrive. That is one of the reasons why, in the build back better high streets strategy, we announced a package of measures to make parking more accessible. I thank her for the strong support she has shown for North Lincolnshire's levelling-up fund bids. She will know that we expect to announce the outcomes later.

Darren Henry: The Government's levelling-up agenda will finally bring much-needed investment to the east midlands, and the town of Kimberley in my constituency may gain hugely from it. Kimberley has some fantastic ideas, such as moving its cricket pitch and building a new community hub. However, there is concern among local community leaders that if the money is committed for a three-year time span but is not spent on time, it will no longer be available for use on the new hub. Can I have a commitment from the Minister that that is not the case?

Kemi Badenoch: We are looking to empower local communities such as Kimberley as part of our levelling-up agenda, but I must stress that any project that wishes to gain Government funding must have a fully developed plan before bidding. Places should have confidence in their capacity to deliver to agreed timescales.

Cherilyn Mackrory: Falmouth has huge potential. It is the third-deepest natural harbour in the world and is the gateway to the Atlantic. However, it is crying out for investment, and often gets overlooked because of how well the town does with very little. I stand ready to make the case for Falmouth in the next tranche of the levelling-up fund. Will the Minister confirm that the next tranche will be forthcoming? The Secretary of State said that we would have it in a wee while. Could the Minister perhaps expand on that? Will she, or the Secretary of State, join me for a tour of Falmouth to see how it could unleash its potential?

Kemi Badenoch: First of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Truro town deal in her constituency and welcome her continued work as a champion of the area. I encourage her and local partners to continue to work with us on our shared ambition to level up Falmouth and towns throughout Cornwall as future opportunities emerge. She will know that as part of this work, £88.7 million of towns fund investment is driving regeneration and growth in Camborne, Penzance, St Ives and Truro, and there are real economic benefits for Falmouth, too. I am sure she and I can discuss a potential visit in due course.

Jerome Mayhew: Levelling up has sometimes been mis-described as a transfer of resources from the south to the north, but is it not a better analysis to say that it spreads the opportunities often seen in cities to the towns and villages of our communities, as part of the wider social covenant? If so, what plans does the Minister have to support towns in Broadland, including Fakenham, Acle and Aylsham?

Kemi Badenoch: I should start by saying that the levelling-up agenda is not transferring resources from cities to towns, or from south to north. Levelling up is about empowering local leaders and communities to drive real change, and restoring local pride across the UK, so I thank my hon. Friend for asking that question. The Government are investing over £17 million in Norfolk's towns, with ambitious town deals already delivered in Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn. The UK shared prosperity fund will help to ensure levelling up for people in places across the UK. It will increase and spread opportunity for people no matter where they live, including in places like Fakenham.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The town deal is incredibly important to us in Staveley, and we welcome the fact that the Government are supporting the plans for the town centre. Will the Minister stress to her colleagues that the cut to universal credit will fatally undermine retail in Staveley, and that these plans would benefit from universal credit not being cut?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government are doing everything they can to support communities such as his. He knows the official Government

policy on universal credit. We are putting other resources in place to support those people in his community who need them the most.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): With Question 16 in mind, which we may not fit in today, may I ask what urgent action the Department will take, with COP26 around the corner, to ensure that local authorities have a proper grip on flood defences and the environmental issues that councils face day by day?

Kemi Badenoch: I apologise to the hon. Lady, but I am not sure, given her reference to COP26, what sort of answer she is expecting. I can ensure that she gets a letter providing further information.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Even if we add up all the piecemeal pots of regeneration funding that the Government like to mention in their press releases, they still come to nowhere near the £15 billion that has been cut from local councils under the Tories. The Government have failed to deliver on promises to reimburse covid costs, and the Tory-led Local Government Association says that there is now £2.6 billion in non-covid cost pressures on councils. On Wednesday, the Chancellor has the chance to tackle the council funding crisis that the Government have created, so what demands have Ministers in this team made to get the Budget settlement that all our towns and cities need?

Kemi Badenoch: I cannot comment specifically on what will be announced in the Budget this Wednesday, but I will tell the hon. Gentleman what, for instance, we did in the most recent local government finance settlement. In this year's settlement, we made available an increase in core spending power in England; it will go from £49 billion this year to £51.3 billion in 2021-22—a 4.6% increase in cash terms. We see ourselves as a supporter of local government across the country; we very much speak up for it in our discussions with the Treasury, and I am sure that will become apparent on Wednesday.

Topical Questions

T1. [903804] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I would like briefly to pay tribute to two of my predecessors. It is an honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) in this role. I thank him for his dedicated service, and particularly for the role he played in championing integration and social cohesion in this county, and in ensuring that we recognise how vital beauty is in the built environment. It is also a privilege to follow our departed friend James Brokenshire in this role. There is not enough time now for me to say how much we all owe him, but he was a truly wonderful guy and a great Secretary of State.

Mr Perkins: I associate myself with the comments made by the Secretary of State. The great benefits that HS2 will bring to the east midlands and Yorkshire will be undermined if we do not get the increased capacity and reliability that new lines would bring, so it was

deeply concerning this weekend to hear the Government suggesting that future plans for the eastern leg of HS2 might not involve new lines. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he is an absolute advocate in Parliament and around the Cabinet table for the letter sent to him by the leaders of Leeds City Council and Nottinghamshire County Council, which stated that levelling up would “fall at the first hurdle”

if we did not get full investment in the eastern leg of HS2, with new lines attached?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but I will not pre-empt anything the Chancellor may say later this week about the commitment we are making on infrastructure.

T2. [903805] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What better example can there be of potential levelling up than Twycross zoo's bid, under Bosworth, for a national education and conservation centre? It would not only drive tourism but teach the next conservationists of the year. Would the Secretary of State care to come to Twycross and see it for himself? Failing that, could he give a date for when we can find out the result of the first bids?

Michael Gove: Having been in this House for 16 and a half years, I am familiar with what zoos look like, but it would be an absolute pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency. He makes an important point about the importance of linking environmental awareness and levelling up in the drive to unite and level up the country, and ensure that we address our broader environmental concerns.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): May I associate myself with the comments made about the former Members for Southend West, and for Old Bexley and Sidcup, who are both immensely missed by the whole House?

It is a pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State and the new Ministers to their place, and to see older Ministers as well—why not?

It has been four months since the deadline for community renewal fund bids. The mid-point reviews are due to start next week, but many areas still have no idea whether their bids have been successful. Some tell me that the Government's delays mean that their projects may collapse. There is no point in the Government trumpeting funding that never turns up, so will the Secretary of State commit to letting every area know the outcome of its bid before the end of this month? Can he guarantee that the Department's delays so far will not jeopardise jobs or investment linked to any of those projects?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The UK community renewal fund and its successor, the UK shared prosperity fund, are both examples of how we can have more effective control of the money that needs to be spent to support communities in improving productivity now that we have left the European Union. He is right that it is a cause of regret that we have not been able to respond as quickly as we might have wanted, but there will be more news later this week.

T4. [903807] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Given the excellent track record of councils, including the London Borough of Hillingdon, on delivering infrastructure improvements in a variety of local services, including homes, sports centres, libraries and schools, what role does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State envisage councils playing in ensuring that our green investment projects are fulfilled locally?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Local authorities are vital delivery partners for the Government's grant-funding initiatives to decarbonise homes. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have been delighted to hear that the heat and buildings strategy, which was published last week, committed further funding to those initiatives, with £950 million for the home upgrade grant and £800 million for the social housing decarbonisation fund between 2022 and 2025. The strategy also committed to investing £1.4 billion in our public sector decarbonisation scheme to reduce emissions from public buildings.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I welcome the new Ministers to their place. In 2019-20, the Government oversaw a net loss of 17,476 social homes. House building fell short of its national target by 90,000 homes. That caps more than a decade of house building failure. Every year, the Government do not meet their housing targets and do not build enough genuinely affordable homes. Will the Secretary of State grab the bull by the horns and build a new generation of green homes for social rent at scale?

Michael Gove: Not a bad idea.

T7. [903810] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): Operational carbon emissions continue to fall, but as the Secretary of State will know, 38% of our global emissions still come from our buildings. Will he consider regulating embodied carbon in our built environment, as a way to promote more sustainable building and the use of more natural materials?

Eddie Hughes: The Government's net zero strategy sets out our ambitions to help the construction sector improve its reporting on embodied carbon in buildings. We are also exploring the potential for a maximum embodied carbon level for new buildings in future, while encouraging the sector to reuse materials and make full use of existing buildings. In championing low-carbon materials, increased energy efficiency and enhanced product design, we are supporting the sector to deliver cleaner, greener buildings for tomorrow.

T5. [903808] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State on a point about the Llanhilleth Miners Institute, which does fantastic work? It was a safe haven for my community during the floods last year. It applied to the UK community renewal fund in May and got council support but, like others, it has heard nothing since. Will he please consider an extension to the time that the Llanhilleth Miners Institute will have in which to spend any grant, should it be successful?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. We want to make sure that the money is out of the door as quickly as possible, but we will, of course, look at every project, and will look to work with Llanhilleth to see what we can do to deliver effectively.

T8. [903812] **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): I support the right of councils to build homes, but there is an obvious conflict of interests when councils acting as developers award themselves planning permission. The Secretary of State will know that I presented a Bill on this issue during the last Session. Will he agree to meet me to discuss how we can take this proposal forward, so that councils are subject to the same checks and balances as private developers?

Michael Gove: I look forward to having just that conversation.

T6. [903809] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on retaining the portfolio responsibility for democracy in his new Department. When he cheered for the Brexit campaign, he used to rail against unelected elites making decisions. With that in mind, can he tell us how Lord Frost managed to become a peer and a member of the Cabinet, and how Malcolm Offord has managed to become a peer and a member of the Scotland Office? Was it anything to do with the £150,000 that he donated to the Scottish Tories?

Michael Gove: In both cases, it was sheer luminous talent.

T9. [903813] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister take action to stop the Mayor of London building over suburban station car parks in places such as High Barnet and Cockfosters, given the damage that it will do to public access to public transport, particularly for people with impaired mobility?

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): My right hon. Friend campaigns assiduously for her constituents in this regard. She and the House will know that the national planning policy framework makes it very clear that houses and other properties should be built in a sustainable way in sensible places, but she will also know—partly because of the campaigning that she brought to bear in this regard—that we have told the Mayor of London to amend his policy to allow for a tall buildings provision in local planning, enabling local authorities to say where they want tall buildings and where they do not. That will afford local communities much greater protection as to where tall buildings should or should not be built, thanks partly to my right hon. Friend.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): The bulk of the affordable homes programme funding goes on homes that are out of reach of even families on average incomes, and analysis from Shelter shows that the richest 28% of private renters are the only ones who earn enough to access the Government's new first homes scheme. If the Minister is so committed to levelling up, does he agree that it must involve building homes that people on low incomes can actually afford to buy?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question. Yes, we want to make sure that people are able to buy homes that are affordable. That is why we have introduced the first homes scheme, which allows for a discount of at least 30%, and up to 50% in areas of high unaffordability. It is why we have changed the

affordable homes programme to allow people to buy a smaller share of their property and then “staircase” at lower amounts. It is why we have the Help to Buy scheme, and why we have the guaranteed 95% mortgage scheme. The Government are absolutely determined to ensure that people can get on to the property ladder, in a way that the Opposition never have and never will.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to his post. In doing so, I cannot miss the opportunity to request a meeting with him so that I can convey the real concerns of local residents to the west of my constituency boundary, in the parish of Ifield, at proposals for 10,000 houses on greenfield sites.

Michael Gove: Of course I cannot comment on any individual planning application, but I know what a brilliant job my hon. Friend does in representing his constituents, so I look forward to meeting him to listen to the case he is making, or to a member of my ministerial team doing so.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Despite Bristol University students being housed in Bath because there were not enough students from Bath University, a planning inspector

ruled this year that more purpose-built student housing was needed. What does the Secretary of State suggest a local authority should do when it is overruled in this way?

Michael Gove: The planning inspector is, of course, there to ensure that there is effective compliance with the housing requirements on the part of local authorities. However, one thing that I would say for any planning inspector is that they depend on consistency, and there has been consistency in the way in which the Government have approached these issues. Where there has been inconsistency is in the position of the Liberal Democrats, who campaign in seats such as Chesham and Amersham on the basis that they are wholly opposed to new housing and development, and then, at a national policy level, call for even more houses to be built than this Government. Were it not for the fact that the phrase “hypocrisy” would be unparliamentary, that, I am afraid, would be the best description of the multi-faceted bottom-feeding perversion of consistency that is Liberal Democrat housing and planning policy. To describe it as hydra-headed would be an understatement, when it comes to the many contorted positions that the Liberal Democrats occupy on this issue.

NHS England Funding: Announcement to Media

Mr Speaker: While I am not obliged to explain my decisions about urgent questions, I want to make it clear why I have agreed to this urgent question. I have made it clear, repeatedly and as recently as last Thursday, that Ministers must make important announcements first to this Chamber. Despite those very clear comments, it is evident that the Government and the Treasury briefed journalists on the content of the forthcoming Budget over the weekend, including on NHS funding. Therefore, and in line with what I told the House last Thursday, I am giving the House the earliest opportunity to hold the Government to account.

I repeat to the Government that if they persist in making announcements first outside this House, Ministers will be called to account in this Chamber at the earliest opportunity. The Chair of Ways and Means, who oversees the Budget, is also very upset by the briefing that has gone out. At one time, Ministers did the right thing if they briefed before a Budget: they walked. *[Interruption.]* Yes, absolutely! They resigned. It seems to me that we are now in a position where if they have not got the information out five days beforehand, it is not worth putting out. Members are elected to this House to represent their constituents and those constituents quite rightly expect their MP to hear it first in order to be able to listen to what the Budget is about and also, in the days following that, to hold the Government to account. This is unacceptable and the Government should not try to run roughshod over this House. It will not happen.

3.36 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask whether the Government will make a statement on the announcement to the media of £5.9 billion for NHS England.

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Mr Speaker, I hope that you will recognise that I seek to be assiduous in my accountability to this House and in adhering to its protocols and forms, not least as a former member of the Procedure Committee. I can reassure you that what you said just now will have been heard not just by me but by colleagues in my Department and in Her Majesty's Treasury.

Just as we are determined to keep this country safe from covid-19, we also want to tackle the backlog that the virus has brought with it. We know that “business as usual” will not be enough, so we will do whatever it takes to ensure that people get the treatment they need as quickly as possible. In September, we announced plans to spend £8 billion to tackle the elective backlog over the next three years, in addition to the £2 billion this year.

The House will have seen the announcement of £5.9 billion to tackle the NHS backlog of diagnostic tests and procedures and to support the delivery of millions more checks, scans and treatments for patients across the country. This includes £1.5 billion for increased bed capacity, equipment, new surgical hubs to tackle waiting times for elective surgeries and at least a total of 100 community diagnostic centres to help to clear backlogs

of people waiting for clinical tests such as MRIs, ultrasounds and CT scans, as well as £2.1 billion of investment to modernise digital technology on the frontline.

This is an historic package of investment that will support our aim of delivering around 30% more elective activity by 2024-25 compared with pre-pandemic levels. That of course comes on top of the work we are doing to strengthen the NHS workforce, who have performed so brilliantly throughout this crisis. All of this is vital if we are to help get our NHS back on track and ensure that no one is left waiting for vital tests or treatments and that we have the right buildings, equipment and systems so that our NHS is fit for the challenge ahead.

Daisy Cooper: Almost every elected Member of this House woke up this morning to see the announcement of extra cash for the NHS in England to reduce the covid backlog, although it contained absolutely no details at all. There were no details on where the money will come from, no details on what this means for the almost 6 million people still waiting for treatment, and no details on what it means for our exhausted NHS staff. The Minister has reportedly said that this money is new. Well, is it? How do we scrutinise that claim? Will the Minister set out clearly today—not on Wednesday—where the money is coming from?

Many hospitals in the Government's so-called new hospitals programme, including those in west Hertfordshire, have been waiting months for funds to be released so that they can start renovation work. Is any of this so-called new money actually part of these existing commitments? There are almost 6 million people stuck at home in pain waiting for treatment. Senior medical staff are predicting thousands of early deaths if the Government fail to act. People are desperate to know how many more weeks they have to wait for their operation. Can the Minister tell them?

Finally, it is all very well announcing money for new diagnostic tests and medical equipment, but there are tens of thousands of vacancies in the NHS. Without the trained medical staff to use these new facilities, this plan is doomed to fail. Without a serious plan to recruit the NHS staff that we desperately need, England could face an epidemic of empty wards and shiny new scanners and superfast broadband going to waste because the staff who make our NHS what it is simply are not there any more.

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right that the waiting list is 5.7 million and growing. As she will have seen, the Secretary of State has made it clear that the number could grow to more than 13 million if all those who would normally have come forward in the previous year do come forward. That is exactly why we are taking these steps. Rather than expressing concern about the announcement, I would have thought she would welcome this investment, this new money, to help tackle those waiting lists. Of that 5.7 million, around 1.36 million—I may be slightly out—are waiting for diagnostic tests, which is why this is so crucial.

The hon. Lady asks where the money is coming from. She tempts me, but I am afraid she will have to wait until Wednesday's Budget for the Chancellor to set out how he is funding each of the announcements.

The hon. Lady touched on the single most important element of our ability to tackle the pandemic and to respond to the consequences for the elective waiting list

and, as I know she would, I put on record our thanks and gratitude to those staff. Radiologists and radiographers are the key people in this space, and since 2010 we have increased the clinical radiology workforce by 48% from 3,239 to 4,797 full-time-equivalent posts. The number of diagnostic radiographers is up by 33% since 2010.

Does that mean we need to continue to do more? Of course it does, and she is right to highlight the need for continued investment in our workforce. She will have seen last month's announcement of £12 billion of funding, a significant part of which will help to build that workforce, on top of the commitments we made at the last election and on which we are delivering.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The well-known journalist Michael Crick put out on Twitter:

"Tonight, in quick succession, I—and no doubt other reporters—received 6 Treasury press releases about what's in next week's budget—5 of them embargoed to various times over weekend... Whatever became of budget secrecy & announcing things to MPs first?"

The Government have put up a good Minister, so we cannot have a go at him for that, but why does he not go back and tell his friends in the Treasury, at the very least, to provide Members with copies of these embargoed press releases? If it is good enough for the media, it is good enough for us in this House.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, indeed my friend, and I understand and entirely appreciate where he is coming from. He is an assiduous parliamentarian and quite rightly, as Mr Speaker alluded to, he takes the role of this House extremely seriously, as do I. I suspect that what he says, just as what Mr Speaker said, has been heard loud and clear both in the Department of Health and Social Care and across the Government, including in the Treasury.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I remember a time when Chancellors went into purdah before a Budget. Perhaps that tradition needs to return.

Fortunately, I received the press release on Sunday. I should not have, but I was sent it, and obviously Members should have received it, too. Of course the NHS is in a desperate state and is under crushing, unsustainable pressure, partly because of a decade of under-investment in infrastructure, the cutting of thousands of beds and raids on the capital budget. It means that today, hospitals are facing a repair bill of £9 billion, and we have sewerage pipes bursting, ceilings collapsing and equipment breaking down. The number of safety incidents in hospitals as a result of these problems has increased by 15% in the last year alone. Not only is the equipment old and outdated but, on a head-for-head basis, we have some of the lowest numbers of computed tomography and magnetic resonance imaging scanners in Europe and the highest numbers of fax machines. Capital budgets have been raided throughout the last 10 years. Will the Minister confirm that, in what he is announcing, the total capital budget will be ring-fenced and not raided in the coming years?

The Minister has not mentioned mental health, but we have thousands of unsafe and undignified dormitory wards. Will there be extra capital investment to get rid of them? If so, by when? Will the diagnostics centres that he mentioned be provided and run by the NHS or

run and supplied by private sector contractors? He said that we will clear the 1.3 million backlog in diagnostic tests by the end of the Parliament, but nobody wants to see ghost surgical hubs or new equipment standing idle. Who will staff the diagnostics centres? Who will staff the surgical theatres? Who will operate the new equipment?

The Minister mentioned diagnostics staff, but we are short of one in 10 of them. We are also short of 55% of consultant oncologists, short of radiologists and short of 2,500 specialist cancer nurses. Will he guarantee that the Health Education England budget will be not frozen or cut but properly funded to recruit the thousands of extra doctors, nurses and NHS staff needed to provide safe care and bring waiting times down?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—my constituency neighbour—for his sensible and reasonable questions. I will endeavour to answer each of them in turn. On capital, he will know, not least because his local hospital—mine as well—is in that list to receive capital investment as part of the overall 40 new hospitals programme, that an initial £3.7 billion has been already allocated to the 40 hospitals that we are committed to delivering by 2030. That is investment not just in maintenance but in replacing old or outdated stock with new hospitals to minimise those longer-term maintenance bills. He is right that we must continue to support ongoing maintenance, as we have done. To take one example, we did exactly that by making an extra £110 million available to help support the maintenance of RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—plank hospitals around the country.

On mental health, the right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about capital investment. In the context of those new hospitals, mental health facilities and hospitals are included. They have not been left out; they have got their share.

The right hon. Gentleman also rightly talked about staff, which, as I said to the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), is a key point. We have seen significant increases in the number of doctors and nurses. He is right to highlight the need for continued increases in specialisms such as radiographers and radiologists. I highlighted the increases that we have seen, but we know just how valuable they are. I alluded to the £12 billion that the Secretary of State announced back in September, a significant part of which will go to support the workforce in the delivery of elective recovery.

On how community diagnostic centres and community diagnostic hubs will both be selected and operate, we are working closely with the NHS on exactly how to do that to ensure that the workforce are sufficient and that we do not impose burdens over and above those already imposed on them. I think that I have answered the right hon. Gentleman's questions, but I am sure that his hon. Friends will come back if I have missed anything.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Mr Speaker, you spoke for many of us in the guidance you gave the Government. I trust that they will follow it.

Given that in the last two years very large sums of money have been spent on test and trace, establishing a successful vaccine programme, Nightingale capacity and other one-offs for the pandemic, how much of that money will become available to spend on the other work that is now so desperately needed in the NHS?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend will know that by far and away the overwhelming majority of that money was one-off spending to tackle the pandemic in its most acute phase. We will need to continue to spend some of that on therapeutics, vaccinations and similar. On other things, such as the significant increase in infrastructure and understanding that we have built in test and trace and in testing and diagnostic capacity, I am looking at how a long-term legacy can be born of that and how we can transition the learnings and infrastructure from that to continue to deliver for patients in more normal times.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This announcement goes to the very heart of what is wrong with the Union. Ministers make decisions from here in real time for England based on their perception of needs, while the devolved nations get the consequential. The Health Secretary's announcement mentioned that consequential would be coming. Can the Minister tell us today exactly how much money is coming to Scotland and when the Treasury will send it?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the Secretary of State said that there would be Barnett consequential. The details of those will be set out on Wednesday.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly welcome the huge sums that the Government are devoting to the NHS, but I echo other people in saying that for the funding to work we need to have the people working in the NHS. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to improve the retention of doctors and nurses in our national health service, and particularly to persuade women to stay in the workforce because of the crucial roles that they play and the importance of having that capacity in the NHS?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We have rightly set out what we are doing to increase numbers through recruitment, but as she says a key part is retaining the skilled and dedicated workforce. We need to recognise that there is not a separate workforce who have been dealing with the pandemic and who will now to be dealing with elective recovery—they are the same NHS workforce, who will all have been working very hard. We have to be sensitive to the fact that they need the time to recover physically and emotionally after the pandemic. That is what we are seeking to do.

We are being realistic in setting expectations about how long it will take to clear the backlog. It is right that we do that with the public, because we must look after our workforce. One of the single biggest things we can do help with retention is to be flexible with our workforce—recognising, exactly as my right hon. Friend says, the need for flexibilities, not just for female members of our workforce but for all our workforce, as well as the need for additional staff to come through and help ease the burden.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The waiting lists are now the longest we have ever seen, plus there are the 7 million people who did not come forward during the pandemic. That means that the validation of the lists is a mammoth task. The clerical validation is quite simple—phoning people up to see whether they still live at the relevant address, whether, sadly, they have died or whether

they have moved on—but the clinical validation is now really important. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with clinical leaders about the criteria being used to validate these lists? Crucially, how are local people going to be involved in how and why clinical decisions are being made about who will be treated and in what order?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady and I have spent many days in recent weeks sitting opposite each other in the Health and Care Bill Committee, and she knows of what she speaks given her background in the NHS. She is right about the validation of those lists and then the prioritisation, but although it is absolutely vital that we ensure that patients and those on the waiting lists are kept informed and included in the decisions and discussions about their care, her key point was about clinical decision making. In this context, the decision making and prioritisation must be clinically led.

I have spoken with the Royal College of Surgeons and others of the royal colleges about how we approach the issue. We should look at a number of factors. Is it possible with these new approaches to deal quickly with a large number of high-volume, low-complexity treatments that impact on quality of life? Equally, there are very complex treatments for which a month, a week or even a day longer can lead to more adverse clinical outcomes.

It is right that we go for clinical prioritisation. Although I am keen that we should keep people informed and engaged as participants in the process, it is vital that we see this issue as clinically led.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I warmly welcome the funds that have been provided to the NHS to deal with the backlogs, particularly for those who stayed away from the NHS during the pandemic. Does the Minister agree that this is effectively a deal—a contract, if you like—with the NHS? We are providing the resources, which we voted for; it is the job of NHS chief executives to take those resources and now turn them into the healthcare that our constituents need. It is not their job to send their representatives on the radio to try to get us to shut down the economy. If we do not have an economy to generate the wealth, we will not have the resources that we need to fund our NHS.

Edward Argar: I always listen with great care to my right hon. Friend. He is right that we in this House, on behalf of taxpayers, provide the resources to the NHS and others to deliver the outcomes that we want for all of our constituents, but it is absolutely right that the NHS and others set out their plans for doing so, and that we hold the NHS to account for delivery against those plans. Ministers will draw up those plans in tandem with the NHS because, quite rightly, just as I will hold the NHS to account, I know that my right hon. Friend will hold me to account in this House. A key element of those plans for tackling the backlog must also be reform and innovation rather than simply more of the same.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I honestly despair. This announcement will not make the blindest bit of difference to the backlog. There will not be the kit in place anywhere near in time to make sure that people get their biopsies back in the next 18 months or two years. There will not be enough staff, because we are not training enough this year even to backfill the number of

people who are leaving all of these professions this year. The problem will get worse, not better, unless the Government can tell us how they will make sure that more doctors, oncologists, pathologists and dermatologists stay in the profession and that more of them do more additional sessions a week, for instance, by increasing their overtime payments. The Government might want to sort out the pension problems, which mean that many people are leaving. They might want to provide some kind of golden staying-on bonus for people and make sure that they have a few extra days' holidays. Most of them are not desperate for money; they are desperate for just a moment to be able to draw breath so that they can do a decent job. However, if we do not have the people, this is all a waste of money.

Edward Argar: I know that the hon. Gentleman genuinely feels strongly about this issue. He and I discussed it in a recent debate in Westminster Hall, and I think I am due to meet him to discuss the 10 points that he flagged up then as genuinely practical suggestions to help improve both retention and recruitment in the NHS workforce. He knows that I am always happy to do that. Hopefully, my office will have been in touch with him. If it has not been in touch, it will be, because I want to have that conversation with him.

On the hon. Gentleman's key point, there are number of things. This is about not only tackling the urgent backlogs now, but building a system that is resilient for the future and that can actually tackle the broader challenges that we as a society face. That means more diagnostic capacity and more diagnostic capacity at an earlier stage, as some other countries have. I am quite happy to acknowledge that, under Governments of both political complexions, we could have done more, and that is why we are doing more now, and I say that to him gently. He talks about urgency; he is right. He also makes a very important point, which I tried to allude to in my earlier answer. If I did not land it clearly, I will attempt to do so now. He is absolutely right to highlight the risk of burn out and exhaustion, for want of a better way of putting it. As I said, it is very easy for people to say that X specialty was not working during the pandemic because that surgery was not happening, but you can bet your bottom dollar that the people involved were probably helping out—the anaesthetists and theatre nurses were—so we do need to address that point. I will be happy to see the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): To answer one of the points just raised, one of the key problems with driving productivity is that about 10% of a clinician's time is spent on chasing admin. Can the Minister confirm that some of this money will be put into dealing with the primary and secondary care interface, for example, so that people do not have to spend their time chasing letters and appointments and finding out what has been happening? Those things should happen as easily as they do in our phones.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why part of this figure—£2.1 billion—is allocated for things such as ensuring that digital patient records and shared care records are rolled out across every trust. There has been an extensive roll-out, but there is more still to do.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I hate to tell the Government but there has been a shortage of clinical radiologists for at least 20 years. It takes 12 years to train a clinical radiologist, three to six years to train a radiographer, three to five years to get a specialist nurse and the same for a biomedical scientist. While the investment in the infrastructure is welcome—I would never shy away from welcoming investment in the NHS—there is a very real problem with staffing these centres. What assistance will be provided to NHS trusts to mount an international recruitment drive, because we will have to go to the international market to recruit the staff to these centres?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the capital and for his tone. Quite rightly, he highlights the workforce point again. I go back to what I said to the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper): on the basis of the figures that I have, since 2010, we have increased the clinical radiology workforce by 48% and the number of diagnostic radiographers is up by 33%. We continue to build on that. The hon. Gentleman is right about the long lead time, which is why it behoves me to say that the increase in numbers is a reflection not just of this Government, but of the previous Government's investment in this space.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is certainly true that vast numbers of NHS staff have done an amazing job in the last 18 months in my constituency and elsewhere, and in secondary and primary care. It is right that we are committing these extra resources to help them to get the job done, and it is certainly the case that in the past we have not trained enough professionals in this world. However, I echo the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper): it is simply not right to have the profession at this stage—when we are all, as taxpayers, making a big new commitment to the health service—demanding more lockdowns and more restrictions. We have got to live with this virus. It is also not right, when these large amounts are found by taxpayers—with some doubts from some of them—that we hear the same representatives still turn around and say, "It's not enough."

Edward Argar: I entirely appreciate where my right hon. Friend is coming at this from. I hope that, in answering my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), I was clear that we hugely value the amazing work done by all our NHS workforce. This is about providing them with the money and resources they need to do the job, but also stimulating reform and innovation alongside that. The final point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) was about the calls by some for particular policy approaches to this winter by Her Majesty's Government. He will have heard my response to that on various media outlets on Thursday morning.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We are all agreed across the Chamber on the importance of the workforce in the NHS and social care. Will the Government consider—alongside a decent pay rise—a covenant to protect and support our NHS and social care staff, akin to the one that they are introducing for the police and the one that we already have for the armed forces?

Edward Argar: The right hon. Lady makes a good point. It is an interesting idea and I will certainly reflect on it.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Thousands of new homes are being built to the east of Leighton Buzzard and to the north of Houghton Regis. Does my hon. Friend agree that those residents deserve a plan for a rational and budgeted increase in general practice capacity?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is coming back for a second bite of the cherry after Health and Social Care questions last week. I am well aware that there is significant housing development in his constituency and in many others. We need to ensure that the GP and broader health facilities follow that development, and do so in a way where the local health system can predict it and plan to deliver on that basis.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Minister, any investment in the NHS is welcome, but let us be honest: this is just a drop in the ocean compared with what has been taken out over the last 11 years. I am very concerned that there is still a lack of parity between mental health and physical health. In Rotherham, the longest wait time for a child's mental health assessment is 204 weeks; that is nearly four years. What will the Minister do to speed the process up and ensure that there is parity of funding?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady knows that I have a huge amount of respect for her and her work in this House. She is absolutely right to highlight the need for parity of esteem not just to be a phrase, but to be made a reality in our constituencies and on our streets. That is why we have significantly increased funding for mental health not just in revenue terms, but in the capital terms about which we are speaking today—as I alluded to in response to the shadow Secretary of State, in terms of investing in eliminating mental health dormitories, but also in terms of new hospitals. I suspect that the hon. Lady was possibly alluding to child and adolescent mental health services. I am always happy to discuss that issue with her, as is the Minister for Care and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan).

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): My good friend and the very excellent Minister is going to help me out here, because he said that we will hold the NHS to account for these plans. He knows that I have raised this matter in the House before, when we announced the £12 billion of funding. I know that there is a plan for the catch-up; I know that it has been agreed with the Department and I know that it has been agreed with the Treasury, because a Treasury Minister has told me from the Dispatch Box. How can we all hold our local health trusts to account when we have not seen that plan? Please can it be published?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend asks a key question. I can reassure him that he will see that plan published in the coming weeks. I know that he will both study it carefully and hold me and the NHS to account on what is in it.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The new money is very welcome, but North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust is having to spend millions of pounds every year just to keep University Hospital of North Tees safe and operating. It is doing a grand job. But the Minister knows the facts of this: we really do need a new hospital in Stockton. So will the new one be announced any time soon?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Everyone loves a trier in this place, particularly on behalf of their constituents. I have met him to discuss this, as he alludes to. I think I am overdue giving him an update letter on where we are. As he will be aware, we have had significant numbers of expressions of interest in the opportunity to be one of the next eight hospitals. We look forward to making an announcement on them in the spring of next year. I cannot say any more than that—but, as ever, he makes the point on behalf of his constituents.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I warmly welcome this funding announcement. A few weeks ago, I visited the biochemistry department in Furness General Hospital. It is one of the best in the country, so I am glad that there is this focus on diagnostics capacity. Can the Minister confirm that funding will go to centres that already have capacity and the will to do more, rather than creating additional units that may draw it away from them?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and important point. These will be new diagnostic hubs, but he alludes to a central point. For example, there could be a hub in the car park of an existing hospital where these services are delivered to allow it to deliver them in a covid-free environment, rather than having the same front door for A&E or similar. We are working through the exact detail of how these new hubs will be delivered, but we will be looking at how they can potentially fit with existing services.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Capital investment in our hospital estate is desperately needed at Royal Lancaster Infirmary—an incredibly old hospital site, which comes with its challenges. Does the Minister agree that closing two hospitals—Royal Lancaster Infirmary and Royal Preston Hospital—to make one new hospital is not creating a new hospital but is in fact a net loss of one hospital? He has a letter on his desk from me asking for a meeting to discuss the future of the hospital site at Royal Lancaster Infirmary. Does he agree that my constituents in Lancaster, which is a growing city, need to have a hospital that they can access?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know that, while her local clinical commissioning group—her local health system—may well be considering various options, it has not put any particular option forward to me in that context. I look forward to seeing her letter, but I am certainly happy to meet her if that pre-empts my reply.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): My constituents in Peterborough will be thrilled with the £5.9 billion to clear the backlog and the extra cash for diagnostic services, but they will also be keen that that money is spent well. Will the Minister ensure that many more

clinicians practise at the top of their licence doing the things that we need them to do, rather than spend their time doing things that clerical staff and more junior colleagues would be better placed doing?

Edward Argar: We need to make sure that our NHS workforce, which is diverse in terms of its skills and background, is able to work where those skills are most effectively deployed to deliver the best outcomes for patients. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: where are there are administrative tasks, which I do not in any way denigrate, that are better performed by an administrator than a clinician, we should be looking to deliver that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister for being assiduous and incredibly dedicated. We welcome money wherever it comes from because it is important to have it. In Northern Ireland we are very keen to see what that money will mean. Will similar money be provided for Northern Ireland through the Barnett consequential? Will there be any direction as to how the money is spent—for example, to address this year's non-elective surgery waiting list to give people their sight back, their ability back, and indeed, for some, their lives back? What discussions have taken place with Robin Swann, the Health Minister, in relation to that?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—for his question. The Chancellor will set out the detail of Barnett consequential in due course. The hon. Gentleman knows that I speak to Robin Swann, to whose work I pay tribute, at regular intervals—almost fortnightly—about a number of things. I have not yet discussed the detail of this matter with him, and it will be for him as a devolved Health Minister to make those decisions, but I will of course discuss it with him.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering will welcome the extra NHS investment in diagnostics and elective care, but the best way to permanently increase elective capacity in Kettering is for permission to be given for the go-ahead for the redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital. In that regard, will the Minister impress on NHS England and NHS Improvement the urgent need to approve and give permission for the strategic outline case for the hospital redevelopment?

Edward Argar: For a brief moment, I thought my hon. Friend was not going to mention the new hospital at Kettering. Yes, I am very happy to have that conversation with NHS England colleagues as I continue to discuss the new hospital in his constituency with them at regular intervals.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Workforce planning failures have brought us to this point, but many of the patients on the elective waiting lists will be showing up in primary care, and with greater acuity as they wait longer for their treatments. What additional support will the Minister give primary care to manage people on all these waiting lists?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that primary care and GP practices are often the front door for the vast majority of these people on the waiting lists, and I pay tribute to the hard work of GPs

up and down the country over the past year and a half to two years. She will have seen the announcement a few weeks ago by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in which he set out further support that would be made available to help GP practices.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Our GPs have done an amazing job across the country, but especially in Rother Valley, whether that is the Dinnington Group Practice, Swallownest Health Centre or the Stag Medical Centre. I note that there has been a 35% increase in the amount of junior doctors wanting to become GPs. Can we make sure that some of those new GPs and new applicants are in Rother Valley?

Edward Argar: We should make sure that general practice is an attractive career for newly qualified doctors wherever they are in the country. I suspect it will be for those individuals joining the profession to determine where they wish to practise, but I suspect my hon. Friend will do a very good job of explaining to them the joys of working in Rother Valley.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): There are very worrying press reports about a lack of midwifery. Can the Minister put his hand on his heart and tell us that every single trust in the country has a safe ratio of staff to women giving birth?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady asks a very important question. Patient safety, including in midwifery and births, is central to what we are about in this Government and in NHS England. That is one reason why we have seen more than 9,000 more nurses, midwives and health visitors recruited, but we need to continue to do more, and we will continue to do so.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I am certain my constituents will warmly welcome this additional funding. There is currently unprecedented demand on health and care services in Cornwall, more now than at any point in the pandemic. The Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro has escalated its operational level from operational pressures escalation level 4, or OPEL4, to “internal critical incident”. I welcome the meeting that the Cornish MPs had with the Minister last week. I have written to the Secretary of State to ask how we can get some additional support to help us to de-escalate this unprecedented situation.

Edward Argar: As my hon. Friend alludes to, I met her and other hon. Friends from Cornwall last week to discuss this matter. I appreciate the pressures facing the NHS in Cornwall, particularly after the pressures it faced over the summer, when other parts of the system may have experienced slightly less pressure, because of all the holidaymakers who rightly go to visit Cornwall. I look forward to working with her further on this and thank the staff of the trust for what they are doing. We recognise the challenges, which is why we are providing this extra capital funding, including capital funding from previous pots, to her trust. I am happy to have a further meeting with her and her chief exec, if she feels that would be helpful.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Royal College of Radiologists reports that, as of today, another 1,675 consultants are needed to keep up with current NHS demand. The Minister pointed earlier to a recruitment

[Wera Hobhouse]

drive and said that 48% more have been recruited. Still, 1,675 consultant staff are needed. If he cannot give us the answer today, how on earth will he recruit these important people very soon? Will he come back with a statement very soon on how this situation will be resolved?

Edward Argar: What I said in response to the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) and other hon. Members was that we have seen the number of radiographers and radiologists grow steadily since 2010, and it continues to increase. I appreciate the point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about the rate of growth, but it is growing. We are recruiting and training more, so I think we are on track to continue recruiting more into that space.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the new money for the national health service on top of the £34 billion that will be spent. Is it not the case that the new money—the many billions being spent on the NHS—is one of the reasons why we will be able to fund our new hospital programme, including the new Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow?

Edward Argar: The Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow has no greater champion than my right hon. Friend. I reassure him that, as he knows, it is on the list of 40 new hospitals that we are committed to building before 2030.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I, too, welcome the significant extra resource for our national health service as we tackle the covid backlog. I seek an assurance from

the Minister that more difficult to detect conditions, such as blood cancers, will be at the heart of what those diagnostic hubs will deliver.

Edward Argar: The purpose of the investment in diagnostic capacity is not only to tackle the backlog but to provide a long-term solution to allow diagnostic tests to take place for more people earlier in the illness and to detect illnesses at an early stage. We know that is a key part of tackling illness, preventing serious illness and aiding recovery.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the funding for the NHS, and I ask the Minister whether the funding will get down to our ambulance trusts too. Around the country, including in my constituency, waiting times are under huge pressure. What help will there be for winter ambulance pressures, particularly in North Norfolk?

Edward Argar: The funding is capital funding for diagnostic hubs and surgical hubs, which will ease pressure by allowing day surgery to continue but without taking up beds in acute settings and while allowing the flow of patients through A&Es. On my hon. Friend's specific point, we have already announced and provided £55 million to aid our ambulance trusts this winter.

Mr Speaker: Can I say thank you to the Minister? In fairness, he had to answer the urgent question because of the actions of others. Hopefully the message has gone back to the Treasury that it ought to ensure that the House hears first. Hopefully there is a lesson that may have been learned; if not, we will continue with the same lessons.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

4.17 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme.

The Minister for Afghan Resettlement (Victoria Atkins): I promised in my statement to the House on 13 September that I would update the House regularly on Operation Warm Welcome. I am in the process of drafting a “Dear colleague” letter, which will be sent to colleagues later this week, but the hon. Lady has beaten me to it. I am, of course, pleased to appear before the House today in the meantime.

The Government worked at pace to facilitate the largest and most complex evacuation in living memory, assisting the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to help more than 15,000 people from Afghanistan to safety in the United Kingdom. A huge programme of work is now under way across Government to ensure Afghans brought to the United Kingdom receive a warm welcome and the vital support they need to build bright futures in our country. That work spans across Government, charities, other organisations, local authorities and communities. The aim is to give Afghans arriving here the best possible start to life in the United Kingdom, while also making sure that local services can work effectively to support people.

On 13 September, I made a statement, and the Home Office published a comprehensive policy statement, confirming that the Government have committed to take around 5,000 people in the first year and a total of up to 20,000 people over the coming years under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. The statement also set out who would be eligible and who would be prioritised, and how we will work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organisations to ensure the ACRS provides a safe route for vulnerable people at risk. While we appreciate the need to act quickly, it is also important that we do this properly and ensure that any scheme meets the needs of those it is being set up to support.

Our work to support Afghan citizens has not paused while the resettlement scheme is being developed. The Home Office is continuing to work with partners across Government, including in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, given that many of those requiring support are in fact British nationals, to provide permanent housing for the thousands already relocated here. Some of the people evacuated will form the first part of the 5,000 people being resettled.

I am pleased to tell the House that over 200 councils have agreed to house those who have been evacuated. I am extremely grateful for that and, as always, I continue to encourage councils that have not felt able to make offers or those that can perhaps offer more places of housing to do so. This is a national effort. We are all determined to give Afghan people a warm welcome in this country, and I look forward to working with colleagues across the House to achieve this.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the Minister for her response. She says the Government are working “at pace”, but I can promise her it does not feel like that for

the Afghans still stuck in Afghanistan with no idea if and how they will be able to get to safety or if and how the Government will deliver on their promises. It certainly does not feel like that to hon. Members who have been writing emails and making phone calls, desperate to get some kind of response from the Home Office and the Foreign Office, and who again and again, frankly, have just been fobbed off with standard, formulaic emails that do not address the problems we are raising with them on a daily basis.

The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme was announced on 18 August, and on 6 September the Prime Minister told the House that the scheme was

“upholding Britain’s finest tradition of welcoming those in need.”—*[Official Report, 6 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 21.]*

Yet two months on and counting, we have still heard nothing. That is utterly shameful: lives depend on that scheme—not just those who are at risk from the Taliban, but she will know of the deep and growing humanitarian crisis gripping Afghanistan, with about half the population starving.

Can the Minister tell us how much longer do we have to wait until the resettlement scheme opens? If the scheme is going to be by referral, when will those at risk get information about how their cases can be referred and assessed? Has the Government’s derisory 5,000-person cap on how many Afghan nationals will be helped in the first year already been reached or exceeded before the scheme is even open? Will the Minister tell us, on behalf of all those desperate for safety, including former BBC staff and freelance journalists, how many places have already been allocated and how many are left?

Ministerial promises need to be kept, especially to Chevening families and alumni, so when will the scholars at Sussex University and others elsewhere be told if they are to be included in the ACRS? Will former Chevening scholars and their families get the help they are owed? Those who have been very high profile in their support of Government programmes, especially the president and vice-president of the Chevening alumni, live in daily fear. Why have they not been prioritised, and why have some current scholars been allowed to bring their wider families to the UK, and others not?

Local authorities such as Brighton and Hove, a city of sanctuary, want to know: when will they get firm written assurances that they will receive the promised package of financial support?

Lastly, will the Minister stop sending Afghan family members of British citizens still in Afghanistan into Kafkaesque nightmare situations with referrals to a visa process that the Home Office itself admits is not currently possible from within Afghanistan? Will it instead issue the visa waivers and the emergency travel documents that will help people get the safety they so desperately need?

Victoria Atkins: In answer to the hon. Lady’s many questions, she may recall that, in the course of the oral statement on 13 September and indeed in the “Dear colleague” letter that accompanied it, I had to be frank with the House in relation to the emails Members of Parliament had been sending—about people in Afghanistan who are not constituents, but whose safety they understandably want to ensure if they have emailed been and contacted by them—that due to the new situation

[Victoria Atkins]

as it then was in Afghanistan, we would not be able to work those cases as we would expect to in other casework scenarios.

Regrettably, the situation in Afghanistan has not changed since I last addressed the House. We do not have a British Army presence in Afghanistan and we do not have a British consular presence. There are, of course, many members of staff in countries around Afghanistan who are doing their absolute best to work with those who have made the journey into surrounding countries, but we must be realistic about the situation in country. We are working with international partners to find ways and routes out of Afghanistan, but we must do so with the international community.

The hon. Lady mentions the ambitious target of 5,000 that the Prime Minister set for the first year of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and that is in addition to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, under which many thousands of people were evacuated both before and during Operation Pitting. The majority of Chevening scholars were evacuated, and we are working with international partners to try to find ways for those who remain. The foundation on which the Government are working is to try to do things in what are difficult and fast-evolving circumstances, and to do what is right for people who have already been evacuated here, and those we wish to evacuate in future. I am afraid these things take time, but I hope I have the support of the House in creating the scheme in a way that best serves the interests of Afghans. I understand why the hon. Lady secured this urgent question, but I suggest we will achieve this through day-to-day work and by working together to ensure that the scheme addresses the concerns she raised.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): This morning I attended an Afghan community day, hosted by the Stronger Communities team in Southampton, and supported by Hampshire County Council, Southampton City Council, and Test Valley Borough Council. That was for Afghan families who are already settled here, or who have come here as part of the ARAP scheme. Their big concern is about families still left in Afghanistan, and they are desperately looking for detail and information about how the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme will work. My hon. Friend is right to point out the complexities, and we know that this will be harder than the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, precisely because of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. Will she please give us some hope that the application and allocation scheme is on its way, and that we will be able to provide our constituents with some sort of update?

Victoria Atkins: I can certainly provide my right hon. Friend with that assurance. We want to get this right, which is why it is taking us a bit of time. I understand the concerns of colleagues, and also, as she said, the real concerns of Afghans already in this country. I have met many, and every one has raised concerns about their families and friends left behind. I understand that, but it will take a bit of time, and I ask the House to bear with us while we try to ensure we get it right.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I echo the concerns raised so far. It has been two months since the Kabul airlift, and as we know, many of those

who needed to be evacuated, having been accepted as high risk, were left behind in Afghanistan and now face persecution under Taliban rule. I share the frustrations of many about the slow progress of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and we are still waiting for details from the Home Office about how that scheme will operate in practice. The Government's website offering guidance on the scheme has not been updated since 13 September. At the same time, there have been increasing reports of violence against women and girls, and members of the LGBTI community in Afghanistan, and efforts must be made to step up help for those in desperate need.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) mentioned Chevening scholars, and my office has raised concerns on behalf of Chevening scholars who remain at high risk in Afghanistan due to their links with the UK. They were eligible for evacuation but were not called forward, and since raising those cases I have had no response from the Government. Will the Minister provide an update on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and inform the House what measures have been taken to ensure that those most at risk are guaranteed safe passage and access to neighbouring countries? What support will former Chevening scholars who are a priority for assistance and still in Afghanistan be eligible to receive, and through which mechanism? I am not sure whether the Minister answered the question about whether they will be guaranteed a place under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. What steps will she take to speed up the community sponsorship scheme to help those in Afghanistan who may not qualify for the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme?

Victoria Atkins: I can deal with the hon. Gentleman's point on Chevening scholars. The scheme has not been launched yet. We want to get this right, so I am afraid that I will have to give him the holding answer, which is that we are working on the scheme. I know that he would not expect me to give details, thoughts or running commentary on how the policy is being developed before we have, as a Government, come to a collective agreement on it so that we can best ensure that the policy meets the very real needs that many in this House have raised.

I imagine that only today, we will hear not just about Chevening scholars but, for example, about religious minorities, about people who are LGBT+ and about extraordinary women who have done extraordinary things in Afghanistan in the last 20 years in pursuit of equality and the rights of women before the law. Those are all categories of people that we have set out in the policy statement that we want to help, but we have to do this in a managed and measured way so that we get the scheme right and, over the coming years, it delivers the sorts of changes and help that everyone in the House expects.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I really sympathise with the Minister, who is trying to pick up the pieces left behind by the US Administration's appalling behaviour in withdrawing from Afghanistan so suddenly and with so little regard for the people left behind. With regard to the people in Afghanistan who are most at risk and therefore cannot show themselves easily to the authorities without risking extreme persecution, is her Department giving special thought to how they might be catered for, perhaps separately from the more routine—if I dare use that word—cases that are currently being dealt with, under the proposed new scheme?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for highlighting one of the factors that I must bear in mind while I am at the Dispatch Box and that the Government must bear in mind in public communications: the unintended consequences of what we say at the Dispatch Box, how that may reverberate into Afghanistan and the impact it may have on people still in Afghanistan. I know from conversations I have had with Afghans who have been evacuated that when pronouncements are made in this place or in the media, they really do have unintended consequences in Afghanistan. I am afraid that I have to temper all my answers to ensure that neither I nor anyone else in this place inadvertently creates consequences that none of us would want.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on asking some pretty basic but vital questions about the resettlement scheme. We all want to support resettlement, but we all need to know more, too. Even the expression “up to 20,000” is far too vague. What does that mean? Is the Minister confident that 20,000, or even close to it, will be achieved?

Thirty of Scotland’s 32 local authorities are among those that have committed to supporting Afghans under the different schemes, but specific offers are made more difficult because we have seen delays in matching families to properties, and worries that vital housing stock will have to sit empty for weeks and months. What can be done to speed up that process so that more properties are released?

If over 3,000 Afghans in the asylum system were granted refugee or humanitarian protection as a matter of urgency, more properties could quickly become available, so is that happening? Crucially, when does the Minister aim to have people who are already here out of bridging hotels, and how many are currently in them? Does she share my concern that hotels are being targeted by far-right activists? What lessons do we learn from that for asylum accommodation policy?

Why are there delays in issuing Aspen cards and biometric residence permits? Does the Minister agree that more mental health support is urgently required for those stuck in these hotels? Finally, will she comment on the shocking revelations yesterday that the number of people dying while accommodated in the asylum system has increased hugely, and explain what the Department is doing to understand why that is the case and what the implications are for its future asylum accommodation policy?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. May I also take the opportunity to thank the Scottish Government for the work they are doing to help us with our resettlement programme for Afghans? It really is appreciated. I know that the Scottish Government, as well as the Welsh and Northern Irish Governments, are working with us to ensure that we are able to offer accommodation to Afghans across the United Kingdom.

On matching delays, one thing we tried to do, and indeed have done, over the last two months since Operation Pitting finished was conduct detailed induction interviews with every single family in bridging hotels. There may be some who say, “Why didn’t this happen in Kabul?”

Well, with the best will in the world our soldiers on the ground in Kabul, we will remember, were in an emergency and in highly dangerous circumstances. They were not able to conduct the sort of detailed interviews that we have been conducting over the last few weeks. We have been able to do that and are cleansing that data at the moment. Having that data now means we will be able to match homes to families much more quickly in future. Again, as hon. Members will appreciate, an offer of a two-bed flat is not much good if a family has five or six children. We have to match very carefully. We are also mindful that, where we can, we want to take into account, for example, community ties and links with defence. The Ministry of Defence is working with the Royal British Legion and others to try to ensure pastoral support for our ARAP friends as well. It is not simply a question of matching numbers to homes.

On bridging hotels, we have approximately 11,000 people in bridging hotels at the moment, which shows the scale of the task. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman’s eyebrows raised a bit with that. That shows the scale of the task ahead of us. This will take time. I have been frank with the House at every opportunity to make that clear. It will take us time, but we want to do it right.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of security. Again, I do not want there to be any unintended consequences, but we are very, very mindful of the security needs of our bridging hotels and the people who reside in them. Clearly, any actions to target them are not only unlawful and illegal, but despicable in moral terms. The police and others will work very hard to ensure that that does not happen.

On Aspen cards, we have been issuing them as quickly as we can. There was a slight technical glitch at one point with the provision of chips within cards—I will not bore the House with that—but we have managed to get over that. Aspen cards are very much a part of our support package to people in bridging hotels.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I thank the Government for the Foreign Office briefings on Afghanistan that I received while visiting Doha recently. Will the Minister look into using the Qatari embassy in Afghanistan to help facilitate our consular requirements? The folly of our decision to withdraw is beginning to unfold, with more than half the population in Afghanistan facing starvation and a very tough winter. The Taliban clearly cannot cope without international support. We are doing our best to look after Afghans here through Operation Warm Welcome, but may I ask the Government to engage further with the Taliban to secure greater access for United Nations organisations, such as the World Food Programme and UNICEF, to prevent the largest humanitarian disaster in decades from unfolding?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend and very much echo his observations about international partners in the region; it is important that we do everything we can to work with them. I will make sure, if they have not already heard him, that Foreign Office Ministers are aware of his concerns and his request that they continue to work with international organisations to achieve the ends that he set out.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The last time we debated the Government’s response to the situation in Afghanistan, I raised the case of an Afghan doctor with

[Sarah Owen]

family in Luton North who are desperate to get her and her family to safety. Despite being under serious threat as a doctor who publicly spearheaded vaccination and women's rights campaigns, and despite Ministers knowing about her case at the time, she was still turned away from the Baron hotel. Despite emailing all the details of the case to every relevant Minister, I am still yet to receive a response months later. When will we get individual responses to cases and updates on individuals' resettlement applications?

Victoria Atkins: Again, I am afraid this is one of those answers that no Minister wants to give. I refer the hon. Lady to the "Dear colleague" letter that was published on 13 September. We simply cannot casework these cases as she and others would expect us to be able to do if they were in the United Kingdom or any other settled and developed economy. That is why we are working at pace with international partners to develop the ACRS scheme and to get out those who have been referred to it.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I am glad to say that Cumbria's councils stand ready to accept as many Afghan refugees as they have space for, but the few early cases that we have had coming through the system have shown some of the troubles that I think my hon. Friend the Minister has alluded to. A family of three was expected at a council in Cumbria; a family of seven arrived, and obviously there was not a property there for them. I recognise the need to cleanse data and work on internal systems, but there appears to be a missing feedback loop—a simple phone call could alert councils to some of the challenges they are facing. Can she update us on what that process looks like?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If he would not mind contacting me afterwards regarding the accommodation point, I am very happy to take that up.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): There are family members of UK citizens and residents whose lives are at risk from the Taliban in Afghanistan but who have no legal route to safety because the Government have not put in place any interim biometrics provision, even though I have raised with the Home Office several ways they could do so. I have also been told that Home Office caseworkers are not deciding any family visa cases because they are still waiting for updated country-specific guidance. There is also no suggestion that there will be provision for them in the resettlement scheme. May I ask the Minister urgently to look into sorting out biometric routes and the updated guidance, and providing for a family route within the resettlement scheme? Those are the families most at risk of being exploited by the criminal gangs if there is no legal route in place.

Victoria Atkins: Given the range of issues that the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee has understandably raised, may I invite the right hon. Lady to meet me to discuss some of them? There are matters that it would not be right to talk about on the Floor of the House, but I am very happy to meet her to discuss them further.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am sorry that I was momentarily late, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not want to pursue cases on the Floor of the House, because I know that would not be right, but my hon. Friend the Minister is aware that I have been lobbying her about two Afghan nationals currently in Tehran who are trying to get over here. I have written to her and I hope she will see that piece of correspondence. There is a broader issue about Afghan nationals in countries outside Afghanistan; I know my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), sitting behind me, is also concerned about that, so I raise these concerns on behalf of both of us and, I am sure, other colleagues in the Chamber. We have to do as much as we can to bring people who manage to get out of Afghanistan, but are not yet here, to this country.

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. In relation to those who are outside Afghanistan, the Ministry of Defence and others are working very hard with international partners to secure safe routes where it is possible to do so.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I ask again the question posed by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas): how many of the 5,000 places currently allocated have already been filled, and how many of those people are already in the United Kingdom?

Victoria Atkins: Because the scheme has not been launched yet, as we are still developing it, I do not have a precise figure for the right hon. Gentleman. However, I ask him not to take from that that the figure has been met or otherwise. At the moment, I am not able to help the House with that number; when I can do, I will.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that those of us who visited the refugee centre in Doha a little while ago were very concerned to hear about the unaccompanied children with links to British families, who did not seem to be processed as quickly as those of other countries. Can she assure the House that she will ensure that those children are processed as quickly as possible? The longer they are in limbo, the more harm will be done to them.

Victoria Atkins: I am aware that colleagues on the Doha trip met those children, and I thank those colleagues for taking such an interest. I can assure my hon. Friend that this is being worked through. As always, there are safeguarding and other matters that we must turn our minds to, as we are doing, but we are trying to work through this as quickly as we can.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows the warm welcome that my constituency, the Welsh Government and our councils have already provided to Afghan refugees—and have done for decades, as I think is worth pointing out. However, I am afraid that I am still dealing with well over 300 individuals who have been referred to me by constituents, including some cases that I think would be relatively straightforward for the Government to sort out. One of them involves an individual who should be eligible for ARAP, who worked for the British Council as a contractor. They have left Afghanistan and are in a

third country. I have spoken to Ministers directly, but I still cannot get an answer for that person, although it seems to me that it would be relatively straightforward. It is not about getting them out of Afghanistan; they are already out. Their whole family is in Cardiff, and it would make sense to join them. May I discuss the case with the Minister and her colleagues and try to resolve it, along with other cases?

Victoria Atkins: I would be very happy to discuss the matter with the hon. Gentleman. May I put on record my thanks to Welsh councils and the Welsh Government for the work that they are doing, and have done for many years?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for all she does. In Northern Ireland, it will be the Northern Ireland Assembly that looks after the allocation of Afghan refugees. At the very beginning of the process, the managing directors of two companies in my constituency, Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct, each offered 20 places in their workforce to Afghans; they also offered housing and accommodation. Minister, can I ask: after all this time, what is happening?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Please will the hon. Gentleman not say “Minister, can I ask—”? Please will he say, “Can the hon. Lady—”, in the third person, not the second?

Jim Shannon: Can the hon. Lady respond to me and my constituents, who wish to offer those people not only places in the two factories, but accommodation? The offer is there today.

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear that from the hon. Gentleman. This is one of the things I am working on at the moment. There are so many things our Afghan friends can offer us, in terms of employment opportunities and working in our local communities. I am really pleased to hear what he says. There will be more to announce on the principle in due course, but I am very happy to discuss the matter with him in more detail to see what can be done with the companies that he mentions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, visited Doha, and like others I was a guest of the Qatari Government. Two things struck me very strongly. First, things will only get worse over the next few months, because the situation in Afghanistan will be utterly miserable for many millions of people. There will not be food for people to eat; we heard stories this morning of a family selling a baby simply to be able to feed their other children. That will provide a security issue for this country and the rest of the world that the Government need to take on board.

The second point, which has already been made, is that when we went to the refugee camp, all the staff said that other countries were being magnificent and dealing with people very swiftly, but the UK was being very, very slow. That is a Home Office responsibility. I would just like to see a bit more of a sense of urgency from the Minister. How on earth can the scheme still not be in place? We have had 20 months to prepare for this.

Victoria Atkins: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the Government are very aware of the potential security ramifications if the security situation in Afghanistan gets worse; that is why we are working with international partners to do what we can internationally to secure it. On the point about unaccompanied children, I am personally aware of the case, and we are working through it. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s urgency. As I say, we have to ensure that the actions we take are very much in the best interests of the children.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Like many Members across the Chamber, I have been contacted by countless constituents with family members still in Afghanistan. The Home Office tells me to direct them to gov.uk, but it was last updated on 13 September; when will it be updated? When will the children from Afghanistan who are already here be able to go to school, or at least have English language lessons?

Victoria Atkins: If I may deal with the hon. Lady’s second point first, I am delighted to tell the House that the majority of children are already in school, or are being placed in school. We know that there are differences among local authorities, depending on availability of school places, but that is a key factor in the matching operation between families and offers of homes. As for the hon. Lady’s first point, again, I understand the concerns of constituents with family members in Afghanistan. As I have said previously, the situation at the moment means that we are unable to provide the help that we would wish to provide in normal circumstances, but I encourage Members to continue to refer to the website, because as and when we are able to update it, we will do so.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I understand that about 200 contractors who worked for the British Council are still in Afghanistan. About 30 of them were approved under the ARAP scheme, but were unable to get out; the rest have applied, but many of them have not even been told yet whether they would qualify. I appreciate the difficulties—which the Minister has made clear—of trying to help people who are still in Afghanistan, but I urge her and her colleagues to pay close attention to these people who worked alongside our British Council staff and played a really important role, which is the reason they are at risk.

Victoria Atkins: I well understand the motivation behind the right hon. Gentleman’s question. If people were called forward in the way that we have described in the policy statement, they may well form part of the three categories that we set out in that statement in relation to the ACRS. As for those who have not been called forward, again we are working very hard across Government and with international partners, but sadly I fear I cannot add anything to what I said earlier.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Among the scores of constituents who are trying to get their Afghan families out—the hon. Lady has essentially banned me from pursuing their individual cases—is one who came to see me last week. She is dreading every day a call to say that one of the members of her family—one worked for UK aid agencies, one is a doctor helping women, another is a member of an Uzbek minority—has been

[Munira Wilson]

slaughtered by the Taliban. She feels utterly let down by the UK Government, but members of the Twickenham community stand ready to support and sponsor this family. Can the hon. Lady tell the House whether her limit of 5,000 refugees might be extended where sponsorship is available from either local community groups or faith groups based in the UK?

Victoria Atkins: I have not banned the hon. Member from acting on behalf of her constituents, and, if I may say so, I do not expect to see that wording repeated outside this Chamber, because it is not what I have said. I have been realistic with colleagues in explaining that I cannot respond to their requests in the usual caseworking manner because of the situation in Afghanistan. As for community groups, this is part of our work that we are considering for the ACRS. I am very conscious of the enormous role that they have played in the past through, for example, the Syrian resettlement scheme, and I want very much to build on those successes as part of this scheme.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Government had 18 months in which to plan to evacuate Afghanistan, and have had a further two months since it fell, but the Minister for warm welcome still cannot say today when the resettlement scheme will even start, which does not suggest a sufficient sense of urgency. Can the hon. Lady tell me when the meeting with her that she offered on 8 September will finally happen? My team have been chasing it for seven weeks. Will she also agree to meet my local authority, and agency representatives, who have been supporting the hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers placed in Southwark—though no warning was given to Southwark Council—since the start of September?

Victoria Atkins: As I would say to any other Member of this House, if a request for a meeting has not been acted on, please speak to me at any time, because I will ensure that it happens. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I have to say that I do not recall having that conversation with him; however, I will certainly act on what he says now.

As for the timeframe, the Ministry of Defence has been evacuating ARAP translators since, I think, 2014. It is right that we put even more energy into that effort from April this year, but as I have said, Operation Pitting was the largest evacuation in living memory. We are proud of the efforts of the military and everyone else involved in it, and we now want to ensure that the work that they did in Kabul is met with a warm welcome here in the United Kingdom.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We are two months on from the crisis, but many Afghans still have no certainty about their future. Amnesty has accused the Government of moving “at a snail’s pace” in their efforts to assist at-risk Afghans. I want to request two things of the Minister. The first, which a number of colleagues have already touched on, relates to the unaccompanied children in Doha. There are some 200 of them. America, Canada and other countries are dealing with this, but there are 15 children there who have connections with Britain. Can they be looked at urgently?

Secondly, there are many family members who are stuck because they are children or husbands who are British citizens, but the wife is not. This also needs to be dealt with urgently, and the family route needs clarification.

Victoria Atkins: On the matter of unaccompanied children in Doha, we have to ensure that the family members who have been put forward are who they claim to be, or who people have claimed them to be. We also have to ensure that they are able to take the child or children and look after them. This is taking a bit of time, and it is very much being done from a place of wanting to ensure the safety of those children once they are in the United Kingdom. As I say, we are very much working on this. In relation to the hon. Gentleman’s other comments, I do not feel that I can add anything to what I have already said.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): My office in Middlesbrough has been inundated with cases of British nationals and their wider families who are trapped in Afghanistan, including children and also the new wife of a constituent. She has threatened to self-immolate if she is left to the devices of the Taliban. I urge Ministers to treat this with the utmost urgency, because time is something that these people do not have. They need to see progress urgently. If we are to do this, will the Minister please give consideration to visa waivers to accelerate the process, because time is absolutely of the essence in reaching every one of them?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said to other hon. Members, the fact is that we do not have British Army presence or consular presence in Afghanistan, and we are very much bound by those constraints now. I am very conscious of the impact on family members, and we have to try to find international solutions to this. We are working across the region with third countries to try to come up with solutions, but as I have said to the House repeatedly, there are no easy answers. I am very conscious of that in all our discussions.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Home Office Afghan citizens resettlement scheme has yet to make it clear how vulnerable Afghans who are still in Afghanistan will be categorised for eligibility. We know that there are particularly high-risk groups, including high-profile women, human rights activists, LGBT+ people and journalists. Could the hon. Lady explain how her Department is making full use of the information already provided by such desperate people to the Foreign Office’s public hotline and emergency email address? This is readily available evidence for identifying and prioritising those people who are most at risk. Will she also tell the House what has happened to this data?

Victoria Atkins: In relation to communications with the Home Office, as I said in the “dear colleague” letter, we are collating that data and will consider how to use it in due course. We have to look at how else we can support and bolster the claims that people put forward.

The right hon. Lady will appreciate that in a population of 40 million, half of whom are female, very many people will fall into the initial category of being vulnerable and scared for their existence. We cannot, however, accommodate 40 million people, so we have to make some incredibly difficult decisions. That is why it is

taking us time to ensure that we get the scheme right. We are speaking to respected international organisations to ensure that we get the criteria and the methodology right, because as I said at the beginning, we want this scheme to work, and we want people, when they are here, to have the warm welcome of which we have spoken so much in recent weeks and months.

Arrest of Sudanese Prime Minister

4.59 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the arrest of the Sudanese Prime Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): I am grateful for the opportunity to answer this urgent question. The UK most strongly condemns today's arrest of civilian members of Sudan's transitional Government by the military. We are also deeply concerned about reports of shooting at protesters, which must stop.

Over the past two years, Sudan has been on the delicate pathway from oppressive, autocratic rule towards freedom and democracy. The UK has been a consistent and firm advocate for the democratic transition since the 2019 revolution. The acts of the military today represent an unacceptable betrayal of the Sudanese people and their journey to democracy.

I was in Khartoum just last week, when I stressed the need for all parties to support the civilian-led Government's work to deliver the democratic transition, the process agreed by all sides in the constitutional declaration of August 2019. The military leadership in Khartoum cannot claim to be committed to a democratic future while simultaneously acting unilaterally to dissolve the transitional institutions and to arrest leading civilian politicians.

The Sudanese military agreed to the power-sharing agreement, as outlined in the constitutional declaration. Having arrested the Prime Minister and others today, the military have undermined the trust placed in them by the people of Sudan to deliver democracy.

At this very moment, there is a communications blackout and, therefore, only intermittent contact with my officials in Khartoum, but they are working to establish the full details of the situation. We have updated travel advice to reflect the unrest, and we will keep it under review to ensure the safety of British nationals and our staff, although I understand there are no flights at the moment. We are working with international partners and expect to make a public statement later today. I will also speak to my US counterpart later today.

As we know well in this place, disagreement and debate are essential features of democratic politics. Disagreement and debate are neither a threat to Sudan nor a threat to the Sudanese people, and as such I urge Sudan's military leadership to change its course, to release detained politicians, including Prime Minister Hamdok, and to ensure Sudanese people can protest without fear of violence. The actions of the Sudanese military today are wholly unacceptable.

Women were a major driver of the 2019 protests that fought so bravely for democracy. Last week in Khartoum I met inspiring women leaders, inspiring women social reformers, inspiring women entrepreneurs and inspiring women community leaders, including the truly awe-inspiring Mama Iqbal, who successfully eradicated female genital mutilation in her 200,000-strong community of Tutti Island. She has undertaken to roll out her work across the country with help from UK aid.

[Vicky Ford]

Women and girls have a vital role to play in Sudan's future, and the UK stands with them. The military's actions today have betrayed all the people of Sudan, but especially the women and girls.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for her comments. The last military coup in Sudan resulted in a long and brutal dictatorship that caused extraordinary human rights abuses, including war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. The armed forces in Sudan must remember that the military belongs to Sudan, and Sudan does not belong to the military.

Last week the UK Government relaunched the UK-Sudan strategic dialogue, and the Minister met General al-Burhan on Wednesday 20 October. According to the official communiqué, the discussions involved a productive exchange of views concerning the civilian-led transition to democracy. Can she clarify what those productive discussions included? Have the upcoming meetings of the strategic dialogue been cancelled? Is the additional assistance announced last week still planned?

Will the Minister join me in urging the Sudanese military to ensure that protestors and those engaged in civic action in the coming days are not harmed in the horrific manner that we have seen in recent years? Today, reports of injuries and the use of live ammunition are already reaching us. The communication shutdown must be lifted, and we must be clear that not only will any attempt to cover up attacks on protests fail, but responsibility for the cover-up will be on the shoulders of those currently in power, and we will pursue them. There can be no sustainable peaceful transition unless there is also transitional justice. On taking power today, General al-Burhan suspended the investigation into the 3 June 2019 massacres. Will she join me in condemning that?

Any truly global Britain must be assertive in its support for democracy. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I know that our reputation has yet to recover from the devastating in-year cut to our global aid budget that the Government announced this year. Our response today and in the coming days will be seen as a template for how the UK supports democratic transitions across Africa. We must not fail.

Vicky Ford: In last week's meetings of the dialogue between the UK and Sudan, we worked on a number of issues including the support that we have been giving the Sudanese for their transition towards democracy and support for their constitutional arrangements as well as on economic matters. During that visit, I had the opportunity to meet both Prime Minister Hamdok and General al-Burhan as well as other key Government members. I stressed to all parties the importance of supporting the civilian-led Government and upholding the constitutional declaration and Juba peace agreement as well as continuing to progress the transition. I also reaffirmed our commitment and strong advice for them to continue to work with the International Criminal Court and to respect that process. I also urged the Government to increase their efforts to end the blockade of ports and transport links in eastern Sudan.

The UK has taken a leading role in supporting Sudan to hold to account those responsible for past crimes, including our support for the ICC and for investigations

into the 3 June killing of protestors. It is vital that those in Sudan should continue to work with the ICC to hold those responsible to account. Those responsible for today's action should also be held to account.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the Minister's words and the urgent question called by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). The reality is that this is a situation over which we have little control. What conversations has the Minister had with Governments in the region who have traditionally supported the Sudanese military? What conversations has she had with neighbouring states such as Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia and Somaliland, and, over the other side of the Red sea, Saudi Arabia, on whom so many people in Sudan rely for economic support and, in many cases, much more than that?

Vicky Ford: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for his questions. As I said in my response, we are working with international partners and expect to make a public statement later. On the African Union's response to the situation in Sudan, we welcome the statement of dismay at today's event by the chair of the AU commission, Moussa Faki, and we will work with all of Sudan's international friends to apply pressure on the military to return Sudan to the path of democracy.

We are actively calling for a briefing at the UN Security Council to ensure that the situation gets the highest levels of international attention that it deserves. The UK welcomes the statement by the UN Secretary General condemning the military's actions. As I said, I will also speak to my US counterpart later today.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for securing this urgent question today. I welcome the Minister to her role and thank her for meeting me last week, when we discussed Sudan among other issues. I hope that that constructive approach, also shown by her predecessor, who is with us today, will continue.

Like the Minister and the international community, the Opposition unequivocally condemn the coup and share the strong sentiments that she expressed over the arrest of Prime Minister Hamdok and others. That has put the democratic process in Sudan in peril and risks further instability at an extraordinarily difficult time for ordinary civilians there when it comes to access to food, water, healthcare and many other aspects, let alone the precarious state of the economy—and especially, as she said, for women in the country.

The Minister noted that last week she visited a number of key projects, including with women. She also met the now arrested Prime Minister and the general who led the coup. She described those meetings as positive at the time and wished the Sudanese well with the democratic transition. I do not doubt in any way her sincerity or intent in those meetings—it is important that she went—but what does she think has gone so wrong in the last few days?

Can the Minister say a little more about what we are doing to take immediate action with our allies in the region and, more broadly, at the UN Security Council and in our bilateral relationships? Has the Foreign Secretary tried to speak to General al-Burhan and what

of our embassy and special representative? She mentioned the communication difficulties. Are we aware of any contact with the coup leaders, urging them to step back from this absolutely appalling state of affairs?

Does the Minister regret the decision of the Chancellor, Prime Minister and the last Foreign Secretary to slash our support to Sudan, and to much of the rest of Africa, at such a fragile and critical time? Over 50% of our budget was cut in the last year, from £142 million to £62 million; that risks our influence, let alone our ability to help the Sudanese, who will face the consequences of these terrible events.

The Minister announced a number of key projects on her visit, including an InfraCo visit in November, British Council support, humanitarian assistance and safe drinking water projects in Port Sudan. Are those now at risk? What of them? Obviously, as has been said, there are regional implications, both political and humanitarian. There are crises in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and elsewhere—famine, conflict and instability. What assessment has she made of the risks of huge failure in the region?

The Minister rightly pointed out the need to bring to justice all those responsible for past atrocities, including former President al-Bashir and others responsible for crimes in Darfur and elsewhere. Does she now believe that those processes are at risk? She rightly mentioned the investigation into the 3 June massacres. We understand that that has now been stopped. I join her in urging for that investigation to continue; it is absolutely critical.

There are Sudanese in my constituency in Cardiff and across the UK who will today be deeply fearful for their families and others—especially those women protesting bravely in the streets. There are already reports of gunshots and burning barricades at the protests and fears of a return to civil war. We on the Opposition side join the Minister in urging an urgent return to peace, dialogue and the democratic transition—not this betrayal of the agreements and hopes of the Sudanese people.

Vicky Ford: As I said earlier, during my meetings last week I stressed to all parties the importance of supporting the civilian-led Government, the constitutional declaration and the Juba peace agreement and of progressing with the transition as well as continuing to co-operate with the International Criminal Court. I repeat those messages today.

On humanitarian aid, the UK stands by the people of Sudan. We have been a leading donor of such aid in Sudan. It is already the fifth largest humanitarian crisis in the world and the actions of the military do not change the urgent need for assistance. The ordinary Sudanese people must not suffer as a result. I saw first hand how UK aid through the World Food Programme is giving school food at a school just outside Khartoum to girls in great need of food support. It is also encouraging them to come to school and be educated. Given the challenges that many Sudanese people face, the UK urgently continues to call for an end to the blockades in east Sudan and for humanitarian aid and vital supplies to be able to flow without hindrance.

On financial support, we have invested £150 million in Sudan since the revolution, including £80 million in the Sudan family support programme, which is helping citizens cope with the necessary economic reforms, and a £148 million bridging loan to help clear Sudan's

arrears with the African Development Bank. We will consider the impact of today's events on our support, including with key international financial institution partners.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will want to thank my hon. Friend for what is, I think, her first reply to an urgent question in this role and for the robust nature of it.

This is a dreadful setback for the people of Sudan and a horrific reminder to so many on both sides of the House of the awful days of the genocide—as George Bush described it—in Darfur and the international pariah military regime of General al-Bashir. There will be concern that this could not have taken place without at least the passive acquiescence of the Saudis. Can my hon. Friend reassure the House that all discussion about the forgiveness of £600 million of Sudanese debt under debt relief schemes will now be put on hold until the military return to barracks and a lawful regime is put in place? Will she consider all sanctions, including the Magnitsky sanctions, being deployed against these international criminals who have illegally taken over Sudan?

Vicky Ford: I thank my right hon. Friend for his very kind words. As ever, he is deeply thoughtful on these matters. I agree that this is a totally unacceptable betrayal of the people of Sudan who have stood up for their democracy and freedom.

Regarding the debt clearance, the UK used our G7 presidency to agree an ambitious financing package to clear Sudan's arrears with G7 Finance Ministers and other international partners on the IMF board. It was a really important part of that pathway towards democracy and a stronger economy. As I have said, we will consider the impacts of today's events on our support, including with key international financial institution partners.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly commend the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for bringing this urgent question forward. I also commend the Minister for her reply, with which I agree entirely. There is a lot of agreement across the House that this is a very serious setback. The SNP stands four square behind international law, which cannot be taken *à la carte*—that applies as much to Northern Ireland protocols as it does to any other peace agreement anywhere else. Coherence across Government is really important for integrity and credibility internationally. This is a coup; it is a betrayal. The fact that the Minister was in Khartoum last week indicates just how little traction we have over events, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee has said, and I regret that. I particularly liked her remarks about holding people collectively and individually responsible for recent events, because that is very important. Can she reassure the House about arms exports to Sudan and what assessment the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has made of the flow of arms into Sudan and how they are being put to use? Furthermore, the UK is presently providing military support to the Sudanese army. That was unsuccessfully challenged in the High Court in July, but can we take it as read that that support is now being suspended?

Vicky Ford: It is completely clear that the actions of the military are unacceptable. We will reassess our commitment to restart phased defence engagement in the light of the current situation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What do we know about the ideological make-up of the military coup plotters? In particular, what is the relationship, if any, between them and the quite strong Islamist movement within the Sudan?

Vicky Ford: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. As I have stated, there is a communications black-out at the moment and therefore contact is intermittent. I note that General al-Burhan made a statement today, but I say back to him one more time—I do not think that one can say this enough—all parties should support the civilian-led Government, the constitutional declaration and the Juba peace agreement. The military leadership cannot claim to be committed to a democratic future while simultaneously acting unilaterally to dissolve transitional institutions and to arrest leading civilian politicians.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Will the UK call for a special session of the UN Human Rights Council concerning the situation in Sudan?

Vicky Ford: We are already actively calling for a briefing at the UN Security Council to ensure that the situation gets the attention that it deserves. We welcome the statement by the UN Secretary-General, condemning the actions of the military today.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Minister's response to the urgent question and thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for bringing it to the House.

The Minister has said that what has happened today is a real setback for the rights of women and girls in Sudan. Will she also join me in saying that it is also a real setback for religious minorities there, because under the previous Government the apostasy laws were removed and there was real improvement for religious minorities, including the Christian community? Will the Minister work with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I co-chaired when I was the British envoy, to ensure that a multilateral approach can be taken with regards to the United Kingdom's continuing commitment to freedom of religion or belief?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend has a true passion for freedom of religion or belief, and I absolutely share that passion. As I said, the acts of the military today have been an unacceptable betrayal of all the people of Sudan who have stood up for that freedom and democracy. It is vital that Sudanese people should be able to meet to

protest and to pray without fear of violence. That is another reason why we are so concerned about the actions today, and why we say that the actions of the military today are wholly unacceptable.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's response to the urgent question. I am sure that the Government, along with others, will make it quite clear to those in control that we expect no harm to come to the Prime Minister and others who have been arrested. Further to the point raised by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) a moment ago, I am sure that the Minister will be aware that it has been reported that Sudan's Islamist political movements have, in fact, been calling for such a coup against the civilian members of the transitional Government for several weeks now. In the light of that and the point made by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I wonder what effect the Minister thinks these events are going to have on the wider political situation in the region.

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree, not only that no harm should happen to those who have been arrested today, but, furthermore, that they should be immediately released. As I said earlier, we will continue to work with all Sudan's international friends and with the African Union to continue to reapply pressure on the military to return Sudan to that path to democracy. That is incredibly important not only for the people of Sudan, but for stability and democracy across the whole area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to the urgent question. The arrest of the Prime Minister of Sudan is the latest act in an increasingly violent situation in Sudan, which is spiralling out of control. Alongside that, and bearing in mind the well reported violations of human rights against Christians and other minority groups within that country, what steps can the Minister take to ensure that additional support and assistance will be offered to those vulnerable minorities on the ground and what form will that support take?

Vicky Ford: When I was in Khartoum last week, the situation was already extremely tense. The date of 21 October is an important day in Sudan, when people come out on to the streets to celebrate democracy. It was very important that those actions were allowed to happen peacefully; that was a large part of what I was calling for when I was meeting people there. I was extremely pleased to see that Thursday was peaceful—that is, that they were peaceful demonstrations and that there was no action taken against them. As I said earlier and I will say again, it is really important that Sudanese people are able to protest without fear of violence. That includes minority groups, women and girls, and all the people of Sudan. Again, that is why the actions today are so unacceptable.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

5.24 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to make a statement on my constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is indefensible and unacceptable that Iran has rejected Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's appeal against the new charges made against her. We continue to call on Iran to let her return home to the UK immediately. On 22 September, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Iranian Foreign Minister to make clear our deep concern about the ongoing situation of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, alongside the continued detention of Anoosheh Ashoori and Morad Tahbaz. Iran must release British dual nationals who have been arbitrarily detained so that they can return home.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Richard Ratcliffe on 16 and 17 October respectively. Earlier this month, I spoke to the families of arbitrarily detained dual British nationals and reiterated that the UK Government, from the Prime Minister down, remain fully committed to doing everything we can to help them to return home. We also called for humanitarian treatment of detained British dual nationals. Their welfare remains a top priority for us. We lobby on health concerns and mistreatment allegations whenever we have specific concerns or a family member brings issues to our attention. We call on the Iranian Government immediately to allow health professionals into Evin prison to assess the situation of dual British nationals incarcerated there. We continue to raise their cases at the most senior levels and discuss them at every opportunity with our Iranian counterparts. Our ambassador in Tehran regularly raises our dual national detainees with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office provides consular assistance to the families of British dual nationals detained in Iran wherever they seek our support.

The UK Government continue to engage with international partners and directly with the Government of Iran on a full range of issues of interest to the UK. Our priorities remain to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability, to promote stability and security in the region, and to secure the full release of our dual national detainees. I can assure this House that the safety and welfare of all British dual nationals detained in Iran remains a top priority for the UK Government. We will continue to raise our concerns with our Iranian interlocutors at every level, and we will not stop until those who have been detained unjustly are at home with their loved ones.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank Mr Speaker's office and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this urgent question. It is my eighth urgent question on Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe since she was detained five harrowing years ago in Iran on false charges.

You may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that only two years ago Nazanin's husband, Richard Ratcliffe, was on hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy in solidarity with his wife, who was doing the same in Evin

prison in Iran. Today, Richard is on hunger strike on the Foreign Secretary's doorstep in Whitehall, pleading with her and the Prime Minister to do more to challenge Iran's hostage-taking and to bring Nazanin home to be reunited with him and their daughter Gabriella. I think all Members across this House will realise that going on hunger strike is the absolute last resort for anyone. Richard has told me that he feels that there is no other option left because our Government's response to his wife's case has been pitiful.

Earlier this month, Nazanin was told that the Iranian judiciary had upheld a new one-year prison sentence and a further one-year travel ban that she had been given. This was just the latest escalation from Iran in this five-year ordeal, and yet again we do not feel that it has triggered any robust action from the UK. I know there was hope for a diplomatic solution just before summer, but these false dawns have actually made the situation worse for Nazanin and her husband.

I know that the Minister means well, that he is well versed on this case, and that he has been supportive of my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and her husband Richard, who has come to the Gallery today to listen to this urgent question. I want to ask the Minister specifically about four asks from Nazanin's family. Will he acknowledge that Nazanin is a hostage of the Iranian state? Will the Government bring forward Magnitsky sanctions against those involved in this hostage taking and challenge Iran on it in the courts? Will the Government finally fulfil the promise of resolving the £400 million debt that we as a country owe Iran? Will he work to secure a commitment to end hostage taking in negotiations around the Iran nuclear deal?

I urge the Minister, for Nazanin's sake, for Richard's sake, for Gabriella's sake and for the sake of all British citizens imprisoned in Iran or at risk of being taken hostage, to commit to a robust response to Iran and a proper rescue plan for Nazanin.

James Cleverly: I commend the hon. Lady for the passion with which she promotes the interest of her constituents. I know other Members in the House also have an interest. I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like for the families of those incarcerated in Iran, and I understand the universal desire to get these British dual nationals home. I assure her that the UK continues to have this as one of our top priorities. It is the focus of all the conversations we have with Iran. She will understand that a range of sanctions is already imposed against individuals and entities in Iran from the UK and international bodies. Of course the Iranian regime would love to connect the cases of these British dual nationals with the international military services debt. We regard it as unhelpful to reinforce that link. We make the point very clearly that British dual nationals must not be used as a means of diplomatic leverage. Therefore, we continue to call on Iran to do the right thing, to release all the British dual nationals in incarceration and to allow them to come home to their families and loved ones.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Minister tell the House roughly how many British dual nationals are being held captive in Iran, and how many of them chose to go there after the ordeal of this poor lady began so many years ago? What advice would he give to any British dual nationals thinking of going to Iran in the future?

James Cleverly: The UK travel advice on Iran has remained consistent for some time. We strongly advise against all travel to Iran. Our ability to offer consular support, for the very reasons that we have discussed here, is severely limited. My right hon. Friend will forgive me if I choose not to disclose how many people we believe are in incarceration. Our view is that, while that might be frustrating to many, it is sometimes better that we exert the pressure that we exert quietly, rather than publicly.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this urgent question and on the sterling work she is doing on behalf of her constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Six months ago, my hon. Friend secured a similar debate on the second sentence Nazanin was given by the Iranian authorities. Now, Nazanin has lost her appeal to overturn that spurious conviction and faces the prospect of returning to prison, where we know conditions are very poor. This means she may not see her husband and young daughter until 2023. Yesterday, her husband Richard Ratcliffe began, as we have heard, a hunger strike outside the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. When I met Richard earlier today, he showed his courage and determination, and he made clear to me that he was taking this action because he has lost faith in the Government's broken strategy.

After over 2,000 long days, it is surely time for the Government to fundamentally rethink their whole approach to Nazanin's predicament and the predicament of the other dual nationals who are in a similar position. Last week, in reply to questions from my hon. Friend and me in a Westminster Hall debate, the Minister said that the Government remain absolutely committed to securing the full release of Nazanin and the other imprisoned dual nationals. The new Foreign Secretary has said that she will continue to "press Iran" on the issue.

My question today is straightforward: what precisely is the Government's strategy for bringing Nazanin and the others home? Words are not enough. It is surely time for the Government to take real and robust action.

James Cleverly: I understand the frustration that is clearly in the hon. Gentleman's voice and I assure him that that is echoed by everyone involved in the situation. The incarceration of British dual nationals is down to Iran. The most recent charges brought against Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe are as spurious as the original charges and we demand that the Iranian regime releases her. I assure him that we are exploring every option. I assure him that, if he were able to come up with specific ideas that we had not already explored, they would be listened to and taken seriously. I also assure him, however, that we have explored and continue to explore every option to secure the release of all the British dual nationals currently held in incarceration in Iran.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly commend the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing the urgent question and for her indefatigability in keeping the issue to the fore. We were in a Westminster Hall debate last week where she was notably passionate in her prosecution. For the record, I do not doubt the diligence of the Minister on the subject; I think it has been raised a number of times with the Iranians. Despite all the good intentions and cross-party unity, however,

we have not seen progress; arguably, we have seen reversals. What sort of toothless tiger cannot get its nationals back from an overseas regime that has taken them hostage? We need to call a spade a spade.

We have an opportunity for progress with President Raisi coming to COP in Glasgow in a matter of days. Will the UK Government take the opportunity of having him in Scotland to hold talks about the issue? If not, why on earth are we contemplating having the head of a regime that is holding UK nationals hostage on our soil?

James Cleverly: I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that the release of British dual nationals is part of every conversation that we have with the Iranian regime at every level. I remind the House that, ultimately, that is the responsibility not of those people in incarceration or of this Government, but wholly, solely and exclusively of the Iranian regime. The detention of those people is completely illegitimate and unfounded, and they need to be released immediately.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting the urgent question and I thank the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for doggedly pursuing the issue, both of which say that the House will not give up on Nazanin. I find it disappointing that those of us who have taken an interest in the case could have written what the Minister said, because we hear the same thing over and over again.

I want to push one of the questions that has already been asked. As part of the joint comprehensive plan of action negotiations, is the end to hostage taking one of the things that the Government are going to press? We have to keep pushing at every available avenue and that is clearly on the table and needs to be explored. Can the Minister give us an update on that?

James Cleverly: As I have said, we do not accept the notion that arbitrarily incarcerating British dual nationals should be used as a point of leverage in negotiations. The suspended negotiations taking place in Vienna are about ensuring that we do not ever see a nuclear-armed Iran. Our position on that is consistent and unwavering, and we will not allow Tehran to distract us from that course of action. Our position is straightforward and simple: the people in incarceration should be released without condition, not as part of some negotiation, but because they are not in any way responsible for the charges that have been brought against them.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The concern behind the UQ of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) today and behind Mr Ratcliffe's recent hunger strike is that the issue of British prisoners abroad is not really the top priority for the Foreign Office. I ask the Minister to review the correspondence that we have had recently in relation to the case of Luke Symons—it is related in some ways through the Iranian connection—who is incarcerated in Sana'a by the Houthis, and also the correspondence my constituent Bob Cummings has had with his Department regarding that case to see whether he really feels, when he looks at it, that it indicates that the quality of attention that is required in these cases of British prisoners improperly and illegally incarcerated overseas is really being given by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I hope he would agree to do that and review that correspondence.

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the point that he has raised. I can assure him that, on my recent visit to Oman, I raised this case with the Omani Foreign Minister, with whom I have a very good relationship, in an attempt to get a message across to the Houthis, who have in recent times stepped back from direct engagement with the UK Government. When I spoke directly with the Houthis, I raised the case of Luke, and we regularly raise the case of British dual nationals when we have conversations with those countries that are either directly involved or able to act as intermediaries for our message. But I can assure him that this is a topic of conversation that I have consistently with the Foreign Secretary and we consistently have with the Iranians and other countries that might be able, as I say, to act as intermediaries for that message. It remains a top priority of this Government.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have just had the honour of speaking to Richard Ratcliffe, as I did two years ago when he was on hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy. I also want to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her eighth urgent question on this matter. Can the Minister just set out how, or if, we are using our international partnerships to try to bring an end to this dreadful situation?

James Cleverly: The right hon. Lady raises an important point. I can assure her that we speak about this issue, as I say, directly with the Iranian regime, but also with other countries, both in the region and those friends and allies that we have in Europe and in the United States of America. We will not rest in our efforts to bring British dual nationals home not because questions are raised in the House or exchanged in correspondence, but because it is the right thing for us to do. We do not need to be pressured into doing this. This is what we choose to do because it is the right thing to do, and I can assure her and the House that it will remain a priority until they are all able to come home.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am sure all of us send our solidarity to Richard, who is having to go on a second sit-out outside the FCDO this evening and for the coming days. I send my solidarity to him and his daughter, and to Nazanin. Further to calls for the Government to set out a comprehensive strategy to secure the release and return to the UK of dual nationals such as Nazanin and Anoosheh Ashoori, Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof, can the Minister tell us what discussions the Prime Minister has had to secure the release of state-taken UK dual nationals as a matter of urgency with his Iranian counterpart?

James Cleverly: Obviously, the majority of the interactions with Iran take place within the FCDO at ministerial level, and I can assure the hon. Member that the Prime Minister takes a very keen interest in this, as does the Foreign Secretary and as do I. I can only repeat what I have said previously: the Government will not rest until we have secured the release and repatriation of these incarcerated British dual nationals.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing this urgent question, and

thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting it. The Minister knows of my constituent only too well—Anoosheh Ashoori—because he continues to be held alongside Nazanin. He was recently denied conditional release without a hearing. I am not sure if the Minister is aware of that. His daughter Elika said:

“The fate of our family is at the mercy of the UK government. They...will decide whether we see our dad in the near future or when he is an old man in his 70s having wasted a decade of his life in...jail.”

Can the Minister say to me whether my constituent Anoosheh Ashoori will be granted diplomatic protection?

James Cleverly: I understand the frustration felt by the families of those who have been incarcerated in Iran, but the fault is with the Iranian Government. We will continue to work to secure their release, and to do everything that we believe is in the best interests of getting their release. Ultimately, however, the blame lies with the Iranian regime, and we should never lose sight of that. They are the ones who brought about these illegitimate charges, who are incarcerating British dual nationals, and who have the exclusive power to release them, and they should.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend and thank the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her press appearance—she is much admired by many in this Chamber. Recent news from Nazanin’s husband has confirmed the impact that imprisonment is having on her mental health and stability, and that is little wonder when we see a glimpse of the way that this British citizen is living, ever aware that Members of the House had thought to secure her freedom, only for that to be thwarted. What steps is the Minister prepared to take to secure her freedom once and for all, and to send a message that this nation, this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, will protect her own?

James Cleverly: It is not always possible, particularly in fast-moving and sensitive negotiations such as those we are engaged with in Iran, to go into every detail in the House, and I beg the indulgence of the House to understand that. I assure the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to others, that this issue remains an absolute priority for the Government, and the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I will take every opportunity to raise it directly with the Iranians and seek the proper, permanent release of all British dual nationals currently held in arbitrary detention in Iran.

BILL PRESENTED

SOCIAL MEDIA BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rehman Chishti presented a Bill to make provision about hate speech on social media; to require social media platforms to verify the identity of their users; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 January 2022, and to be printed (Bill 173).

Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill

Second Reading

5.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill is the second that the Government are bringing forward concerning the welfare of animals, and its scope relates to the keeping of animals in Great Britain. We are a proud nation of animal lovers, and we have a strong record of being at the forefront of championing the best standards of care and protection for our animals, both at home and around the world. The UK was the first country in the world to pass legislation to protect animals as long ago as the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822. Since 2010, we have achieved a great deal. On farms, we introduced new regulations for minimum standards for meat chickens, banned the use of conventional battery cages for laying hens, and introduced mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. We have also modernised our licensing system for a range of activities such as dog breeding and pet sales, and banned the commercial third-party sale of puppies and kittens. Our 2019 manifesto outlined how we intend to go further. Earlier this year we published the “Action Plan for Animal Welfare”, laying out how we will ensure that animals, both domestically and internationally, are subject to the highest possible standards of welfare.

A week ago, the House gathered to pay tribute to Sir David Amess. Many hon. Members highlighted his tireless work for higher animal welfare during his 38 years in this House. We will feel his absence today. He typically sat a couple of rows behind me off my left shoulder, sometimes with helpful interventions and often with more challenging ones, but always with a sense of good will and that positive smile even when being challenging.

In particular, Sir David campaigned for many years on the issue of live animal exports. He also campaigned on primates kept as pets and on the puppy trade. I last met Sir David at an event organised by the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation at the Conservative party conference, where he expressed his delight at how many of these issues, many of which will be raised in today’s debate, had moved to the fore. We will obviously miss him. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

I thank Lorraine Platt for the work that she has done through the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation to campaign towards several of the measures that we are bringing forward in this Bill. I also take this opportunity to thank the Scottish and Welsh Governments for their contributions to the development of the Bill. Although the provisions in the Bill will not extend to Northern Ireland, I thank the Northern Irish Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for their collaboration and valuable support in helping my Department with the development of these policies.

The Bill focuses on five key areas. First, the Government will take advantage of our departure from the European Union to ban the export of certain livestock and other animals for slaughter and fattening. That will apply to journeys beginning in or transiting through Great Britain to a third country. Many hon. Members have campaigned on this issue, including my right hon. Friend the Member

for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). We have carefully considered the scientific and expert evidence and the responses to our recent public consultation in England and Wales.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much welcome the ban on the live export of animals for slaughter. However, I want to ensure that livestock and breeding stock can come in and out of the country without hindrance. Is the Secretary of State confident, as he brings in that ban, that we can keep breeding stock coming in?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. That is why the Bill relates specifically to animals for fattening and slaughter; it does not include animals for breeding. The Government’s view is that exporting animals for slaughter and fattening is unnecessary; indeed, such journeys are unnecessarily stressful for the animals concerned. Those animals could be slaughtered or fattened domestically, and that could be carried out by means of a shorter or less stressful journey.

The Government’s recent consultation also covered a range of proposals to improve the domestic welfare in transport regime, and the Bill provides us with the power to introduce improvements by means of regulations at a later date. We recently published our response to the consultation, outlining how we will take forward these reforms, working alongside farming and animal welfare organisations. We will carry out further engagement with stakeholders before implementing any reforms, and we will work closely with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to ensure, as far as possible, a consistent legislative approach across Great Britain.

Secondly, our departure from the EU also means that we are able to bring in measures to tackle the serious issue of puppy imports into Great Britain. The number of cats, dogs and ferrets brought into GB through non-commercial and commercial routes has increased significantly over the years. That has been accompanied by an increase in young puppies being illegally landed in the UK. For example, the number of dogs intercepted rose from 390 in 2019 to almost 1,300 in 2020. That problem has been highlighted by many hon. Members in recent years, not least by the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and by many other members of that Committee.

There is growing evidence that commercial importers currently abuse our non-commercial pet travel rules to bring in lots of puppies at once to maximise profit, and that the welfare of those puppies is frequently compromised. The Bill therefore reduces the number of pets that can be brought into the country for non-commercial reasons by a person who is coming into or returning to the country. The maximum number of pets will be reduced to five per motor vehicle on ferry and rail routes, and three per person where someone is arriving by air or as a foot passenger. That will deter traders from abusing the non-commercial pet travel rules to bring in puppies for onward sale.

We also have concerns that many of the puppies imported into Great Britain have been sourced from breeding facilities with low welfare standards, and that their welfare is being compromised during transport.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am conscious of how much puppy prices have increased, particularly during the pandemic. While I welcome the reduction to five pets per person, I am a little concerned that if they were five high-value puppies, that may be still be worth a criminal's while. Will the Secretary of State be prepared to keep that number under review, for higher-value puppies in particular?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We have an important balance to strike. Obviously, these rules are for non-commercial pets, and there are people who may have several dogs that they travel with. We are trying to strike the balance such that we ensure that we do not have a situation where innocent people travelling with their pets suddenly need a commercial licence, while significantly tightening the regime to prevent abuse of the non-commercial pet travel route.

The Bill includes an enabling power that will allow us to implement further restrictions on the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets on welfare grounds through secondary legislation. We have recently conducted a consultation on the detail of those measures, including proposals to raise the minimum age for importing puppies and to prohibit the import of heavily pregnant dogs and dogs with cropped ears and docked tails. That consultation closed on 16 October, and we will be working to analyse the responses over the coming weeks.

Thirdly, the Bill delivers on our manifesto commitment to ban the keeping of primates as domestic pets in England. Primates have highly complex welfare and social needs, making them unsuitable to be kept in a home environment. I saw the consequences of that myself during a visit to the Wild Futures monkey sanctuary several years ago with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). I congratulate her on her work in this area—she previously brought forward a private Member's Bill—along with other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), who has also raised this issue with me repeatedly over the years.

People keeping primates outside of licensed zoos and scientific facilities will now need to obtain a specialist primate keeper licence to do so. That new licence will ensure that the only people keeping primates are those able to meet the highest welfare standards appropriate to meet their welfare needs.

Primate keepers will be required to apply to their local authority for a licence and will be subject to inspections by a suitably qualified person. Only a person holding a licence will be able to buy, sell, transfer or breed primates. The local authority will have the power to revoke a licence if the prescribed conditions are not adhered to, and in instances where primates are being kept illegally, it will be able to seize and rehome them. At the request of Welsh Ministers, we will bring forward a Government amendment in Committee to extend this measure to Wales.

The fourth set of measures in the Bill will update legislation going back to the 1950s on dogs attacking and worrying livestock. Livestock worrying is a serious and increasing problem, which can cause significant emotional and financial consequences for livestock keepers. The legislation will be updated to cover all places where livestock are kept or may be present, such as on roads while being moved from one field to another.

Updating the legislation will also ensure that it covers all the types of livestock now more commonly kept for production, or for other purposes, in England, including camelids, emus, ostriches and enclosed deer. Crucially, the reformed provisions will also give the police more enforcement powers to prevent recurring incidents. Police will be able to seize and detain a dog until the end of an investigation, or the withdrawal or conclusion of a court case. Police will also be able to use DNA testing to collect evidence. I pay tribute to the work done in this area by a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and for Aberconwy (Robin Millar).

Finally, we will update the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 to ensure animal welfare and conservation standards in zoos are strengthened, and can be updated and enforced more effectively. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the UK Zoos Expert Committee are currently overhauling the "Secretary of State's Standards of Modern Zoo Practice". The standards, which set out conditions that local authorities must have regard to when setting requirements of zoos, have previously been criticised for being vague and, in some places, unenforceable. We are drafting new, clearer standards, and amending the 1981 Act via the Bill to ensure that new standards must be followed.

The update to the standards, alongside our proposals to move conservation measures into the standards, should make the requirements placed on zoos clearer, and better enable local authorities to enforce those standards more effectively. The amendments will also increase maximum penalties for zoos not complying with the legislation, and modernise the appeals process for local authority licensing decisions in England.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am a member of the zoos and aquariums all-party parliamentary group, which is concerned about what the regulations may look like. Is there a timescale for when they are likely to be brought forward, or even a first draft, so there can be adequate consultation?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I understand that we are already in discussion with zoos about this change. We will work very closely with them, through the working group, which has already looked at it and recommended it. I recognise that some zoos have anxiety about what it might entail, but I reassure him that we will work closely with the zoo sector.

In conclusion, this is an important year for animal welfare. The Bill sends a very clear message that we are serious about protecting the welfare of animals that are in the care of mankind. I am confident that Members of this House will agree that we have a special duty to kept animals; the Bill is a further important step in improving animal welfare for those. I therefore commend it to the House.

6.2 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): My party has been the party of animal welfare for quite some time, and we welcome the fact that many of the policies in Labour's animal welfare manifesto have found themselves in the Bill. That is good to see. It is also good to see the Secretary of State in his place making such a good case for the protection of animals.

[*Luke Pollard*]

There is a strong cross-party and public interest in us making sure that animals are put first. That has not always been the priority I have heard from those on the Government Benches, and it is good to hear that now from the Secretary of State himself.

The Secretary of State has clearly read a copy of Labour's animal welfare manifesto. It must be a well-thumbed copy, given how many of our policies appear in the Bill. As such, Labour will support the Bill. It is a good Bill and implements much of what we have been arguing for, for many, many years. However, there are a number of elements in Labour's animal welfare manifesto that have not been copied over in full. I want to raise a few of them, to make the case for how the Bill can be further improved and to reflect, on a cross-party basis, the concerns of many of our constituents, who want Britain to be the best country in the world for animal welfare and to ensure that all our animals are cared for and respected, because every animal matters.

I have made this offer to the Secretary of State before, and I am happy to make it again: on such a Bill, there should be no need for partisan disagreements, and I hope and would like to work on a cross-party basis, especially in seeking improvements in Committee; we have identified a number that can be made.

I echo the Secretary of State's words on our fallen comrade, Sir David Amess. He was always a passionate campaigner for animal welfare, and a passionate campaigner on a cross-party basis for animals in general. He is much missed in this debate. I have great sympathy with those who want to name provisions in the Bill after Sir David. I think that passing a good Bill would be a fitting tribute to his passion on this issue.

Turning to puppy smuggling, over the pandemic, demand for puppies and kittens has sky-rocketed. The simple truth is that demand in Britain outstrips supply. That has created a space for criminals and animal cruelty. Research from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home shows that there were 700,000 online searches about buying a dog in February 2020, and that that increased to 1.5 million online searches in April 2020. That has made it so much more lucrative for unscrupulous smugglers, and has driven desperate dog lovers to dodgy websites. I pay tribute to all campaigners, including organisations such as Justice for Reggie, who have, for quite some time, been raising issues around puppy smuggling, puppy farms and their cruel practices. The way that so many animals have been brought to Britain is sickening. Animals suffer not just on the journey, but in many cases for many years afterwards. They suffer as a result of what they experienced in being bred and transported. Smugglers have been feeding a market of dog lovers—our fellow citizens who want the best for their animals. That is why action is necessary.

In one recent seizure during a thwarted smuggling operation, 10 French bulldog puppies just four weeks of age were found heavily sedated in a car travelling from Poland to the UK. The puppies were hidden in the hollowed-out back seats, under a pile of blankets. Luckily, they were seized by the authorities and cared for by the brilliant Dogs Trust, but tragically one of the puppies did not make it through the ordeal. Sadly, that is an

all-too-common occurrence. That is what makes the proposals an important part of the Bill. I would like them to go further.

Labour believes we should reduce the number of puppies and kittens allowed per vehicle to three, rather than the five that the Secretary of State set out. We also believe that the minimum age at which dogs can be imported should be raised from 15 weeks to six months; that will help to rule out the importation of puppies during the entirety of the early stages of life. That should be in the Bill, rather than in guidance or secondary legislation that follows, to send the very clear message that puppy smuggling will not be tolerated in this country. We also want to raise the maximum penalties for those caught illegally importing dogs. There is a longer sentence available for illegally importing cigarettes than for illegally importing puppies. That does not quite seem right.

There is a question about how the rules will be enforced. I would be grateful if, when the Minister sums up, she explained how much additional funding is being made available to police forces to enforce the rules. The cost of policing puppy smuggling is borne disproportionately by a small number of police forces. How can that be taken into account? We welcome the consultations the Secretary of State mentioned on dogs with cropped ears and tails, and the potential changes regarding heavily pregnant dogs, too. We look forward to those being brought forward and enacted soon.

As regular viewers of Westminster Hall debates on animal welfare will know, the Labour party and I are big fans of Gizmo's law and Tuk's law. I do not understand why the Bill on pet microchipping brought forward by the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) has not been cut and pasted into this Bill, because it is a good provision. I would be grateful if the Minister set out why that is, because it enjoys cross-party and public support, and would make a difference. It would put into statute Gizmo's law, which would make it compulsory to scan the microchips of diseased cats, and not just dogs, and Tuk's law, which would require vets to scan a dog's microchip before it was put down. I would be grateful if the Minister could sum up the progress on those two campaigns.

There is strong cross-party support for ending the keeping of primates as pets. I, too, congratulate my constituency neighbour across the river from Plymouth, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), on the work she has done on that, and on the work done at the sanctuary in her constituency, which not only looks after rescued primates but makes the strong, positive, non-partisan case that primates should never be kept as pets.

There is a problem with what the Secretary of State has outlined, in that a licensing system that allows primates to be kept as pets does not deliver on the promise and the pledge that many of us made to our constituents—that we will ban the keeping of primates as pets. A primate keeper licence does not deliver that. I also have serious concerns about whether local authorities, which already in many cases struggle to fulfil their animal welfare responsibilities, will have the powers and resources to go after illegally kept primates and check on those being held under the Government's primate keeper licence.

I would be grateful if the Minister could set out when the Government will publish the licensing standards, what those standards will contain, who will be involved in drafting them and how many suitably qualified persons there will be across the country. The easiest thing to do here is to say clearly, “Keeping a primate as a pet is unacceptable in the 21st century, and it will be banned.” I do not believe that a licensing system will try to deliver that, but there is public support for that position.

I know the Secretary of State is currently fighting his Back Benchers, because he whipped them to vote to continue to allow raw sewage to be discharged into our nation’s rivers. I hope that keeping primates as pets will not also be considered a mistake by the Secretary of State. The Opposition will table amendments to ensure a complete ban on keeping primates as pets, which I believe the public support, and I hope the Secretary of State will choose carefully how he whips his MPs in that vote.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the sanctuary in my constituency is called Wild Futures? He seemed to have forgotten the name, although he has visited it. Can he explain why he is not sticking to the subject of the Bill, but rather making disparaging remarks, which are completely untrue, about sewage being disposed of in rivers?

Luke Pollard: I am always cautious when I compliment the hon. Lady, and hope she receives it warmly. I trust she will when I next mention her campaigns. Wild Futures is a great place, and the expertise that I saw on show was exceptional. It is not the only place in the country that has been caring for rescued primates, and I hope that continues to be the case. My point about raw sewage is simple: we need to be careful about voting in a way that is so contrary to public opinion, and keeping primates as pets—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is answering a point from the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), and I did not want to prevent him from doing that, but he should not have introduced the subject of a Bill that was debated thoroughly last week and should not be mentioned in the context of Second Reading of this Bill.

Luke Pollard: I understand what you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will contain my remarks to this Bill, but I hope that any whipping and voting on amendments in future will be cognisant of public opinion. On animal welfare, there is strong support for ending the keeping of primates as pets—not for licensing, a “get out of jail free” card, or a small number of very rich owners being allowed to carry on owning primates as pets, but for banning it completely. That is what the Opposition will argue; I look forward to those votes, and I hope that when they come, the Secretary of State will be mindful of public opinion.

I support the measures set out by the Secretary of State on banning live animal exports. That is an issue on which we have campaigned for a long time, and there has been cross-party feeling that they should not happen. I am afraid in recent years we have still seen animals exported, in particular for fattening, and what many of those animals experience in being transported for a long

time can be a real concern. I share the concern of the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), to ensure that a system is put in place properly and supported by our farming sector, but long journeys on which animals suffer are not acceptable to the British people, and this measure is long overdue, so I support it.

On livestock worrying, what the Secretary of State suggests here represents good progress, but we must ensure that the legislation is as thorough and robust as it can be. My concern with this section of the Bill is that the language is a little bit looser than I would like, and it could be open to interpretation. I encourage him to look in particular at the definitions of animals as being “at large” and under the control of a person, because already concerns are being raised about how that would work in practice and how the measures would be enforced.

On livestock worrying, which the National Farmers Union estimates costs £1.6 million a year—probably more in terms of the emotional costs to farmers—it is important that we ensure the message is clear and precise for anyone doing that, and, importantly, that it fits alongside a right to roam and further access to the countryside for many people. There are tensions here, and clarity of language would make an enormous difference on that.

Although it is not specifically in the Bill, I also think there is an opportunity within the scope of the Bill potentially to look at strengthening the foxhunting ban because of the nature of the hounds, which are kept animals themselves. It would be good to explore that, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) will table amendments on that in Committee.

I am proud of Labour’s record on animal welfare. I am proud also that many of the campaigns that have been fought on a cross-party basis and many of the arguments made are popular with the people we represent. People want to see us go further on animal welfare than we have done. They want to see Britain be a beacon nation, putting the health of our animals first and foremost. We know that by the amount of correspondence each and every one of us receives from our constituents when it comes to animal welfare. There are opportunities to enhance this Bill, to make it stronger and to ensure that the necessary provisions are in place.

In the spirit of cross-party working, I am happy to say to the Secretary of State that we will work with him and his Department to seek to strengthen the Bill. I do not want to see votes along the way where arguments on animal welfare are pitted against a three-line Whip, if only because the public want to see us working together in this area. In particular, the bits I have mentioned that could do with a wee bit more strengthening, a little more content and a little more thought, are ones that have enthusiastic popular support among the people we represent.

6.16 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on Second Reading of this Bill. I welcome what the Secretary of State had to say, and I welcome what the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), has said, except perhaps for one or two comments on sewage that were unnecessary on this

[*Neil Parish*]

particular Bill. Both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State spoke about Sir David Amess. If Sir David were here tonight, he would be joining in this great debate, and it is such a sad loss that we do not have him here.

Let me get straight into the Bill. On the keeping of primates, my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has done tremendous work on that area over the years. She is a great member of the Select Committee, and we very much appreciate what she has been doing. Since we have been talking about cross-party working on animal welfare issues, may I say that nowhere is that more present than in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee? I am delighted with all its members, who usually support the work we do.

We need to make the licensing of primates being kept by individuals very strong and ensure that the private keeping of those animals is phased out as quickly as possible. I understand that that will take a little bit of doing, but it is absolutely the right way to go. We have some very good zoos in this country, but sometimes some extra animal welfare requirements are needed, so let us work with the zoos to ensure that we can make them better and improve life for the animals.

On livestock worrying, there is no doubt that there have been a lot of cases. The problem is that some members of the public think the dogs are just enjoying themselves. They may not actually savage the sheep, but they chase in-lamb sheep and cause many complications with lambing. So much of the damage to sheep cannot be seen at the time; it comes later, so we must do everything we can not only to tighten things up and make the process of identifying dogs easier, but to get the message out to the general public about the danger of releasing dogs, especially when two dogs play together and cause huge damage to livestock. Let us try to ask people to be more careful as they walk through fields.

We are looking at opening up the countryside and at an agricultural policy that enables more people to walk in it and enjoy it. I very much want people to do that, but we have to do it responsibly. We must remember that livestock are worried by dogs a lot. I think that people do not altogether realise that, so I look forward to measures being strengthened in the Bill.

It is quite right that exporting livestock will not be allowed for further fattening or for slaughter, but we do need to be able to export and import breeding stock, because otherwise we will reduce the gene pool. Farming needs really good-quality stock for the future. Livestock can be transported properly and in good vehicles; when people have them for breeding, they make sure of that.

I want to talk briefly about the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets. A lot of animals have been seized, especially puppies, which not only are very young and unsocialised, but can have many diseases. As well as being bad for the puppies, importing them can bring in diseases; even if those diseases are not contagious, the puppies very often need a lot of medical attention, leading to high veterinary bills, and unfortunately they sometimes die. It causes huge problems.

As hon. Members have said, there is huge profit to be made from bringing in puppies. After Second Reading, I want us to look at that. I understand that the Minister

of State and the Secretary of State want to reduce the number permitted to five per vehicle; I would like it brought down to three per vehicle. We do not want the system to be abused. Surveys by Dogs Trust and others give 1.4 dogs per owner. That is an average, Madam Deputy Speaker—you can't actually have 1.4 dogs, can you? Multiplying that by two gives us 2.8, by my maths, so I would have thought that three per vehicle was about right.

I welcome what is being done in the Bill, but I think we could go further, and tightening things up in this area is key. What would probably make the most difference—I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State to move quite quickly on this—is allowing dogs to be brought in only once they are six months old. The benefits would be twofold: first, it would be easier for border authorities to recognise puppies that were too young, and secondly a six-month dog is not as cuddly and sale-worthy as a young puppy. That approach would probably do the most good of all, and I would like to see it in the Bill.

With his veterinary experience, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), my colleague on the Select Committee, is rightly keen to ensure that moving heavily pregnant dogs be stopped, along with the ear-cropping and tail-docking of dogs. I will not go into more detail, because I am sure that he will.

I do not want to speak for too long, because many other Members have yet to speak. I very much welcome the Bill, which deals effectively with the keeping of primates, with zoos, with livestock worrying, with the export of livestock and with the importation of dogs and cats. As I said, I would like to see some tightening up in places; I am sure that the Government are listening.

I very much welcome the Opposition's support for the Bill. I think that it was very much in our Conservative manifesto, so I am not quite convinced that we have copied it all from Labour's; some of it we actually came up with ourselves. We are very much a party that supports animal welfare, but I accept that there is a lot of cross-party support for it in this Chamber.

6.25 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I broadly support the overall aims of the Bill—I am keen to see increased animal welfare across the country and am glad that the Government share that ambition—but of course the devil is in the detail. My speech will focus on just a few areas.

First, the Bill's attempts to tackle puppy smuggling are particularly welcome, but we need to ensure that they are as efficient as possible. I encourage Ministers to work with organisations such as Dogs Trust and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home to make sure that their proposals are robust. I have seen the heart-breaking torture of puppy smuggling and its lifelong implications, particularly on animal health and psychology. Often, puppies are smuggled in car boots or under seats; sadly, some do not even survive the journey. That is totally unacceptable.

Right now, the profit motive is high and the risk of being caught is low for smugglers. The Bill proposes a maximum of five pets per vehicle entering the country, but Dogs Trust believes that that must be reduced to three per vehicle if it is to have any real impact on puppy smuggling. In addition, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said, we must increase

to six months the age at which puppies can be imported, and ban the transportation of all pregnant dogs for commercial purposes. These are simple measures that would improve the safety of many more dogs.

I would like to see increased protection for exotic animals kept as pets. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, the RSPCA is concerned that the licensing system proposed in the Bill

“runs the risk of allowing some private keeping of primates to continue indefinitely”.

An outright ban on all exotic animals—not just primates, but bears, lions and tigers, for example—being kept as pets would be more effective and more manageable for local councils.

Clause 47 will make several changes to the standards of modern zoo practice. I am concerned that moving zoo standards from primary to secondary legislation will create the risk of the Secretary of State amending rules without any meaningful parliamentary scrutiny. It also concerns me that the legislation does not make a clear enough distinction between private collectors and zoos focused on conservation. We need assurances that there will be full transparency from the Government, both now and with respect to any further changes in the law.

There are still many questions that need answering. What role will the Zoos Expert Committee play in advising on proposed changes to zoo licensing requirements? Will the Government allow the committee to publish its independent advice and Ministers to respond to it? That would be beneficial for zoos and for transparency in the policy area.

Not only are zoos exceptional at caring for animals and providing a fantastic day out, but they do phenomenal conservation work. It is right to recognise that work in the new standards, but the definition of “conservation” must be subject to full consultation from the sector and needs to include all the work that zoos do, including education.

Earlier this year, I visited Chester zoo to see for myself its outstanding work. It has been working with schools to build its curriculum around conservation, engaging thousands of pupils with the topic, and over the next decade it will help to train 5,000 conservationists as part of its conservation training academy. Yorkshire wildlife park is close to my constituency and is well-loved by my constituents. I have seen the incredible work that it does, while expanding its premises and providing an ideal location for school trips.

We must make sure that the definition of conservation is not too narrow, and reflects all the excellent work that zoos carry out. Education is a vital part of conservation, and we need to ensure that it is recognised and supported. The Government must work proactively and effectively with zoos to ensure that no park will be punished or forced to change the important work that it does just to enable it to fit the new standards.

I should be grateful for reassurances from the Minister about the concerns that I have expressed—particularly those relating to accountability and the definition of conservation, which seem to be the two issues that worry zoos most.

Another aspect of animal welfare that the Bill does not cover is testing on animals, and I hope the Minister will have an opportunity to address that as well. A recent poll by YouGov found that almost two thirds of people want to see a plan to phase out animal experiments, and the setting of a target date for ending tests in the UK. When there are alternatives to testing on animals, it should not be allowed. Why are we still tolerating the use of this cruel and unnecessary practice by such huge companies? I also fail to understand why animal testing often occurs twice, with the same ingredient used in different products. Surely causing twice as many animals to suffer is unnecessary. I fear that the Government are backtracking on legislation to reduce animal testing, and I hope the Minister will reassure me about that.

I hope very much that the Government will listen to my demands and will work on the Bill with experts, because we all want it to be as effective as possible.

6.31 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). I know how committed she is to animal welfare, and she made some very good points, particularly on animal testing and zoos.

The Bill will make a real difference to the lives of animals across our country. It was, of course, Mahatma Gandhi who said that the moral progress of a nation and its greatness can be judged by how it treats its animals. Well, this nation has always been at the forefront of animal welfare, and this Government are taking that historic record to new heights.

I am proud to have played a positive role in promoting animal welfare during my time in Parliament. When we were in opposition I served as shadow Minister for animal welfare, and on Friday my own animal welfare bill, the Animals (Penalty Notices) Bill, will come before Parliament. It will introduce fines for mid-ranging animal welfare and health offences, preserving criminal prosecution for all cruelty offences. However, my work as a campaigner for animal welfare could never have been achieved without the support of an even more formidable campaigner—a man who should be here today, but who tragically is not; a man who epitomised goodness in every interaction he had, whether with something on two legs or four; my dear friend Sir David Amess, the honourable Member for Southend West, whose passing we mourn so much.

I must inform the House that the Westminster Dog of the Year contest will take place this Thursday. Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), I have been asked—I have been given the honour—to enter Vivienne, the French bulldog of Sir David Amess, and we will be taking her to that contest. I know I should not lobby Members—*[Laughter]*—but they can vote online, on the Kennel Club’s website, to choose their Westminster dog of the year. I hope that friends and colleagues in all parts of the House will consider casting their votes for Vivienne, the dog of Sir David Amess, this Thursday.

There are three areas of the Bill that I want to discuss. The first is part 2, on dogs attacking or worrying livestock. I know that advocates of responsible dog ownership as well as our great farming industry will warmly welcome these proposals, as do I, but the enhanced

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

provisions are likely to lead to more dogs being seized. Can the Minister reassure the House that provision will be made to ensure that all dogs seized under these measures will receive the highest standard of care and welfare?

Secondly, I want to discuss the new measures to help tackle the awful crime of puppy-smuggling, particularly the provisions that will allow for bans on the importation of mutilated animals. Anyone with an interest in animal welfare cannot have failed to notice the fantastic “flop not crop” campaign supported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Veterinary Association, Battersea, the FOAL Group—Focus on Animal Law—Blue Cross, Dogs Trust and many other organisations. Can the Minister confirm that clause 46(2) will include dogs with cropped ears, to guarantee an end to that barbaric practice?

Thirdly, I want to turn to matters relating directly to Britain’s magnificent zoos and aquariums. I do so as chairman of the zoos and aquariums all-party parliamentary group, and having only just received a “Zoo Hero” award from the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which I accepted with great pride at Marwell zoo a few weeks ago. I am endlessly impressed with the sheer diversity and breadth of the conservation work that good zoos and aquariums undertake throughout the United Kingdom. Probably the first thing we must think of in that context is their notable work on animal reintroductions—that critical work to bolster fragile wild populations. Indeed, I have seen just recently how Marwell zoo has successfully reintroduced desert antelopes into north Africa. However, while that is important, zoo and aquarium conservation work extends far beyond reintroductions. For example, I was privileged last year to visit Whipsnade Zoo—

Andrew Selous: Hear, hear.

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend knows that zoo all too well. When I went there, I was able to see for myself how a “mammoth” bank of 30,000 thermal images taken of UK zoo elephants is directly contributing to conserving their wild counterparts. This groundbreaking work, completely dependent on zoo-based research, has led to an affordable technology solution to reduce human-elephant conflicts in a range of countries.

As well as engaging in all those unique conservation efforts, our zoos and aquariums up and down the country are bringing millions of visitors—more than 35 million each year—closer to nature. Most of those people would not be able to travel thousands of miles to see these incredible creatures in their home territories.

It is right that this Bill will push many more zoos to scale up their conservation efforts, but that must be done with diversity in mind. We must avoid falling into the trap of considering conservation only in terms of the amount spent or the number of introductions made—measures that only skim the surface of conservation. As conservation will be defined in the secondary legislation for which the Bill provides, it is important for that to be done in a way that truly captures the enormous diversity of the work of our zoos and aquariums. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State therefore make a

commitment that as we raise our expectations on zoo conservation, the definition will include the full range of activities that those zoos and aquariums offer?

That, however, is not the only assurance that we need. Inherent in the Bill is the work of the Zoos Expert Committee, which will advise the Secretary of State and the Minister on the future of zoo-based conservation. However, that Committee cannot make its options known to the public or to Parliament. Why, when the Government are proposing a new animal sentience committee with the ability to publish independent recommendations, is that same ability not being afforded to the Government’s Committee on zoos? Will the Secretary of State consider that, please?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his energy and enthusiasm for this issue. Belfast city zoo is part of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and he is probably aware of its project in Belfast on the lemur, which is tied in with Madagascar. Does he agree that conservation does not always have to happen on site, and that it can happen in partnership with Madagascar and other countries that are many thousands of miles away?

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Gentleman makes a really good point that needs to be emphasised more and more strongly by the day. Zoos do incredible conservation work, and they are there to ensure the survival of so many species. They are not just places that tourists go to see animals. We have an amazing network of zoos in this country that provide conservation and education, working with third world countries to protect animals in the wild and to re-inhabit animals. It is so important to emphasise that. I know that Belfast zoo does amazing work in that area, and that zoos contribute enormously to the work of animal welfare and conservation. That is why it is so important that they are included fully in this legislation.

Sarah Champion: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his award and thank him for the incredible, consistent work that he does in this area. Does he agree that in most cases conservation means working with local people to invest in the animals and the landscape, not least because many in places—I am thinking of Kerala—it really helps tourism? It is a win-win all the way round.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Lady is completely correct. Without working with the local people—the indigenous people of those countries—these efforts are not going to work. We need to ensure that the people in those countries are playing their part, by including them in these projects, as our zoos are doing. That is vital for the sustainability of the projects. I thank her for her remarks.

To recap, can the Minister please give reassurances that conservation will be understood in the broadest sense at zoos and aquariums? Will the Government also seek to make the Zoos Expert Committee more accountable, because that is vital? Finally—I say this in all sincerity—I extend an invitation not only to the Minister but to all Members of the House to visit their local zoo or aquarium. We have the most incredible zoos across the United Kingdom, and it is only by seeing for themselves that Members will see the brilliant work that they do to

protect the animal kingdom with whom we share this planet. Our dear friend David Amess said this in June about the forthcoming animal welfare Bills:

“I hope the House will come together, support them and get them quickly on to the statute book.”—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 243WH.]

I can think of no better tribute to him and to the animals across the United Kingdom that he so adored.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think that one thing is for absolutely certain: had the tragedy not befallen David recently, he would have been in this debate today championing animal rights, which were so close to his heart. I do not normally profess any opinions, as you know, but I will be voting for Vivienne.

6.43 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this Second Reading debate today, and a complete pleasure to follow the excellent contribution from the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I congratulate him on his recent award, and I would like to associate myself with his warm words about our good friend Sir David Amess, whose absence is felt incredibly heavily by everyone in the House tonight.

It is often said with great pride that we are a nation of animal lovers. Our love of animals big and small is right at the heart of our national identity, and if my inbox is anything to go by, it is an issue of huge importance to people across the country. For too long, hard-working animal welfare charities such as the RSPCA have been calling on the Government to take steps to bring an end to live exports, and I warmly welcome the provisions in the Bill to do so.

From dog theft to the rise in puppy smuggling, it is also clear that the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on animal welfare. There has been an enormous impact from the demand for animals, with research from Battersea Dogs & Cats Home finding a more than 200% increase in online searches about buying a dog between February and April 2020. More people becoming pet owners is not necessarily a bad thing, of course. I know that the vast majority of them will go on to become loving and caring owners, but this increased demand has had a major impact on the incidence of pet theft and, crucially, on the demand for dogs and puppies from overseas.

Puppies are currently being bred in terrible conditions and being taken away from their mums at a very young age. Being smuggled into the country is often a terrifying and difficult journey, with little food, limited water and no exercise at all. This Bill is clearly a timely one, and I particularly welcome the provisions in clauses 45 and 46, which take steps to tackle the illegal puppy trade into Britain. It is absolute right that the Government are introducing a limit on the number of animals per vehicle that are able to enter the UK, but I would add my plea to the Minister to go further and consider bringing the limit down from five to three. We can and should do more. Introducing new laws is important, but without giving Border Force the resources it needs, how on earth are those laws meant to be practically enforced? I would be grateful if the Minister could outline what steps will be taken to give Border Force the tools it needs to enforce this much-needed legislation.

I recently had a great opportunity to visit a local dog rescue charity called Hope Rescue in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). I heard at first hand from the brilliant team there about the impact of the increased demand for puppies. While there, I also met a gorgeous puppy who had recently been rescued from an illegal puppy farm at just five weeks old. The Dogs Trust charity has also found that heavily pregnant dogs are increasingly being brought into the UK in an effort to circumvent the ban on commercial third-party puppy sales. I therefore welcome the provision in the Bill that will enable the Secretary of State and his counterparts in Wales and Scotland to introduce measures to ban the import of pregnant animals, or those below a certain age.

This provision will also enable the Government to finally take steps to prohibit the importation of dogs who have had their ears cropped. The RSPCA has reported a 621% increase in ear cropping since 2015. That is a shocking statistic, and I urge the Minister to take steps as soon as possible to address this issue. I also echo the RSPCA's call for a minimum age limit of six months to be imposed in relation to puppies and I would be grateful if the Minister could outline what recent conversations she has had with colleagues in the devolved Administrations on how she will support the policing of bans such as these.

Finally, I simply cannot resist briefly mentioning a pet issue of mine—if you will pardon the pun—even though it is out of scope of the Bill. The Minister will know my passion for ending the sale of fireworks for public use. All of us with dogs at home know the worry and anxiety that bonfire night brings. My own gorgeous Jack Russells, Dotty and Dora, find fireworks terrifying, and some pet owners report that their pets have to be sedated when fireworks are going off. I welcome the commitments in the Bill, but I would urge the Minister to work with Cabinet colleagues to see what more can be done on this issue and whether it can be brought within scope of the Bill.

For too long, this Government have dragged their heels on animal welfare issues and failed to meet their own manifesto commitments. The provisions in the Bill represent a huge step forward in the work to protect animal welfare, but there is still much more that can be done and I urge the Minister to do everything possible to protect the animals here in this country.

6.48 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be able to speak in this debate tonight and a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is a proud champion for animal welfare on the Opposition Benches. I also want to echo the comments made on both sides of the House about our late friend Sir David Amess. I can think of no better tribute to him than this Bill passing through on to the statute book quickly and being a proud voice for the animals of the United Kingdom.

I declare a strong interest in this Bill as a veterinary surgeon, and I very much welcome it and all its intentions. Important action can come forward from it on primates, on livestock worrying and on zoos, but I want to focus my comments this evening largely on the movement of animals. As has been mentioned, the Bill needs to be

[*Dr Neil Hudson*]

clearer on some of the specifics. We need to go further in some areas as well. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), has just published a report on the movement of animals across borders, in which we looked at a lot of these issues. First, I would like to cover small animals. As has been mentioned, puppy smuggling is an abhorrent crime that needs to be stamped out, and I look forward to the Bill working towards that. We have seen an increase in this awful trade during lockdown and we need to stamp it out at all costs.

I welcome the comments about heavily pregnant animals. It is difficult to judge how heavily pregnant a dog is. It is currently illegal to import a dog during the last 10% of pregnancy, which is difficult to judge, so we should start looking at the last 30% to 50% of pregnancy.

The Select Committee has heard harrowing evidence of heavily pregnant dogs being shipped into the country, sometimes with fresh laparotomy wounds from a caesarean section, which is dreadful and really needs to be stamped out. We need to take strong action, and I would welcome it if the Bill could provide clarity.

As has been mentioned, we need to increase to six months the minimum age at which animals are transported. I agree with colleagues on both sides of the House about wanting to see that in the Bill, as it would help to reduce this dreadful trade of puppy smuggling.

It will also help if we reinstate the rabies titre checks and increase the post-rabies vaccination wait time to 12 weeks, which would be a win-win for the health status of the animal and will indirectly help on the age limitation. We need to look at those areas.

It is important to set a limit on pets per vehicle, and I welcome the discussions on reducing the limit from five to three. Dogs Trust surveys have shown that 97% of owners have three or fewer dogs, so it would be a sensible change.

I welcome the dialogue on banning the importation of animals that have been mutilated. We have talked about ear cropping and tail docking. In the past year, six in 10 small animal vets have seen dogs with cropped ears. We also have to consider popular culture, the media and celebrity lifestyles, which have a role in not normalising cropped ears.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman is a vet, does he share my concern that the most popular dogs at the moment, flat-faced dogs such as pugs and various types of bulldog, have been bred to have deformities? He is talking about mutilation after a dog has been born, but does he share my concern that we should not encourage people to buy dogs that are very unhealthy because of how they have been bred?

Dr Hudson: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. Brachycephalic dogs have become increasingly popular, and people need to be educated about the risks such animals sometimes suffer later in life.

The Disney-Pixar film “Up” is a favourite of mine but, looking closely, some of the Dobermans in that film have cropped ears. We need to address the subliminal normalisation of such procedures in culture.

We must not forget cats, which have been mutilated, too. Just as dogs are being cropped, cats are being declawed, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton will back me up when I say that that must also be stamped out.

There have been increased reports in the UK of diseases such as canine brucellosis, babesiosis, leishmaniasis and echinococcus. Some of these diseases have zoonotic potential, so I urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to increase the pre-import health checks on animals coming into this country. We also need to reinstate the tick and tapeworm treatments for animals coming in, as this will protect the travelling animals and the animals in this country, and it will also indirectly protect people.

Not one horse has been moved legally to the continent of Europe for slaughter, but the Select Committee has taken evidence that it is likely that thousands of horses have been illegally transported for slaughter in Europe. We need to make sure the Bill covers that. The evidence is troubling, so we need to stamp it out. Simple measures such as improving equine identification and moving to a digital ID system would help.

I want to move on to the export of livestock. I welcome the measures to stop the movement of animals for slaughter or for fattening for slaughter but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, we need to make it clear that the movement of breeding animals is outwith the frame of that part of the Bill.

We also need to make sure that we work with all the sectors to improve the conditions for animals as they are transported. It is important that animals are slaughtered as close as possible to where they were reared, which fits into the idea of eating locally produced, sustainable food.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the closure of some of our small slaughterhouses that are close to breeders is a problem? They have been forced out of business. Perhaps the Minister will listen and try to help the slaughterhouses that are still operating to survive.

Dr Hudson: My hon. Friend, who is also a member of the Select Committee, makes a great point, and she reads my mind. My next bullet point says that a key recommendation of our Select Committee’s report is that DEFRA and the Government need to support and bolster the abattoir network in this country to extinguish the need to transport animals over long distances.

The Select Committee has also started an urgent inquiry on workforce issues in the food supply chain, which has a direct implication for animal welfare. There is a shortage of workers in many aspects of the food production sector, from vets through to abattoir workers, drivers and so on. We must take note of the fact that 95% of vets working in the meat hygiene sector are from the European Union, from outside the UK. We need to monitor and support the veterinary workforce.

The current pig crisis highlights the animal welfare and livestock farming issues we are facing in this country. We have labour shortages and an impending animal welfare crisis, and the Select Committee has taken evidence that it is building up on farms as we speak. Pigs are damming back on farms and are biting off each other’s tails and developing respiratory diseases, and sadly some pigs have started to be culled on farm.

I welcome what the Government have said so far about trying to mitigate against such culls. As a vet I spent a very sad period supervising the cull of farm animals on farm during the foot and mouth crisis. Those farm animals were then not destined for the food supply chain. I can tell the House how upsetting that is for vets, farmers, slaughter workers and everyone else, not least as a senseless waste of food. We must make sure that we mitigate against such culls at all costs.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Can my hon. Friend share with the House any insight into why we are seeing an issue in the pig supply chain but not so much in the beef and lamb slaughterhouses?

Dr Hudson: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We have labour shortages, and the pig sector is producing pigs under pressure and to a timeline. Things can build up if there is a stoppage at any point on that timeline, which is what has happened.

I welcome the Government's movement on visas, English language tests and cold storage, but I urge Ministers to go further and to work across Government. DEFRA needs to work with the Home Office and the Department for International Trade. We need to reopen the export market to China, too. I fear we have an impending animal welfare crisis, and I urge the Government to act quickly.

The Secretary of State touched on devolution, and it is great that the devolved nations are working together on this issue, which is important. I urge all four nations to work closely together so that we do not end up with unintended consequences from the Bill. Lucy's law on third-party sales is progressive, but unscrupulous people are exploiting the loopholes caused by the differences between our devolved nations, so I urge the nations to work together.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member may know that Lucy's law has still not been legislated for in Northern Ireland, and that a colleague in the Northern Ireland Assembly is bringing it forward. Would he encourage the Department to assist us in closing the loopholes that people have realised exist here on the mainland?

Dr Hudson: The hon. Member makes a good point. I urge the UK Government to work with all the devolved Governments to close the loopholes in these well-intended laws. We should try to anticipate any loopholes in the Bill that unscrupulous people may try to exploit. We may have political differences on constitutional issues regarding the devolved nations, but I am sure that animal welfare unites us as a United Kingdom and as a House. I firmly believe that we can work together on that.

I really welcome the Bill. The Government are strong on animal welfare, with Bills on sentencing and legislation on pet theft. Animal welfare unites the House, and we have a duty of care to the fully sentient beings under our care. We need more specifics to make the Bill workable and pragmatic, and we must act urgently on certain issues, but I welcome the Bill and look forward to its passage.

7.1 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): From what we have heard this evening, there is no doubt that we are indeed a nation of animal lovers. I declare an interest as

an animal lover—as many in the Chamber are—and as the owner of a dog called Herman. Anyone who has invited a border terrier into their home knows that they never fully own a border terrier; border terriers definitely own their humans.

I am sure nobody in the Chamber will disagree that animal welfare is one of the issues on which we receive the most messages and emails, and thousands of people in Luton North have written to me in the short time that I have been an MP. I want our country to have the highest animal welfare standards in the world. My constituents write to me about protecting bees, and about badgers, animal testing, caging, banning fur, and so much more. Young people in particular write to me worried about the state of the planet and every creature on it. How many of those creatures will have their habitats destroyed and become extinct before those young people are as old and cynical as us?

We have heard much about the Government's commitment to animal welfare. Unfortunately, for many people, belief in that has been rocked. The Secretary of State mentioned the Government's manifesto commitments and promises. One commitment was not to compromise on Britain's high standards in trade deals, but recently we have seen a worrying trend with trade deals, and the risk of a race to the bottom on welfare standards. There was, as has been discussed, a manifesto promise to ban the keeping of primates as pets, but the Bill breaks that promise, too. Instead, people will be able to keep a primate as long as they can afford a licence. We are used to monkey business from the Government, but that is something else. All joking aside, if anyone can give me a valid reason why someone should be allowed to keep a primate as a pet, I will happily give way to them.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): A zookeeper who had to look after their animals at home could be construed as having them as pets. That is why licensing and a case-by-case, "the individual must come first" basis is so much healthier than an outright ban. It is impossible to deal with different examples without having laws that can understand the difference. Does the hon. Lady not understand that?

Sarah Owen: I was going to thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but the tone was a little patronising, to say the least. I wholeheartedly disagree, given that any zookeeper who had to look after an animal in their home would be doing so through their work, and under the licence for that job. That was not a valid reason to keep a primate as a pet—it was not a pet.

The Government's manifesto even promised the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on Earth, yet we have the Prime Minister saying he is worried that COP26 will not be a success. Probably the less I say about the Government's record on the environment at the moment, the better. We have a duty to protect the planet and the environment for all animals, kept and unkept.

I turn to something more positive and light-hearted. In the recent recess, I visited Whipsnade zoo with my family. It was the first time that I had taken my daughter to a zoo, and the magic in a child's face when they see in real life an animal they had seen only in books and on the television is a real joy to behold. Whipsnade zoo is much loved by people in Luton North and across the

[Sarah Owen]

region. During the covid restrictions, I received hundreds of emails from people asking me to campaign and ask the Government to allow zoos to reopen. People are right to be proud of Whipsnade zoo, not just for the happy memories that it provides but because of its proud history of sector-leading work on conservation.

Whipsnade's freshwater aquarium is home to more threatened and extinct-in-the-wild species than any other in the world. Whipsnade provides significant insights that inform work to help reintroduce and conserve species in their natural habitats, including projects in Madagascar, Greece and Turkey. Its work with elephants directly contributes to protecting the species in the world. It is doing such important work.

Whipsnade zoo's conservation work also encompasses young people. On-site teachers deliver engaging learning programmes in biology and conservation, inspiring tens of thousands of schoolchildren every year and instilling them with the wonder of and desire to protect wildlife. I will never forget when I saw all these schoolchildren at Whipsnade being hurried around to see the chimpanzees. I explained to my toddler that chimpanzees are not monkeys. Now she points at them and says, "Not monkeys."

When Whipsnade zoo wrote to me to tell me of its concerns about the Bill, I had to voice them in the House. Removing the definition of conservation work from law and giving the Secretary of State the power to define conservation could easily undermine Whipsnade's fantastic work and lead to an overly simplistic view of conservation—and, dare I say, a politicised one. We know that the Government have an uncanny ability to turn any old issue into a culture war. I ask them please not to do so with zoos.

I hope that in Committee we will work to protect the brilliant work of our zoos by leaving it to the experts and keeping the politics out of conservation. However, there is one place where politics and animals should meet: the Westminster dog of the year award. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) in saying, "Please lend your vote to Sir David Amess's dog, Vivienne." Please, anyone who was willing or wanted to vote for Herman and me, do not do that—vote for Vivienne instead.

On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) about fireworks and dogs, and animals in general, I recently presented a Bill calling for tougher punishments for the misuse of fireworks and tougher enforcement of those measures. We know how much that misuse affects animals and animal owners across the country. I hope that there is scope for those measures in the Bill.

Jim Shannon: Back home, my provincial press this morning referred to the fact that at this time of the year and during fireworks week, more dogs go missing than at any other time of the year. The hon. Lady is right that we must address fireworks to ensure that dogs do not feel threatened.

Sarah Owen: The hon. Member is absolutely right. This time of the year should be one of celebration, but for many animal owners it is one of absolute fear. There is no need for fireworks to be as loud or as late as they are. Everyone across the House seems willing to work

on the Bill to ensure that it is not a missed opportunity to make Britain the country with the highest animal welfare standards in the world. I hope that that is what we see.

7.9 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I add my tribute to Sir David Amess. It was because of Sir David that my late cat Bosun received an award for being a responsible pet. Sadly, Bosun has passed away; I am hoping that he is providing some comfort to Sir David today.

I would like to raise the case of our fellow primates. We are social beings who need contact with our own kind, and that is the same for all primates. I stood on a manifesto that promised to ban keeping primates as pets, and I want the Bill to fulfil that promise. Like the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), I have visited Wild Futures monkey sanctuary, which is in my constituency, on a number of occasions. I applaud it for the work it does. I say to the Minister that both the shadow Secretary of State and Secretary of State have visited; I am absolutely sure that she will be welcomed by Wild Futures when she finds time in her diary to visit. It is really good at educating people on how primates should be kept and the adverse effect of keeping them in a home.

I am very concerned about the proposed licensing of the keeping of primates as pets. I would like a complete ban on the practice. The only non-human primates in this country should be those kept by experts such as zoos, in places where they have the socialisation that they need with their own species. We need to stop any money from being made from trading monkeys—including by those with a licence, should we end up going down that route. There need to be tougher fines for those who illegally trade in these animals; they should be at least double what is proposed in the Bill. I am concerned that not many vets or local government inspectors have specialist expertise in caring for primates. We need consistency and expertise in the care of these animals.

Often, primates that have been kept as pets need psychological help as well as healthcare, and that is not often easily assessed. Over the years, I have learned that some are fed on the wrong diet, which results in their suffering from conditions such as diabetes. One particular primate at Wild Futures, Joey, had been kept in a tiny cage for decades. All he could do was rock to and fro because he had been kept in the wrong way. Minister, we need to tighten the Bill to address such issues.

Clearly, many primates coming out of the pet trade will for the rest of their lives need specialist care, such as that provided at the excellent Wild Futures monkey sanctuary in my constituency. As we outlaw this barbaric practice, we need to keep those facilities going, and ensure that such places have the capacity to cope. That will cost money. I understand that in the current economic climate it is difficult to introduce anything that seems to do that; I wonder whether that has had an impact when it comes to the proposal for licensing. If it has, I ask the Minister to think again and tell me what resources the Government have put aside to help these centres allow our fellow primates the quality of life that they deserve after being so badly let down by human beings. It is our responsibility to see that they are cared for.

As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats, I turn to those furry friends. I would like there to be parity between dogs and cats in the legislation with regard to imports. I do not believe that we should allow the importation of young kittens, pregnant cats or declawed cats, and I ask the Government to ensure that that does not happen. I also support the reduction of companion animals from five to three. That seems a sensible figure, and I ask the Minister to reconsider the issue in Committee.

I have asked the Backbench Business Committee for a debate in Westminster Hall on pet travel, so that these issues can be debated in more detail; I really hope that, if I am successful, hon. Members will support that debate. As I wind up, I ask the Minister to consider in Committee my comments about primates and about cats, our wonderful furry friends.

7.15 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Despite its being heralded as a ban on keeping monkeys, I actually welcome part 1 of the Bill relating to primates and the keeping of them. Governments should not be banning things; there should be licensing. I apologise to the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen); I did not mean to come across as patronising, but I like the idea that the Government have the flexibility through legislation to take into consideration individual circumstances for higher creatures such as primates. There will never be a one-size-fits-all, so that is really sensible. It means that animal welfare is considered on a case-by-case basis rather than there being a well-intentioned but disastrous blanket ban. When it comes to animal welfare, we should respect the expertise of vets acting for local authorities in determining what is a safe and healthy environment for the animal. If someone wants to keep any animal, they should ensure that they can fulfil its needs. They owe that to their pet—they must take the responsibility.

I also welcome and am truly grateful for part 2 of the Bill, which relates to dogs attacking or worrying livestock. Sadly, that is a regular occurrence in my constituency and it is particularly awful when pregnant ewes are torn apart and lose their lambs. It is devastating for the sheep and farmer and is directly due to the dog owners.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my view that such incidents are very distressing for farmers? It would be far better if livestock worrying were addressed largely through an improvement in the behaviour of dog owners rather than through an increase in destruction orders.

Bill Wiggin: Of course I agree with my right hon. Friend; I will come to that in a moment.

At the moment, a farmer has the right to shoot an out-of-control dog, but I have not yet met a farmer who wants to do that. Farmers love animals but sadly these sheep-worrying incidents occur far too often. Livestock are vulnerable and fairly defenceless. Dog walkers want extra access to the countryside; in return, as my right hon. Friend said, dog owners and dog walkers must be more considerate about how their dogs behave and ideally have them on a lead.

The estimated cost of dog attacks on farm animals in the first quarter of 2021 has risen by 50%. As we have already heard, the National Farmers Union estimated in 2020 that £1.3 million worth of animals were attacked by dogs—an increase of 10% on 2019. But when it comes down to it, the issue is not the monetary value of the animals attacked, but the completely unnecessary nature of the attacks and the fact that the dog owner could prevent them.

Research carried out on 1,200 dog owners revealed that 88% walk their dogs in the countryside. Some 64% said that they let their dogs run free off the lead, while 50% admitted that their pet did not always come back when called. We are trying to do what we can to stop livestock worrying, and part 2 of the Bill is entirely welcome.

Neil Parish: *rose*—

Bill Wiggin: I was about to talk about zoonotic diseases such as neosporosis, but I give way to my hon. Friend.

Neil Parish: The other problem is that dog owners think that their dogs are obedient, but when dogs get excited and see sheep, they are off—they are no longer obedient even if they normally are. When they are really excited by chasing a sheep, they will not come back. That is why they need to be kept on leads, for the sake of sheep especially.

Bill Wiggin: Keeping dogs on leads is particularly important with sheep. It is completely the opposite when there are cattle with calves in the field. The dog owner should let go of their lead and let the dog run away, because otherwise it is people who become the casualties. This is complicated, which is why the Countryside Code matters and why us rural MPs must take opportunities such as this to remind people that what they do with sheep, they do not do with cows.

Let me turn now to the banning of exports for slaughter. Supermarkets have a vice-like grip on the provision and price of meat. Our centralised supply chain is narrow, and I am not entirely happy with the introduction of this ban. The beneficiaries will be supermarkets, the Republic of Ireland, and uncastrated ram lambs. As I mentioned earlier, the Government should be in the business not of banning but of licensing. In that way, only the highest level of animal welfare would be allowed. Sadly, instead, these sheep will now go through Ireland and make the much longer journey to France and Spain.

Around 6,400 animals were transported from the UK directly to slaughter, according to Government figures in 2018. Now the country is facing a shortage of abattoirs, abattoir staff and carbon dioxide. We will need to see animals being sent abroad, and they will go as breeding stock. How long does a sheep have to live in France or Spain as breeding stock before the purchaser can decide to eat it without the UK farmer going to prison for up to six months? That is the sort of thing that I am hoping will come out in Committee.

What steps will the Government take to ensure that live animals are not transported through Northern Ireland to the Republic and then onto Spain? This legislation, while well-intentioned, is full of loopholes, which the

[*Bill Wiggin*]

unscrupulous traders will exploit. These are the same people who do not care about animal welfare. That is why licensing is much safer than allowing the unscrupulous to win through.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Just on that point about the use of Ireland as an access country, I refer my hon. Friend to clause 42(3), which does include the term “British Islands”. To my mind, that provides a safeguard and prevents that type of activity from occurring.

Bill Wiggin: I am grateful, as always, to my hon. Friend. I think that if he looks at the bit on the Northern Irish element in the explanatory notes, he will find that that is not in there for this particular element. I am sure that he will be on that Committee and sorting that out, which will be wonderful. None the less, it is important and it does matter.

In much the same way, the dog element in this Bill is important. A total of 843 illegal puppies were seized at the border last year. Again, it is always the unscrupulous who do not care that are ruining it for everybody else. I want to use this little moment in my speech to make this appeal to people: rather than spending huge amounts of money on a puppy, please think about rehoming before you buy your puppy. Just because it is rehoming does not mean that the buyer will get a pit bull with mental health issues—their dog could have come from a home exactly like their own where the owner has simply become too ill to look after their dog.

Dr Luke Evans *rose*—

Bill Wiggin: The buyer might also find that their dog is house trained. On that note, it is entirely appropriate to give way to my hon. Friend.

Dr Evans: My hon. Friend’s point could be no more pertinent than at this moment in time given that, post lockdown, we are seeing a rise in animals being given away because owners cannot deal with them. We must get the message out that people looking for pets should please rehome these lockdown puppies.

Bill Wiggin: There is no better way of ruining the market for illegal puppies than simply getting them from the plentiful rehoming centres and charities. Finding the right home for our pets is a humane and worthy thing to do, so everyone should please look at this very carefully before they pay large sums of money.

I also urge the Government to look hard at dog theft and all the other animal-related crimes. We have read that they are going to treat such things in a very serious way and I encourage them to do so and I encourage them to iron out some of the minor hiccups in this piece of legislation and continue with the good work they are doing.

7.23 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): It has caught my eye that there is no time limit on the current debate, and, given that we have been kept MPs during covid, it is nice for me to be able to rise to speak, but slightly ironic that it is within the kept animals Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker mentioned that his vote in the Westminster dog of the year will go to David Amess’s dog. I hope that that has nothing to do with the fact that he met my two dogs on the street at the weekend which are also entered in the competition.

From farmers to residents, Bosworth is a constituency of animal lovers. We were in the top 10 of 650 constituencies when it came to petitioning for animal welfare. At this point, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) for taking his Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill through the House with the help of the Government and the Opposition. That is a good example of what we can do when we work together—we can improve animal welfare. That Act should be lauded and seen as part of the record that the Conservatives are driving forward. I am pleased that this Bill has been introduced, because it really does mean a lot.

There are four main strands to this, and I will comment only briefly on the first two. On livestock exports, I was really pleased to hear the Secretary of State clear up the difference between breeding and fattening livestock. My farmers from the National Farmers’ Union are very concerned that the messaging is not getting out. When they hear us talk about banning live exports, they worry about what is happening to their livelihood. We need a nuance within the messaging and I urge the Government to get that across to make sure that the farming community does not feel threatened.

When it comes to bothering farm animals, I am pleased to see that there is no measure in the Bill that talks about bothering Londoners. Given the weekend that I had with my two whippets down here, I would have been in huge amounts of trouble because of the problems they caused. Fortunately, though, we are talking about the farming community. Again, it has been made abundantly clear that the farming community really feel this issue on an emotional and a financial level, and it could easily be stepped up. Would the Government consider running a campaign to raise awareness of the Countryside Code, because we can join together to change the legislation not only around bothering, but on how to care for our environment. Litter has been a real problem in the countryside during lockdown. An attempt to drive up awareness of what is involved in going to the countryside would be very welcome.

My speech focuses on two elements. The first is puppy smuggling. It is fantastic to see ear cropping and tail docking included in the legislation. Will the Government consider looking at brachycephalic pets? We know that one in five pets now being bought is short-nosed. When we talk about smuggling, could we incorporate that matter as well?

The shadow Minister mentioned micro-chipping and pet theft. I have sat in debates on both of those subjects and was pleased to hear that the Government were open-minded on the matter. Will the Minister comment on the pet theft reform group that has stepped up to look into the detail of this. While pet theft is very much a growing concern, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home says that there is such a fear of it that dogs are not being taken out. Clearly, this must be a fact-based exercise. I would be grateful to hear when those reports are coming forward, so that this House can use those facts to debate the matter and what will actually make a difference.

Finally, I wish to focus on zoos. I must declare an interest: I sit on the all-party-group for zoos and aquariums under the fantastic stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). It must be said that, during the pandemic, he has been a true champion of zoos. Given that zoos are covered by three Departments—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury—it has been difficult to ensure that the noise on zoos is heard, and there has been no finer champion of them than my hon. Friend.

Zoos have a special place in my heart not only because I have Twycross Zoo in my patch, but because it was the subject of my first question in PMQs. Interestingly, I was not in this place, as it was the first PMQs done remotely, and it was not the Prime Minister answering the question, but the Deputy Prime Minister, but that takes nothing away from the fact that Twycross is incredibly important not only to me and my constituents, but to our region. That was clear from the number of MPs who spoke to me in support of Twycross during the tough times. It should come as no surprise therefore to know that, as of today, I have secured a visit from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up to see our bid at Twycross Zoo for the levelling up fund. As the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) pointed out, zoos do so much. They are the ark of species. When we are seeing such decline, they offer the hope of learning and of contributing to our environment. Twycross is exemplary in that regard. It has put forward a bid for a national education and conservation centre, which will not only breed the next specialists in conservation, but will drive the economy too. It already has 600,000 visitors a year. If the bid is successful, that number will grow. I welcome anyone else who would like to visit Twycross, because it is a fantastic day out.

There is a serious point here. I have met both the Zoos Expert Committee and indeed DEFRA to talk through the Secretary of State's standards of modern practice and to hear what the Zoos Expert Committee had to say. I am pleased to see that there is representation from the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums on the Zoos Expert Committee, because there is a worry among the zoo community about what the provisions on zoos would look like. The zoos that we have heard about today—Whipsnade, Chester and Twycross—will have no problems and nothing to fear, and rightly so.

This Bill is all about driving up the standards of bad zoos. In this age, we must make a distinction between good zoos, which are in favour of conservation and education, and bad zoos, which are simply there to profiteer off the back of animals. That is what is at the heart of the Bill. However, we must ensure that conservation is not simply seen through the amount of turnover or financial dedication, but through all the non-tangibles that we have heard about, such as education and support for places elsewhere around the world. That is what Twycross thrives on. With the four great apes that it has on show, it is literally a world leader in understanding great apes and chimpanzees. That level of conservation must be what the Bill drives forward. I am quite happy for the Secretary of State to have these powers, because as we move forward we must be able to update the legislation. It was last looked at through the reforms of

the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, but I urge the Government to come forward and clear up what conservation truly means.

That has been a fast canter through my view from Bosworth—from the zoo sector, and from the farmers and residents there. I am most pleased to hear that, in a time of difficulties and hostilities, we have heard such good news from both sides of the House. I really hope that the Bill is a success in supporting animals.

7.32 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): As a fellow patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, may I thank the Secretary of State for his kind remarks about Sir David Amess? They will have been appreciated across the House and indeed outside it. I cannot help feeling that, somewhere just above us, he is watching; given the content of this Bill, I suspect that, as usual, he will also be smiling.

I have listened with interest to the remarks about primates. Indeed, a whole section of the Bill is dedicated to the matter of the care of primates. I cannot for the life of me, having read about and listened to debates on the subject, understand any case whatever for the domestic keeping of a primate as a pet. I am not in favour of the keeping of exotic animals as pets at all, but particularly primates, which are so close to the human race. It seems abhorrent. I therefore ask the Department to take another look at that issue.

On the importing of animals, I shall support my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) if he chooses to table an amendment to limit to three the number of puppies in a litter that can be imported together. It does seem to me that the number is currently too high.

I share entirely the views expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) about tick and worm treatments. The British Veterinary Association, of which he is a full member and I am merely an honorary member, believes that the relaxation of those regulations was a mistake and that they should be reintroduced. By the way, that would also include a post-rabies grace period of 12 weeks before animals are allowed to travel.

The illegal importing of puppies is horrific. The diseases that are brought into the country and the state of the animals is frequently appalling. The misery that it causes for the animals and for the recipients of those animals is equally grim. My eldest son is a practising veterinary surgeon in a small animal practice, and he has to deal with the debris that is brought into his surgery as a result of puppy smuggling. He sees the misery of the animals and, very often, of the little girl who has just been given a puppy that then turns out to be sick. The crime is abhorrent. We need to throw the book at the people who are doing this. I have said it before and I will say it again: I would like to see a car crusher on the dock at Dover, and, under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, for the cars used by anybody who is found to be smuggling puppies to be crushed in front of them. That might just act as a deterrent. I would, of course, remove the puppies first—just in case there was any doubt. I am not so concerned about the drivers.

It is beyond high time that the transport of live animals for slaughter is ended. I am delighted that we are now getting to grips with the issue.

Craig Mackinlay: My right hon. Friend, who represents the same part of the world as me, will be aware of the horrendous event in 2012, when 44 sheep had to be euthanised at Ramsgate harbour. It was an outrageous disgrace. That has been a stain on Ramsgate and on the entirety of Thanet. I am just wondering—I do not think this needs an answer—whether he shares my enthusiasm that the Bill will finally stop the abhorrent trade in live animals.

Sir Roger Gale: If my hon. Friend had not intervened on me, I was about to pay tribute to him for the work that he has done in seeking to bring about the ban. It is past high time.

Chris Loder: Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Kent Action Against Live Exports group for all that it has done? It has been a huge effort on the part of so many people; we should recognise them for their work.

Sir Roger Gale: With pleasure; a large number of people have campaigned for this ban and it is very good news indeed that it is going to happen.

I will put down one caveat in respect of an amendment that may be needed. The transport of live animals, as distinct from for slaughter, will inevitably continue for the purposes of breeding stock and also because, within the British islands, there is a necessity to move animals from time to time. I urge the Department to look carefully at the weather conditions under which, by sea, that is done. My personal view is that if there is an animal on board, no such transport should be permitted when winds are above force 5 on the Beaufort scale.

Finally, I would like to raise an issue that is not in the Bill, but which will, I think, be so soon: the matter of non-stun slaughter. Some of us have worked carefully—one colleague, in particular, has worked very hard indeed—with the religious organisations, particularly those of the Jewish faith and Muslims, to make certain that it is understood that we do not seek to interfere with religious practice. That said, there is a case for much greater regulation of non-stunned slaughtered animals, because we know perfectly well that vast amounts of kosher and halal meat are produced—not for the British market even, but for export. There is no necessity whatever for that. I believe that I am right in saying that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) will be seeking to address this matter. If he wishes to intervene, I would be happy to give way to him.

Chris Loder: I thank my right hon. Friend very much; I appreciate his comments. I hope that the whole House would agree that we should indeed pay real attention to and have a real debate on this matter. Does he agree that while we as a House talk very much about the care of our pets—our cats, dogs and others—we should also be having an appropriate, understanding and sensitive debate about that matter?

Sir Roger Gale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If he chooses the appropriate time to bring in a suitably sensitive amendment, then he will certainly have my support, and I would hope that he might well have the support of those on the Front Bench as well.

All that said, I welcome this Bill, not just as a stand-alone Bill but as part of a raft of measures introduced by this Government designed to improve animal welfare.

7.40 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate on a Bill, because this place has spent 38 years only talking about these measures.

We have heard a lot today about the impact of lockdown on our pet population, but I want to focus on the need—currently not addressed in the Bill—to require animal sanctuaries, rescue and rehoming centres to be licensed. As the RSPCA says:

“Most will have been set up by incredibly energetic individuals devoted to animal welfare. But one thing they all have in common is that no-one is checking they have the skills, resources and knowledge to provide the right standards of care for vulnerable animals on a daily basis. When troubled times hit such as staff sickness, a lack of volunteers or funding dries up, there’s no guaranteed fail-safe to ensure that the welfare of animals they care for is never compromised.”

Currently there is no regulation at all, and anyone can set up an organisation and say that it is a sanctuary, rescue or rehoming centre. Regulation will help to protect the welfare of the vulnerable animals that often end up in sanctuaries and rehoming centres, providing safeguards for those involved in their care and helping to give reassurance to those who donate to them that these organisations are meeting the needs of their animals. We know, for example, that some dog sanctuaries can be a cover for puppy-smuggling.

World Horse Welfare rescue centre at Penny Farm on the edge of Blackpool, just outside my constituency, has been increasingly asked to help in situations where rescued animals have been subject to neglect and/or cruelty in other establishments where the management, for any number of reasons, is so poor that it leads to horse suffering. While many sanctuaries will strive to give the care and rehabilitation that horses in their care need, the few that do not meet these standards have the potential to overload the rescue sector if and when they fail. I am already aware of sudden surges in demand, because covid has led to the collapse of unregulated and poorly run horse sanctuaries, and of the impact that that has had on professional horse rescue centres. In 2019, World Horse Welfare committed to taking in 38 equines from two rehoming centres that had failed. However, that figure does not adequately reflect the resource that goes into supporting and advising these organisations to help to raise standards and prevent failure. In addition, cases involving failed sanctuaries and rehoming centres often involve many equines, sometimes in the hundreds, and trying to find somewhere that has the space to take them can be very challenging.

There needs to be a more robust and structured system that will help to ensure that organisations that are at risk of failure are identified quickly and steps are taken to address the problem before welfare problems escalate or they take on more horses than can be easily rehomed. Inspections and licensing should be seen as a framework via which we can drive up standards while taking stronger action against those who fall foul of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 or continually fail to improve standards despite being given time and guidance.

Licensing costs must be proportionate for animal welfare establishments, since some could have as many as 2,800 animals. Any legislation depends on the effectiveness of enforcement, so we simultaneously need a review of the enforcement of current animal welfare legislation alongside licensing proposals.

On a separate matter to horses—we have heard about monkeys today as well—I recently visited Birdman parrot rescue in my constituency. It is one of only a few official sanctuaries for unwanted large domesticated birds in the country. Can I seek reassurance from the Government that when they seek to propose legislation on sanctuaries, they will include those that cover birds as well? The situation with birds is very different from that with other pets. There are numerous reports of people setting up a so-called bird sanctuary as a cheap means of gathering a collection of parrots and other species and then suddenly closing down. These birds individually can cost up to £2,500 if purchased, but nothing if surrendered by the existing owner. What steps can the Government take within legislation to ensure not just that sanctuaries are licensed but that the welfare impulse behind such sanctuaries is not abused by those seeking to grow a bird collection on the cheap? Birdman raised additional concerns about the selling of parrots and cockatoos, and the practice of sedating birds in shops prior to purchase in order to present a misleading impression that they will not be noisy after purchase. What preventive measures can the Government put in place?

When looking at the issue of equine sanctuaries, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), will Ministers review the Equine Identification (England) Regulations 2018? There is a need to ensure that equine premises are registered and there is a registered operator responsible for keeping the equine ID record. DEFRA has promised a consultation, but it really has to build bridges with the British Horse Council and the wider equine sector to find a digitised solution.

I also wish to make a number of small points about the provisions regarding the transfer of animals across borders as they relate to horses. Despite no horses being declared as going to slaughter, there is good reason to believe that some are moved under the radar and, often in poor welfare conditions, are now ending up in slaughterhouses. The proposed ban on exports to slaughter in the Bill is an opportunity to put additional barriers in place to help to prevent this trade, but they have to be implemented effectively. I know that DEFRA is engaging stakeholders to assess how to do this, but I fear that it will require additional financial resources and be put in the “too difficult” box by Ministers, who are often scared of controversy, I fear.

Equines are particularly problematic compared with other food-producing species as they can be moved legitimately for purposes other than breeding, fattening and slaughter. Therefore, risk-assessing a consignment based on factors such as declared number of animals per consignment could disproportionately impact legitimate movements, such as for competition, while missing non-compliant movements—for example, by people who declare that their vehicle is empty yet are carrying horses. A joined-up, intelligence-led approach is fundamental to stopping this trade, flagging non-compliances to all enforcement agencies and building up a picture of the

individual, the organisation and the associated movements. While these are not welfare non-compliances, they can have significant welfare implications—for example, if a vehicle is highly substandard—and are often associated with poor welfare practices and vulnerable, untraceable equines.

I could go on, if I had time, to address other issues such as local abattoirs or Gizmo’s law and the need for equity between dogs and cats—but I dare not. I am sure that all my constituents in Blackpool North and Cleveleys will welcome this Bill as a significant step forward as part of a wider suite of animal welfare legislation, and it has my full support.

7.47 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Like every other hon. and right hon. Member who has spoken, I am pleased to welcome this Bill, which contains progressive animal welfare measures that, in some cases, are long overdue and deliver on the manifesto pledges contained in the 2019 Conservative manifesto. As that manifesto put it,

“High standards of animal welfare are one of the hallmarks of a civilised society”,

and this country has always been ahead of the field on animal welfare.

The restrictions provided for in the Bill on keeping primates are absolutely right. Primates, as we have heard, are highly intellectually sophisticated creatures with complex needs that should be kept only in specialised, properly adapted conditions, which is what the Bill will achieve. Similarly, the restrictions on the import of pet animals will, as we have heard from many hon. Members, address the long-standing and worrying issue of puppy smuggling.

I also welcome the provisions relating to dogs that worry livestock. I represent a largely rural constituency, and I know the damage that dogs can do to sheep and other livestock if not properly controlled. It is good that the Government have decided to update the law in this area, but may I suggest that the provisions in the Bill still do not go quite far enough? The maximum fine that can be imposed under the Bill is £1,000. As my hon. Friend the Minister will know, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) introduced her own ten-minute rule Bill on 20 July on this very issue. She pointed out the inadequacy of that fine, when farmers frequently face losses of many thousands of pounds. I agree with my hon. Friend and suggest that the upper limit of the fine should be reconsidered. In our rural areas, dog worrying is a serious concern and a heavier fine is more than justified in order to deter irresponsible dog ownership.

I strongly support the provisions prohibiting the export of livestock for slaughter, which is a very stressful practice for the animals concerned. In all my time in this House, I dare say I have had more letters from constituents on this issue than most others. The ability of Parliament to legislate for the prohibition of the export of live animals for slaughter is a direct benefit of our departure from the European Union. I congratulate the Government on introducing this measure.

I will turn to the provisions relating to zoos contained in part 3 and schedule 5, and I would like to consider them in a little detail. I have a particular interest in this

[Mr David Jones]

matter, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for zoos and aquariums under the inspired and, as we have heard today, heroic leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I echo his words entirely. The late David Amess would be delighted to know that this Bill was going through. If ever there were a proper memorial for our dear friend, this Bill is it.

I have a further interest, in that my constituency is home to the Welsh Mountain zoo, the national zoo of Wales. The zoo's chief executive, Mr Nick Jackson, is a highly respected figure in animal conservation in the United Kingdom and is also a Government zoo inspector of some 37 years' standing. I have found his advice on the Bill invaluable, and my remarks have been significantly informed by his advice.

It need hardly be said that zoos are an important national asset, with significant societal benefits in recreation and education. Perhaps most importantly, British zoos are a hugely important international resource for animal conservation. The British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, or BIAZA, is a conservation, education and scientific wildlife charity. It is the principal professional organisation representing zoos and aquariums in the UK, and the APPG works very closely with it. BIAZA zoos participate in more than 800 conservation projects and 1,400 research projects and deliver education sessions to more than 1 million students every year. It is an internationally respected organisation in the field, and its views should be listened to.

Both BIAZA and Mr Nick Jackson have expressed concern about certain provisions of the Bill. The preparatory work for the Bill, and its amendment of the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, have been proceeding over the past two years in tandem with a revision of the Secretary of State's standards of modern zoo practice. Those standards are periodically revised and updated in the light of modern zoo thinking, under secondary legislation provided for by the 1981 Act. This process of periodic revision of the standards is fully supported by the British zoos community.

Although the Government's advisory body on zoos, the Zoos Expert Committee, has been involved in the revision of the standards, there has been, according to Mr Jackson and BIAZA, a somewhat regrettable lack of consultation with the wider zoo community throughout the process. That is a matter of concern, because the Bill's provisions transfer the broad definition of zoo conservation out of primary legislation—currently under section 1A of the 1981 Act—and into secondary legislation: that is, into the Secretary of State's standards through schedule 5 to the Bill. It amounts to a significant transfer of power to the Secretary of State, who will be able to create new obligations, or amend existing ones, in terms of the conservation role of zoos, with minimal parliamentary scrutiny. There is concern that this change is proposed to be made without sufficient consultation with BIAZA or the wider zoos community.

BIAZA and individual zoos fully understand the Government's desire to strengthen the conservation role of zoos through legislation, and they acknowledge that good zoos have nothing to fear from good regulation. However, it is a concern that, under the Bill, prescribed conservation activities will no longer be set out in primary legislation, but will be moved to secondary legislation

through the repeal of section 1A of the 1981 Act. On the face of it, that may seem a good idea, giving the Secretary of State flexibility to modernise zoo conservation standards over time as the needs of the natural world change, without having to return each time to Parliament to amend the primary legislation. I dare say that is why it is so framed.

However, that same flexibility could feasibly also result in moves, for example, to interpret the conservation role of zoos narrowly and lose touch with the broad understanding of zoo conservation as accepted by zoo associations across the world, by global conservation organisations such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and by the public. I therefore would be grateful if the Minister confirmed why it has been decided to move the definition of conservation from primary legislation. Why is it not on the face of the Bill? Conservation, after all, is the bedrock of all modern zoo activity. Surely, therefore, at least its key elements should remain within primary legislation.

That is not to say that conservation should necessarily remain as defined in section 1A of the 1981 Act. That definition probably should be modernised. If, however, there is a good reason for not incorporating the definition of conservation activities into the Bill, at least mechanisms should be put in place to ensure full transparency and proper consultation and accountability when that definition comes to be compiled and revised.

One possible mechanism could be to enhance the role of the Zoos Expert Committee, with clearly prescribed functions in advising on the formulation of conservation obligations and any revisions. The ZEC could have similar powers to the newly proposed animal sentience committee to publish independent advice to which the Secretary of State must then respond.

Finally, a further concern is that, under section 18(1)(b) of the 1981 Act, a zoo can appeal if aggrieved by a condition attached to its licence. Paragraph 17(2)(a) of schedule 5 to the Bill removes that right. That will preclude appeal against any condition relating to standards specified in section 9 of the 1981 Act, which under paragraph 9(3)(b) of schedule 5 will be conservation standards. However well-crafted a standard may be, there is always a danger that it could be applied incorrectly. A right of appeal is surely therefore necessary, and perhaps the Minister can explain why it is thought appropriate to preclude such a right.

To conclude, I ask the Minister to give careful consideration to the concerns expressed by such respected organisations as BIAZA and such respected figures as Mr Nick Jackson. This Bill is good and highly welcome, but it could be even better. I therefore strongly urge the Government to give serious consideration to the points I have raised with a view to putting forward appropriate improvements when the Bill goes into Committee.

7.58 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on the Second Reading of the Bill and to follow so many hon. Members who are committed to animal welfare. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) put it so eloquently, animal welfare is something that unites us as a Union and as a House. I welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on the Westminster dog of the year competition. It is

right and fitting that Vivienne, Sir David Amess's dog, is celebrated, and I would like to gift all the votes cast for my cocker spaniel Violet to Vivienne.

I have a particular interest in the Bill because part 2 addresses a subject I have been campaigning on for the past year: dogs attacking or worrying livestock.

When I became the Member of Parliament for Ynys Môn, I committed to learning Welsh. One of my constituents suggested that I watch S4C to improve my vocabulary. When I was watching the excellent farming programme "Ffermio" one day, I caught an item on the impact of dog worrying on farmers. A couple of days later, I followed that up with the chair of Anglesey's NFU, Brian Bown, and with local sheep farmer Peter Williams. After finding out the extent of the problem, I started working with the NFU, the Farmers Union of Wales, the Department and my local rural police crime team on how we could change the law to protect farmers.

To put the issue into a national context, it is estimated that around 15,000 sheep are killed by dogs each year. The average insurance claim for attacks is more than £1,300, with some claims being in the tens of thousands. The national cost is estimated to be about £1.3 million. To put it into a human context, one of my constituents, Tecwyn Jones, told me how he had found seven pregnant ewes and three rams dead in his fields in Bodedern. They had been killed by an unknown dog or dogs in what police described as a brutal and horrendous attack. His account of the event was truly harrowing. The financial cost ran to thousands, and the emotional cost to his family was huge.

Livestock worrying is legislated against under the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953, which is nearly 70 years old. So much has changed; more people are visiting the countryside with dogs, and technology and farming have moved on. Under that legislation, however, the maximum fine for livestock worrying is £1,000; the definition of a dog in "close control" or "at large" is—pardon the pun—woolly to say the least; and the police have limited powers to seize a dog and no powers to take DNA samples. In July, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to amend the 1953 Act, with support from the NFU.

Carla Lockhart: The Bill puts a policy duty on the police in GB to act. In Northern Ireland, we use the local councils, given the pressures on our police service. Perhaps the Government could take that away and look at empowering councils to take action against such dogs.

Virginia Crosbie: It is a team effort and certainly about public awareness.

Some of my proposed amendments have been incorporated into the Bill already, and I am delighted that the Government are taking the matter seriously. I fully support the measures proposed in part 2 of the Bill, but I would like even more robust measures to be proposed and debated. Last week, I wrote to the Secretary of State requesting a meeting to discuss the matter. I am working with the NFU and the Kennel Club to ensure that the changes I propose are fit for purpose and do not penalise responsible dog owners. I conclude this speech with three words: vote for Vivienne.

8.3 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): All five measures in the Bill are important to our constituents. I am proud to support them tonight, and to vote enthusiastically for this important Bill. As every hon. Member has said, we are a nation of animal lovers. I am a dog owner and I have been reflecting on how much dogs can teach us human beings about love and loyalty. We can learn a great deal from them.

Let me go through the measures in the Bill. We have heard a lot about primates. It is right that those magnificent animals should be cared for only in environments where their complex social and welfare needs can be properly attended to. It was many years ago that David Attenborough showed us on television how wonderful those creatures are. The measures in the Bill are absolutely right.

We know how many more dogs have come into the country, particularly during the pandemic, and about the imbalance between supply and demand. I am pleased that measures in the Bill deal with puppy smuggling by limiting the number of dogs coming into the country, not allowing pregnant dogs in, and taking a stand on ear cropping and tail docking by banning them. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) made the important point that on films and on television, we must not show dogs whose tails have been docked and ears have been cropped in any way other than to expose it. I am grateful to him for that.

The issue that my constituents have raised most frequently is probably that of live animal exports. It is fantastic that the Bill will ban that for slaughter and fattening, that it will apply to cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and equines, and that it will apply to journeys beginning in and transiting through Great Britain. That is necessary and important, and something we can do now we are outside the European Union.

Livestock worrying is of particular concern to me, as I have a partly rural constituency. I have been contacted by some of my farmers, who are in enormous distress about the issue. It is not just the significant number of sheep they lose or the loss of income that that represents; it is the huge emotional distress for farmers who love their animals. It is not just a financial crime; it is something that we should not put any farmer through. That is why I am so pleased that we will expand the police's powers. As was said earlier, however, education for dog owners is really important. No dog should be put down unnecessarily; it should only be a last resort.

I had a worrying conversation with one of my sheep farmers recently, who reported a dog that had attacked some of his sheep to 999, and was initially told that it was not a police matter. I was concerned about that, so I am pleased that the new police and crime commissioner for Bedfordshire, Festus Akinbusoye, has been educating our call centre about the impact of rural crime. I hope that happens across the country, because no farmer should be told that it is not a police matter.

Dr Hudson: On the point about widening the scope of the measures in this Bill or another Bill, we have talked about pet theft, and my hon. Friend is talking about rural crime. I hope that the Government move forward with legislation on pet theft and strongly consider expanding it to include other animals, such as farm livestock and horses. Those animals are, sadly, increasingly being stolen.

Andrew Selous: I will always defer to my hon. Friend's knowledge and experience in such matters. He is absolutely right. I remember an older lady coming to see me in my constituency a few years ago whose small dog had been stolen. It struck me that that was akin to a member of her family having been kidnapped—the removal of a child or grandchild—she was so devastated. We need laws to reflect the gravity of that. My hon. Friend is right that that should apply not just to pets, because the theft of any animal is a serious matter.

Whipsnade zoo is in my constituency. I am delighted that four or five other Members have talked about it, such is its reputation. There are about 400 zoos in this country but I would say, with justification, that Whipsnade is at the pinnacle of global conservation work. I am delighted that we heard from my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), about the fantastic work that Whipsnade is already doing with its freshwater aquarium. She told us that it has more extinct-in-the-wild and threatened species than any other aquarium in the world.

We heard about Whipsnade's fantastic work to deal with elephant-human conflict, and the 30,000 thermal images that have been taken to support that work around the world, so that elephants and humans can live together without anything bad happening to the elephants. Whipsnade also hosts 50,000 schoolchildren every year, who leave inspired to do more for conservation. In addition, Whipsnade has reintroduced tigers to Nepal, Kenya and Indonesia; it has introduced rhinos back into the wild in Nepal and Kenya; and it has done work to restore the coral reefs in the Philippines. Closer to home, Whipsnade has been involved in getting angel sharks back on the coast of Wales, and even closer to home, Whipsnade has helped get eels back in the Thames, just outside where we are tonight.

I had the opportunity to speak to my hon. Friend the Bill Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—about this conservation work at breakfast this morning. I think the Government get it, and are complete supporters of this fantastic conservation work. I do not believe the Bill is a threat to that work, and I think she will reassure us. I would be failing in my constituency duty if I did not express those concerns, but I do think that we are in good hands with a Bill team such as this one.

8.10 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity briefly to participate in this important Second Reading debate on the *Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill*, and it is a great pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous).

It has been really heartening this evening to hear people from across the House, the political divide and the United Kingdom supporting the Bill. Yes, there have been some nuanced differences on some of the provisions proposed by the Government, but the unifying aim of this House has been to significantly advance and improve animal welfare standards. I hope that those differences can be worked out in Committee and on Report, as well as when we listen to the Minister's response in a few minutes' time.

For example, the fact is that research and conservation really do need to be at the heart of what zoos do best. We have heard some wonderful examples this evening of zoos around the country that contribute worldwide to that effort. When it comes to keeping primates, the view of some in the House is that there should be a complete ban, and others think that there should be a licensing system, as the Bill suggests. The desire is to significantly improve the wellbeing of these highly intelligent and complex animals.

I am particularly pleased that livestock worrying is being addressed, although I have some sympathies with what has been said. The fines and the action proposed could perhaps be improved and sharpened up further still to make this a really effective piece of legislation. I am vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare, which has been looking at the issue for some time, and I am pleased that it is very much central to this Bill.

It is great that the Bill addresses the importation of puppies, and the practices of docking tails and clipping ears. However, perhaps in Committee we could look at the number of puppies brought into this country privately, and at reducing that number to a more realistic figure.

Principally, I welcome the ban in the Bill on live animal exports for slaughter and for fattening. This is something my late mum was a great campaigner on many years ago, and it is so heartening that now that we have left the European Union, we are able to introduce this ban. To reflect the comments of hon. and right hon. Members from across the House, there is a potential loophole in the export of animals to the continent through Northern Ireland; it is important that we look to address that. Reducing the journeys of animals is also good for our environment and carbon footprint, and we have heard about the economic benefits. The ban on the live export of animals does not cover poultry, and I would be grateful if the Government looked at that.

I mention poultry deliberately, because on 22 September I had a ten-minute rule Bill, the *Hen Caging (Prohibition) Bill*, which is known as *Beatrice's Bill* after a rescued hen. This is really very poignant for me, because our late, dearly loved colleague from Southend West, Sir David Amess, was a co-sponsor of that Bill. He sat about here on these Benches as I presented that Bill to the House, in support, and his last comments in this House on the record in *Hansard* were, very typically of his character, kindly supportive of the measures in that Bill to end so-called enriched cages.

Battery farming for hens was banned in this country in 2012, but enriched cages are not much bigger, and they present many animal welfare concerns. The hens are not able to display their natural behaviour. Millions of hens still live in those conditions, despite many of our main retailers, wholesalers and other suppliers moving to a commitment to 100% free-range eggs. I therefore find it poignant to mention the importance of those provisions, something that Sir David—our dear friend—cared about so much, as he did about so many other subjects that we have heard about in the last week. Last Monday, I did not have an opportunity to pay my respects and tributes to him, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so now.

I am glad that this has pretty much been a debate of consensus. “Erskine May”, our rulebook, which sits on the Table, says that it is out of order to make farmyard noises in this House. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am glad that we have not had to resort to that this evening.

8.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and to follow the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), and I thank him for that.

I am well aware that this Bill does not specifically apply to Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State in his introduction referred to that, but also referred to the discussions he has had with the Minister in Northern Ireland, Edwin Poots, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I know that the Minister probably does that nearly every week, and that there is regular communication between the Assembly and here. It is always good to have that, because the co-operation, partnership and teamwork that resonates across this great nation is something I welcome. It follows that the Northern Ireland Assembly will be taking note of the passage of this Bill and be giving consideration to the similar legislation to be passed in Northern Ireland. I would hope very much that my party and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), as well as other parties, will feed into that process.

Key to the issue of puppy farming is pet movement, and its regulation needs to be extended. Every hon. and right hon. Member has spoken on this issue. I, along with reputable bodies such as the Countryside Alliance, welcome the proposed changes to the number of animals that can be moved under retained EU rules for the non-commercial movement of dogs, cats and ferrets. The current maximum of five animals per person will be reduced to three, or a maximum of five per vehicle. That will help reduce the current abuse of the system, which in particular allows the import of low-welfare puppies into the country.

I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State have both referred to this in the past, but I again underline that this issue is about better co-operation. I have referred to better co-operation between Northern Ireland and here, but it is also good to have better co-operation between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic to make sure that we do not end up with any serious problems.

Others have talked about this, but I would also like to say for the record how much I would have liked, as others would, to have seen the now deceased hon. Member Sir David Amess here to participate in this debate. He was a wonderful man. I do not say that because he has passed; I say it because it is true. Although every one of us misses him very much, we also celebrate his contributions to this House, which were enormous and resonate with many things. Last week we had a debate on Iran, and he would have been there but for what happened. Tonight he would have been here to participate in this debate on the Bill, and I want to say how much we miss him, and how much he lives on in our hearts, minds and thoughts for the future. Last week was hard for everyone in the House—who of us did not shed a tear? Some of us perhaps also looked back and thought of all the wee funny jokes he had with us. Those were all good times.

Let me return to animal welfare. The Bill rightly retains the exemption for larger movements for sporting and competition purposes. That covers the exemption for pet animals that are moved into Great Britain for the purpose of participating in competitions, exhibitions, sporting events, or training for such events. I welcome the Government’s intention to use the powers in clause 44 to amend retained EU legislation to prohibit the importation of puppies under six months old, heavily pregnant bitches, and those that have been subject to mutilation—as we said, that could involve ears or tails—that would not have been lawful here, subject to necessary and sensible exemptions. Numerous constituents have raised that issue with me, and I hope they are also pressing my hon. Friends and colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure continuity on this issue through the entire UK.

Carla Lockhart: My hon. Friend will know that the Bill makes positive moves regarding the export of livestock and the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets, but in that area we in Northern Ireland are governed by EU law. That is the consequence of the protocol, and it is yet another reason why we need the Government to bring Northern Ireland back under the laws of this land. Does he agree that time is ticking, and that we need action now?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend knows that I agree with her. There is no doubt about that whatsoever, and I am pleased to endorse her comments.

As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, livestock worrying is a concern, and that has also been raised by many of my local farmers. I know that the Bill does not touch on the issue directly, but it is a matter we will be taking forward in the Assembly. I have raised the issue numerous times over lockdown, as more people bought or obtained dogs for company, and then took a country walk to get out of the house. There is nothing wrong with that, but we should always remember that a dog will want to roam—that’s the way it is. The Bill retains the existing exemption to the offence of being in charge of a dog “at large” with livestock present for working dogs, including working gun dogs or packs of hounds.

The main changes in the Bill would introduce control orders, destruction orders or disqualification orders that the courts may impose following a conviction for a livestock worrying offence. Control orders would require owners to take specific steps to avoid future offences, destruction orders would require dogs whose actions resulted in an offence to be destroyed, and disqualification orders would prohibit an owner from owning or keeping any dog for a period at the court’s discretion. I welcome the measures put forward by the Government on livestock worrying and protection. I think the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire is right, and that every Member of the House would also endorse that. I have also been in touch with bodies that have stated their preference for the provision on “at large” dogs to be further strengthened, to require that dogs in fields with relevant livestock be kept on leads at all time, subject to the working dog or keepers exemptions.

Finally—this issue has been very much in my mailbox—I want to talk about the export of live animals. The Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

[*Jim Shannon*]

and others have referred to that, and I believe we must do more to support greater animal welfare. I am supportive of the measure in the Bill, but I agree with the Countryside Alliance which said:

“We would suggest that in order to account for unanticipated emergencies, the Bill be amended to grant the Secretary of State the power to dispense with the prohibition on a temporary basis. If, for instance, the country faced circumstances in which domestic slaughterhouse capacity because severely restricted, it would be preferable for the range of emergency measures available to the Government to include an option to permit exports for slaughter temporarily, rather than being limited to culling.”

Perhaps when the Minister sums up the debate she will indicate whether such discussions have taken place with the Countryside Alliance to address those issues.

This is an opportunity for DEFRA to work to ensure a proper network of local abattoirs, so that livestock are slaughtered as close to home as possible. As others have said, it is also an opportunity to address food labelling, so that meat and products containing meat that are labelled “British only” contain only meat from animals that were born, raised and slaughtered in this country. Post Brexit we have opportunities that must be realised, and that presents another opportunity to ensure that British meat comes from animals that were born, bred and slaughtered in the UK. I look to the Government and the Minister to consider these issues sympathetically. Indeed, I know that will happen. Others have referred to it, and the House is united to try to push the Bill through.

8.25 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, and the Minister, for the hard work they have undertaken on this Bill. As we have heard, animal welfare is a vital cross-party concern, and as MPs it is in our postbags regularly as a definite priority of the UK public. The Bill is an important improvement on existing animal welfare legislation, and the Scottish Government have granted a legislative consent motion, working in conjunction with the Minister and the Secretary of State on those issues that link with devolved competences.

It is vital that we work together, and I wish to pay tribute to the memory of Sir David Amess MP, who did so much work on animal welfare across the House. He was a fantastic cross-party colleague in that work, and I learned so much from him in the time I knew him. What happened has been such a shock to us all. It is something that we are left reeling from, but we will always fondly remember the work he undertook, which led to many good Bills coming through Parliament, not least the one we are discussing today. I will certainly be voting for his dog, Vivienne, as Westminster dog of the year. The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) mentioned Calderglen zoo and said that we should visit our zoos. I have already visited Calderglen zoo in East Kilbride, where I was put into a number of cages with many different animals to give them their dinner. I experienced the tortoise weeing on my hand, but despite that I am very keen for tortoise welfare to be taken forward across the UK.

I thank the many animal welfare organisations that have contributed to the Bill, including the Blue Cross, Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, the British

and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and Marc the Vet. I give a special commendation to the all-party dog advisory welfare group, which I currently chair. That has cross-party working at its core, because these are all issues that concern the public and MPs.

On primates as pets, many animal welfare charities would like a complete ban rather than licensing, because primates have really complicated welfare needs. That was outlined very well by the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who undertakes lots of excellent animal welfare work across the House, in addition to having a fishing specialty. Primates are often fed unsuitable diets and held in unsuitable cages, but they have advanced cognitive capacities, so that is psychologically extremely cruel. We must conclude that primates are not suitable as pets, and we must overcome any loopholes in the Bill.

Worryingly, licensing could be seen as giving approval to, or legitimising, the keeping of primates as pets. I think that is where some of the anxieties of the animal welfare organisations come into play. Alongside that, many local authorities simply do not have the capacity or expertise to enforce licensing requirements. Perhaps those issues can be addressed during the Bill’s passage.

The legislation on livestock worrying definitely needs updating. The Scottish Parliament recently updated the legislation in Scotland, via my colleague Emma Harper. Livestock worrying is of great concern to livestock owners and causes pain and distress to the animals. However, as well as being an animal welfare issue for the animals in the fields, it can be an issue of irresponsible dog ownership. The Blue Cross says that it does not want a situation where dogs are euthanised unnecessarily because of irresponsible dog owners. We should state clearly and explicitly in the Bill that owners should keep their dog on a lead in areas of livestock. It is a myth that dogs cannot enjoy a walk if they are not off the lead, and that should be overcome in messaging to the public.

I am delighted that the ban on live exports for slaughter is coming to pass. That is extremely welcome. I have wanted that and worked for it for a long time, and it has cross-party consensus. We have spoken tonight about loopholes, and I would like to see those closed.

Let me point out an issue that perhaps has not been mentioned yet. I am aware that many greyhounds are exported to Asia—to various countries—and I have been notified by charities working in greyhound welfare that those dogs are then found in dog markets and, sadly, find their way into the food chain in other countries. That has to be dealt with.

On the importation of dogs, cats and ferrets, the all-party parliamentary group on dog advisory welfare worked cross party to champion Lucy’s law, which is now being expanded across the nations of the United Kingdom. We hope to see that introduced in Northern Ireland in the near future. I am keen to see further measures enacted to combat puppy smuggling, and I entirely agree with and take on board the issues raised tonight regarding the significant number of dogs that have been imported, particularly during covid. The conditions are appalling.

We would like the maximum number of dogs that may be taken in transit reduced from five to three, and the minimum age of those puppies increased to six months. I understand from vets that consult with our all-party

group that that is very important to aid screening, but also because dental checks can age a dog at around six months, but below that it is very difficult to determine the age of a puppy.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) made an excellent point about the importance of alternatives to animal testing. That is not in the remit of this Bill, but I notify Members that early-day motion 175 seeks a scientific hearing on best practice. This issue, which was debated in an e-petition debate tonight in Westminster Hall, is another that the public feel extremely strongly about. I could not be in two places at once—I have not managed that yet—or I would have been there, too.

We really must get behind the Scarlett Beagle For Life On Earth campaign led by Ricky Gervais and Peter Egan and ensure that there are alternatives to testing on animals, and in particular to the terrible plight of beagles. Scarlett was lucky to be rescued, but so many beagle puppies suffer a short life of tests, toxicity and then death. We were informed at the dog advisory welfare APPG that beagles are used because they are extremely placid little dogs; they do not usually bite or retaliate, and they can even be trained to give their paw for injections. We really must make progress on these issues.

I am delighted to speak at this important stage of the Bill, and to work jointly and collaboratively with so many excellent colleagues from across the House who champion animal welfare. It is vital that we legislate for these issues, given their importance to the public, who hold them in their hearts. Compassion must be at the heart of the legislation. Once again, I thank everyone involved for making this an important, memorable and poignant debate in memory of Sir David; he would be pleased that it was so constructive and positive.

8.34 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): May I start by echoing all the warm tributes to Sir David Amess? My office in 1 Parliament Street is very close to his. We often spoke in the lift and came over to vote together. We had different political views, but what a lovely fellow. Like everyone, I miss him very, very much. If anyone is running a book on the Westminster dog of the year competition, close it now, given the number of promises for Vivienne—although we politicians know that promises do not count for anything, so get out and vote!

We are all animal lovers here—no one doubts that—and we all care, but sometimes actions speak louder than words. I was slightly disappointed not to hear anything from the Secretary of State earlier about the animal welfare crisis unfolding on this Government's watch, for which I think they bear some responsibility. I am, of course, talking about the crisis in the pig sector, which the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) spoke about so eloquently. It is absolutely right to celebrate the end of live exports in the Bill, which we strongly support—we are not opposing the Bill tonight—but it is worth noting that there have been as many pigs culled in the fields in the last few weeks as, sadly, live animals exported for slaughter in the last year. I fear there will be more to come. In answer to a written parliamentary question, the Government recently admitted that they do not keep a tally. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why not. These are kept animals—dumped animals,

effectively. They do not feature in the Bill, but, like many other things, they probably could and should have.

Once again, the Government are doing things in the wrong order. Just as the Environment Bill should have come before the Agriculture Act 2020, just so we have a rather eclectic collection of bits and pieces on animals in this Bill, when the key legislation that we should have started with, the Animal Sentience (Welfare) Bill, is in the other place. If anyone wants to see some really traditional Conservative views on that, I suggest they read some of the speeches made on that—not a lot of time for animal welfare there. We on the Labour Benches take a very different view. There is so much that needs to be done that Labour will do: better conditions for piglets; an end to the cage age; and an animal welfare commissioner to make sure it all happens. That is for the future, but tonight is a start, and we will work with that.

Let me start with primates. The Government have made big promises to end primates being kept as pets, but as we have heard from Members from across the House, that is not what is happening. A number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and Government Members, made that point. The licensing system proposed in the Bill allows the continued breeding and selling of primates, meaning that primates can be kept as pets in perpetuity. That needs to stop, and I think there are others across the House who agree with that position. If the Government are introducing a licensing system, it must be one that improves primate conditions and ends the domestic breeding and sale of primates, so we can gradually see it phased out. We think the position should be much clearer. I suspect there will be an interesting debate on the issue in Committee. We also think the Government have been too vague about the welfare conditions connected to the licence. Perhaps the Minister could tell us when the standards will be published, what they will contain and who will be involved in drafting them.

The Government have deployed one of their favourite tactics: palming off costly responsibilities to local councils. We all know how councils have suffered over the last decade, and they will need additional support. Perhaps the Minister can explain how councils will operate a costly and complex system without any additional support.

We have had a good discussion on livestock worrying, and I suspect there is strong agreement on it across the House. However, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has criticised provisions in the Bill that state that a dog must be “at large” for its behaviour to fall under the definition of livestock worrying. It says that that is

“too broad and contains loopholes”.

We rather agree. We think a dog should be on a lead when near livestock, and we do not believe there should be an exemption for packs of hounds.

We all welcome the ban on live exports, but the exportation of livestock for slaughter has always posed significant welfare concerns. Prolonged periods of transportation expose animals to food and water deprivation, overcrowding and lack of rest, and exporting animals has always opened them to the risk that they will be slaughtered in conditions that fall below UK standards. However, the Bill ignores the obvious truth

[Daniel Zeichner]

that long journeys in the UK to slaughterhouses also harm animal welfare—a point made by those on the Government Benches and by the Animal Welfare Committee.

In the UK, the number of local abattoirs has been significantly reduced, meaning that many farmers have little choice but to send livestock long distances for slaughter. Everyone will be aware of the strong campaign that has been waged on this matter, which is frequently raised with me by farmers who would like to return to a mixed farming model, but are reluctant to subject animals to such long journeys. There was some incredulity at the comments earlier this year by the Secretary of State, who seemed to suggest that that was not a problem. Can the Minister commit to working to re-establish local networks of slaughterhouses, to end the suffering of animals undertaking extensive journeys inside the UK?

During the pandemic, we have all heard about the rising demand for pets, and many have spoken tonight about the horrible, illegal trading of puppies and smuggling of animals. While we welcome the provisions in the Bill, we do not think they go quite far enough, and we heard many hon. Members talk about that. I hope the Government will listen to calls from the RSPCA, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and others to reduce the number of pets permitted to travel across our border in a non-commercial vehicle from the suggested five to three. We heard powerful case made by my hon. Friends the Members for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), and by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). We think it would be much better to make that change sooner rather than later, and I am sure the matter will be discussed intensively in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham also talked about the provisions restricting the importation of animals on welfare grounds, such as by raising the minimum age of imported animals and banning the importation of heavily pregnant animals and animals subjected to illegal mutilation. Those provisions are not in the Bill but will be put in secondary legislation. Many hon. Members who spoke would like the Minister to explain why it is being done that way. I was struck by the number of Government Members raising concerns on zoos. I suspect that will also be something we will want to look at much more closely in Committee.

In conclusion, this seems to us a slightly odd Bill, perhaps more limited than it needed to be, but useful, and one that could certainly have been better. We will not oppose it, but given that there is so much more to do, I can guarantee that we will look to improve it in Committee. We look forward to challenging the Government to explain why they do not want to do what it appears so many hon. Members on their own side would like them to.

8.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): This Bill shows the Government's commitment to improving the standard of welfare for all kept animals. We have heard this evening from animal lovers, farmers and dog and cat owners from across the House. We have covered almost the full range of the animal kingdom.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): The Minister is quite right that the UK is leading the way on animal welfare, but she is aware of the thousands of dead crustaceans that have washed ashore on Redcar and Marske beaches in recent days. Will she work with me to establish the cause?

Victoria Prentis: Indeed, we had not yet heard about the crustaceans. I will of course work with my hon. Friend, who raised this serious issue with me several days ago. We have commissioned research from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science to find out what on earth is going wrong on the beach in Redcar.

Many hon. Members feel that more should be in this Bill—Gizmo, Tuk, microchipping, animal sanctuaries, fireworks and animals being used in scientific research—and I am happy to take those matters up with them individually, although not now. I accept that not everything that we could possibly do for animal welfare is in this Bill, nor indeed is everything in our action plan for animal welfare covered.

Nevertheless, the Bill is significant progress. This House has been passing animal welfare legislation since 1635, when we prohibited

“pulling the Wooll off...Sheep”

and forbade the attaching of ploughs to the tails of horses. I am sure that we will continue to pass animal welfare legislation, but I would like to point out the significant steps that we are taking this evening.

I hope that hon. Members will not take it amiss if I say that, in many ways, the most important speech was not made: the one by our hon. Friend who represented the city—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—of Southend. I do not think it presumptuous to say that I know what he would have said; after all, he had been saying it for 38 years. I quote from a speech that he gave on live exports in 2012:

“Any practice that regularly inflicts such pain on living creatures, and, worse, regularly leads to their deaths, should be ended as soon as possible.

This is not an impossible dream.”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2012; Vol. 555, c. 514.]

Well, not any more, David. I know that he would have been proud that Brexit allows us to deliver on many of the issues on which he campaigned.

The Bill will deliver our manifesto commitment to end live exports for fattening and slaughter. Long journey times pose clear welfare risks, and a consultation several years ago showed that 98% of the public support a ban. I thank the farming world for working with us on it. Breeding animals are typically transported in very good conditions, above the regulatory baseline, and poultry are generally exported as day-old chicks in excellent condition. Nevertheless, we will continue to work with Members across the House on closing possible loopholes. Clause 43 will allow us to make regulations on the matter, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) called for.

I am a great supporter of local and even mobile abattoirs; I visited one at Fir farm recently and am always happy to take up the issue with anybody who wishes to discuss it. Wider transport reforms are also important. We have done a great deal of work on length of journey for animals generally.

Neil Parish: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: I am afraid not, because I have a great deal to get through.

A series of stakeholder workshops are coming up, and we will make statutory instruments late next year and in 2023 to deal with the wide range of issues thrown up by the consultation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) spoke about the specifics of transporting animals, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who spoke about his late mum. I refer my right hon. Friend to Scottish research about conditions at sea; I will make sure to pass him a copy of it. We have looked carefully at that important issue.

On livestock worrying, dog attacks on farm animals are a major concern for farmers. The Bill gives enhanced tools to the police, expands the type of livestock protected and will ensure that police can respond more effectively. I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)—who rightly pointed out that dog owners need to behave more responsibly, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), who has worked so hard on the issue.

The Bill delivers the manifesto commitment to crack down on illegal puppy smuggling. I have heard what has been said about numbers, but we have worked hard to get them right in consultation with the public; we will continue to do so, though. The Bill also includes the powers to enable us to introduce further restrictions—I have heard what has been said about that—such as raising the minimum age and tackling the importation of pregnant bitches and cropped and docked dogs. The consultation closed last week; we had 14,000 responses, which I am working through now. We need flexibility, and we need to address this area of the Bill through regulation to get ahead of the criminals.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) mentioned her love of cats, as chair of their APPG, and the importance of ensuring that the Bill covers them. I reassure her that clause 46 covers “dogs, cats and ferrets”. We know that the problem is greatest for dogs, so we will probably cover them first, but our ambition does not end there.

We know very well that primates have complex welfare needs and are not suitable pets. We have introduced a licence, and not one that people can just pay for; the aim is to meet the stringent conditions required for meeting the complex needs of primates. There will be regular inspections and vet visits, and we absolutely have a plan for how our approach will be enforced. The Secretary of State has worked closely with Monkey World, which is well represented by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), and with Wild Futures, which I would be delighted to visit.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall introduced a private Member’s Bill on the subject 10 years ago: the Keeping of Primates as Pets (Prohibition) Bill. It was suggested by some of those organisations, which are well aware of all the issues involved in primate keeping, that a licensing system would be most appropriate, but I am happy to work with Members on that.

On zoo licensing, it was good to hear from the “Zoo Hero”, my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who told us again about the important conservation work done by zoos. We also heard from

the vice-chairman of his all-party parliamentary group on zoos and aquariums, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). The Bill reforms the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, improving its operability and allowing for animal welfare standards to be enforced more thoroughly. The aim is to absorb conservation measures within the existing process for other zoo standards. We think that this will raise conservation standards, and I want to reassure Members on both sides of the House in that regard. The standards are drafted by the Zoos Expert Committee, and we are about to start serious engagement with the wider sector. I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford about the specific points that he made about appeals and so on.

This Bill will extend and strengthen protections for pets, farm animals and kept wild animals. Yes, there is more to do, but that does not detract from what we are doing today. I was not going to reveal my voting intentions for the Westminster Dog of the Year contest, but I think I will after all: we will probably all be voting for Vivienne. I know that David would be very proud of the progress that has been made, and I commend the Bill, in his name, to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ANIMAL WELFARE (KEPT ANIMALS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on 18 November 2021.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Amanda Solloway.*)

Question agreed to.

ANIMAL WELFARE (KEPT ANIMALS) BILL (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase in expenditure in the sums payable under other Acts out of money so provided, where that increase is attributable to:

- (a) any provision of the Act relating to primates;
- (b) any power in the Act to apply such provision to other animals; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Amanda Solloway.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DRAFT ONLINE SAFETY BILL (JOINT COMMITTEE) (POWER TO TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE UNITED KINGDOM)

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 21st July 2021 appointing a Select Committee to join with a Committee of the Lords to consider and report on the draft Online Safety Bill (CP 405) be amended by leaving out the words “to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom” and inserting the words “to adjourn from place to place”.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 8 together.

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

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Heavy Commercial Vehicles in Kent (No.1) (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.

That the Heavy Commercial Vehicles in Kent (No. 2) (Amendment) Order 2021 (SI 2021, No. 988), a copy of which was laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.

NATIONAL SECURITY

That the draft National Security and Investment Act 2021 (Monetary Penalties) (Turnover of a Business) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.

That the draft National Security and Investment Act 2021 (Notifiable Acquisition) (Specification of Qualifying Entities) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

High Income Child Benefit Charge

8.53 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of constituents who have expressed concern to me about what they see as an inherent unfairness, whereby a family with one high earner can be disadvantaged in comparison with two-earner families, and who have highlighted some anomalies in regard to the threshold rate not aligning with the basic-rate tax threshold.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to re-examine the High Income Child Benefit Charge policy to address the disparities it creates and ensure that any revision accounts for future increases in basic-rate tax thresholds.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares the High Income Child Benefit Charge is an unfair policy that puts families with one high-income earner at a financial disadvantage to a two-earner family; further that it discourages claims to child benefit, which negatively impacts National Insurance Contributions; notes that that the policy’s £50,000 threshold does not align with the basic-rate tax threshold of £50,270.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to re-examine the High Income Child Benefit Charge policy to address the disparities it creates and ensure that any revision accounts for future increases in basic-rate tax thresholds.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002692]

Abraham Accords

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Amanda Solloway.*)

8.54 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House for the opportunity to hold this short debate, and to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his attention this evening. As our main proceedings have finished early, I will limit my remarks to about an hour, as I clearly have a fair amount of time! I am only joking, of course; I will try to speak briefly.

This debate has three purposes. The first is to note and celebrate a significant development that has occurred within the last year in the middle east. The fact that Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan—we note the concerning situation in Sudan that we have heard about today and was addressed in an earlier statement—have come together and taken a material step forward in the relationships, normalising relations between the nations, the faiths and the peoples, is potentially a substantial step forward.

The second point that I would like to raise this evening is how we can nurture this fragile agreement and help it to continue and to broaden the circle of nations that have taken part in it. The Israeli ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, has said that this is a bit like a wedding, in that we have had the party and made vows to each other, but the true test is whether that can lead to a lasting partnership. That work really is required now. As with any marriage, it is up to friends, allies and supporters to ensure that we help it to succeed in the months and years to come.

That brings me to the third point that I would like to raise this evening. What is the role for the United Kingdom, and for our Government in particular, in taking this forward?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. I spoke to him last week about intervening tonight. He asks what the United Kingdom can do. Does he not agree that the anniversary of the Abraham accords is the perfect opportunity for this House to reaffirm our commitment to the state of Israel and to peace in the middle east as a whole, and to recognise the achievement of continued peace during this past year? We can celebrate that here, and Israel also deserves some credit for what has happened.

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. One of the purposes of this evening's debate is to pause for a moment and celebrate the state of Israel and those other countries of the Gulf and north Africa, many of which are great and long-standing allies of this country and friends with deep associations, which we should be supporting. The events of just over a year ago, when some of those countries were able to come together and sign the accords, were very significant, and I do not think we should underestimate the profound change in the relationships that underpins those accords.

There have always been relations between those nations in one form or another—often discreet and sometimes covert. Some of the individuals who have helped to broker agreements, or tried to do so, have built relationships

themselves, person to person. My uncle, Eli Rubinstein, the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Israel, was the chief negotiator at the Camp David accords. He told me that he would meet privately and holiday with his former interlocutors from Jordan, Egypt and other states who had been involved in those negotiations, in order to continue the friendships that they had built up. However, that is nothing compared with what we are now seeing as a result of these transformational changes. In the past year alone, 200,000 Israelis have gone to the United Arab Emirates, mostly to Dubai, for holidays and weddings. Synagogues have been set up in hotels for Rosh Hashanah. There were synagogues in ballrooms in the four-star and five-star hotels that many are familiar with in the United Arab Emirates. That is something that could not have been imagined just a year or so ago.

Economically, the ties are already increasing at a rapid pace. At Dubai Expo, Israel became one of the 191 countries to have its own stand. That was the first time that Israel had been welcomed to a trade exhibition in an Arab nation. Already, almost \$700 million of bilateral trade has occurred between Israel and the UAE alone. Latterly, that has been surpassed by one single transaction between the sovereign wealth fund of the UAE and Israel.

We have seen other things that were almost inconceivable just a few months or years ago. There have been joint efforts by Israeli and UAE organisations and businesses to take forward the port of Haifa. It has not come to pass but, none the less, there has been a proposal by UAE interests to purchase a football club in Israel. We have seen collaboration on covid vaccines and research, and we have even seen a kidney transplant facilitated jointly by the UAE and an Israeli donor programme. The list goes on.

Beyond those two nations, others have joined in different ways. Some prominently, such as Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, and others in simpler ways that we should not underestimate, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enabling flights over the kingdom for the first time, thereby enabling the thousands of tourists and businesspeople—the human interactions that could not have happened otherwise. There is increased sharing of intelligence and security, and greater religious tolerance has been encouraged.

On Saudi media, for example, the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca urged Muslims to avoid passionate emotions and fiery enthusiasm towards Jews, which will make a difference over time. Of course, it is not just the citizens of these countries who see it. People growing up in all parts of the middle east share the same media and look at the same websites, and they will see those images of Israelis, Muslims and Arabs from the Gulf nations meeting, sharing bread, doing business and sharing innovation, technology and security.

The benefits to the UK are also clear. Of course we, other than perhaps the United States, are the deepest ally and friend of many of these nations. We have huge trade in innovation, technology and security interests, all of which becomes simpler and easier for us to do knowing that relations are gradually normalising between these nations to which we already have strong ties.

The accords will also benefit interfaith relations here in the UK, as our Jewish and Muslim communities are able to see the normalisation of relations, with more tolerant and sensible language being used in the middle east, and peaceful co-existence beginning to happen, if only in a small way.

[Robert Jenrick]

In May 2021, during the Gaza conflict, we saw a serious diminution in relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities in this country—perhaps the worst seen for several years. There was an increase in hate crime, as recorded by the Community Security Trust with respect to antisemitic abuse and by Tell MAMA with respect to Islamophobic and anti-Muslim hate crime. We saw terrible incidents, such as the convoy of vehicles through Golders Green in north London. The relations that are now building between Israel and Arab and Muslim countries in the Gulf can only be positive in helping to build ties and break down barriers.

It is easy to be cynical about what happened a year ago, but the Abraham accords have proved to be remarkably resilient. They have survived the change in US Administration. Although, of course, it would be natural for an incoming Administration to be reluctant to take up with the same zeal something that was such a signature of the previous Administration, we have now seen positive and encouraging signs from Secretary Blinken, who has said that he, too, wants to take forward the Abraham accords and widen the circle of nations that are part of them. He has had positive conversations, of which he has spoken recently, with other countries in the Gulf and the broader middle east. He said the accords were

“an important achievement, one that not only we support, but one we’d like to build on... we’re looking at countries that may want to join in and...begin...their own relations with Israel.”

Most recently, I was heartened to see Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Adviser, raise normalisation with Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. That would, of course, be a major step as Saudi Arabia is the most significant regional player but, short of normalisation, there could be smaller steps that Saudi Arabia might consider. I have already mentioned that it gave support in one form or another to Bahrain to participate and that it has enabled flights over its airspace, so it may be willing to take steps short of outright acceptance and normalisation. Of course, progress might be possible with other nations such as Oman.

The accords managed to survive the 11-day Gaza conflict, which tested relationships both here and in the middle east. All of that points to the accords being substantial and lasting. However, we should not be naive. Such developments may look like the dawn of a new era in the middle east, but they could easily unravel. That might happen were there an escalation in the conflict between Israel and Gaza or Palestine, or between Israel and Iran, or on many other issues that might galvanise sentiment in the Gulf and help to see that progress set aside.

The draws me to the thrust of the debate: what is the role of the United Kingdom and our Government? As I have suggested, we have an important role to play. Short of the United States, we have the deepest and longest-standing relationships in the region in diplomacy and security, as well as the relations between our royal family and those of Gulf nations. We also have huge numbers of citizens who know and have relatives in those respective countries. There must be an important role for us and our other allies—in Europe, for example—to help to stiffen the sinews and give the Abraham accords lasting impact.

In many respects, it is disappointing that the UK was not closely associated with the work done last year. In 2019, I was privileged to represent the UK at the Peace to Prosperity conference in Bahrain organised by Jared Kushner, the then special adviser to President Trump. It was easy to be cynical of that initiative—it was very unlikely that the Israel-Palestine conflict would have been materially advanced by that conference or by Jared Kushner’s proposals—but, from spending time there, it was clear that deep relationships were being built between nations in the Gulf and the United States and, above all, with Israel, and that they might just bear fruit. On one day—it was not widely publicised at the time—a number of delegates from a range of countries, including Arab nations, visited a synagogue in Bahrain. We could see at the conference that things were changing. Perhaps it is a pity that the UK was not at the forefront of what came next, but it is easy for us to take it forward now.

What would I like us to do? I see my right hon. Friend the Minister in his place, and he has already spoken publicly about the United Kingdom’s support for the Abraham accords, including, I believe, earlier in the year at an event here in the House of Commons. There is an opportunity for us to use our diplomatic power, our diplomatic and security relationships and our rapidly building commercial ties actively to get fully behind the initiative. Through that, we can support those nations who have already signed up to the Abraham accords, to help ensure that we do not see that progress slip through our fingers. We can also think carefully about which other nations might be willing to sign up to the accords or to take steps in that direction. I have mentioned a few. Saudi Arabia would be the most significant, but others might be easier and faster to achieve, and we are particularly well placed with our relationship with Oman.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister and the Foreign Secretary will take that forward. It seems to accord with all our foreign policy objectives. It helps us to build and deepen relationships with our friends and allies. It helps to bring lasting peace to the middle east, one step at a time. It helps us to bring different communities and faiths together for the benefit of individuals living in the middle east and in our country. It also helps to point towards a better future beyond the middle east, showing that long-standing enmities can be set aside and that, with a leap of faith, we can make moves towards peace and a better future.

9.9 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for securing this debate and highlighting an incredibly important event. The Abraham accords were indeed an historic moment, beginning a new chapter in Israeli foreign policy and regional collaboration, hopefully bringing us all a step closer to resolving one of the major issues driving instability and conflict in the middle east.

As my right hon. Friend said, the UK enjoys excellent relationships with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel. Those strong relationships are built on a mutually held desire to further the cause of peace and stability in the region and the wider world. A recent example was when the Prime Minister welcomed the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, His Highness Sheikh

Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, to London last month, demonstrating the strength of our historic relationship with the UAE and our commitment to working together to advance regional prosperity, peace and security.

The United Kingdom and Bahrain also have a close and long-standing relationship—one reinforced during my recent visit to Bahrain. We benefit from a genuine and open dialogue, working together on mutually beneficial issues while also being able to speak frankly when we have concerns. Meanwhile, the UK is Israel's largest European trading partner, with total trade worth around £5 billion last year—a significant increase on the 2019 figures. We are working together on a new, ambitious UK-Israel free trade agreement that will modernise our trading relationship, covering new areas such as technology and data.

Israel remains an incredibly important strategic partner, and we collaborate closely on issues such as counter-terrorism and cyber to address our shared national security threats. The recent Carrier Strike Group engagements, including at the port of Haifa, demonstrated the strength of UK-Israel defence ties. I am happy to make it clear that our commitment to Israel's security is unwavering.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the fact that good friends of the UK came together through the Abraham accords to be good friends to each other. Those three great friends of the UK chose a path of peace, collaboration and prosperity between societies, cultures and, as he was right to point out, peoples. We were one of the first countries to welcome the accords and to celebrate the other normalisation agreements that followed with Morocco and, as my right hon. Friend said, Sudan.

During the last 12 months, we have been celebrating and reinforcing the agreements, although that period has of course proved a challenge. We are pleased to see that the three nations have grasped the opportunities that normalisation presented. We have seen burgeoning economic partnerships in travel, technology, energy, climate and more. Just last month, Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid made his first official visit to the Kingdom of Bahrain, thus enhancing bilateral ties.

A new Israeli embassy has opened in Manama. Direct commercial flights have commenced and agreements have been reached on sport, health and environmental protection. During my visit to Bahrain, I had the pleasure of being at a bilateral lunch when the new Bahraini ambassador to Israel received a phone call telling him that he was going to be Bahrain's first ever ambassador to the state of Israel.

For me, perhaps one of the most wonderful and moving moments is when I had the pleasure, during Hanukkah last year, to be present at the virtual lighting of the Menorah. It was an event where I, the Ambassadors to the Court of St James from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel came together in this iconic Jewish festival. It showcased the strength of commitment from all sides to this agreement to reinforce the longevity and prosperity of their relationship.

My right hon. Friend was right to mention the fact that the United Kingdom has helped to celebrate through this year. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) for organising a reception here in the House of Commons where

representatives from Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates came together to celebrate the anniversary of the Abraham accords.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark mentioned the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians and he was absolutely right to do so. It is important that these agreements also lead to tangible benefits for the Palestinian people. Sadly, the escalation in violence that we saw in May of this year and the loss of life that resulted is yet another reminder that we collectively have a responsibility to break the cycle of violence using our strong and strengthening relationships with all the parties.

As the Abraham accords demonstrated with the suspension of plans for annexation, normalisation has had a positive track record for delivering progress toward shared goals. The UK is committed to making progress towards a sustainable two-state solution that ensures a safe and secure Israel living alongside a safe and secure Palestinian state based on 1967 border lines, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states. We believe that negotiations will be the only way to get this outcome that will be supported by Israelis, Palestinians and the wider international community. Echoing the words of Israel's Minister of Defence, Benny Gantz, the accords have opened a "window of opportunity" to advance steps towards a political middle east peace process.

We want to see greater co-ordination and co-operation between Israelis and Palestinians, particularly on economic initiatives, to help improve the day-to-day lives of Palestinians and build increased dialogue. It is incumbent on us all to seize the opportunity afforded to us by the accords and make meaningful progress towards sustainable, long-term peace in the region.

We welcome recent engagements between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian leadership, including the meeting between Palestinian President Abbas and Israeli Defence Minister Gantz on 29 August this year.

I am due to visit Israel in December—my first visit as the Minister for the region, although, of course, not my first visit to the country. I will then have completed the trio of the Abraham accords' initial signatories, having visited the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain earlier this year. I look forward to discussing what further opportunities the accords bring, not just regarding our respective relationships with Israel, the Arab Emirates and Bahrain, but to see what we can do to use the accords to further peace and prosperity in the region more widely. Of course, we have encouraged other nations to seize this opportunity and to normalise their relations with the state of Israel. We urge further direct engagement and call on all parties to work together to tackle the immediate and long-term threats to peace and security.

The Abraham accords demonstrate how normalisation can bring people together to forge new friendships and, as my right hon. Friend said, perhaps most importantly to nurture hope. We will continue to intensify our diplomatic efforts in the region, focused on creating the conditions for long-term, sustainable peace. I look forward to working closely with my opposite numbers in the UAE, Bahrain and Israel, and, indeed, any other country that wishes to join and support the normalisation of relations, and bring peace, strength and stability to the region.

Question put and agreed to.

9.20 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 25 October 2021

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

University Tuition Fees

4.30 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage hon. Members to wear masks when they are not speaking, in line with current Government and House of Commons Commission guidance. Please give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 550344, relating to university tuition fees.

It is a pleasure, Ms McVey, to serve under your chairship for the first time. I thank the petitioner for putting together a petition on this important issue, and the 581,287 people—a very large number—who signed the petition, particularly the 764 from Ipswich. That number does not surprise me, because I have been contacted by many constituents over the past 22 months with concerns about how university education has been impacted by the pandemic and about having to pay full tuition fees, even though, so often, their education and university lifestyle have been disrupted.

The petition first calls for a reduction in tuition fees from £9,250 a year to £3,000. Secondly, it calls for live debates to be held frequently between Members of Parliament and students. Though in principle that sounds like quite a good idea, practically I am unsure how it would be arranged. If we were to have those sorts of debates between MPs and students, where would it stop? Would we have such debates for every interest group on every issue across the land? It is important to remember that we are a representative democracy and that, as Members of Parliament, we engage frequently with higher education students.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is also worth saying for the benefit of those watching the debate that there is the opportunity to visit Parliament and see debates take place. As the hon. Gentleman says, debates between MPs and students may be a little more difficult to organise, although not impossible, but it would be great to see student organisations come and meet MPs and see what goes on in Parliament and how they can influence it.

Tom Hunt: I could not agree more. I have the University of Suffolk in my constituency, whose students have visited Parliament, and I was very happy to receive them. It provides a good opportunity for university students to engage with their elected representatives and understand how Parliament operates.

The £9,250 fee means that those leaving university have an average debt of £45,000. It is not a particularly pernicious form of debt, but it still has interest applied to it. That debt has to be paid over a number of years, often decades. In fact, it is thought that only 25% pay it back in full—the interest and the amount borrowed—while 75% do not. The concern about the level of fees is that it

could put off young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds from attending university. The Education Committee published a report not long ago on white working-class kids, and found that they were the least likely of any group to be represented in higher education, with only 12% of white boys eligible for free school meals ending up in university. I think the percentage was slightly higher for girls, at around 15% or 16%. That is a point that the Government need to consider.

Repayment does not kick in until someone is earning £28,000, but that can still be difficult for people who are trying to get by. As I saw when I was trying to get a mortgage, it is taken into account by mortgage providers. It does not impact a person's credit rating, but it does impact their likely success in getting a mortgage. I have sat there and looked at my monthly outgoings and ingoings, and clearly, if a certain amount is going out over a long period, that does not make it any easier to get a mortgage.

There are two slightly separate issues here. There is the question whether, in the medium to long term, tuition fees should be decreased, but there is also the impact of the pandemic and the question whether or not there should be a partial or full reduction for young people who have been impacted by the pandemic over the last 22 months. It is important that we bear in mind how young people and their mental health have been impacted.

We know that university is not just about the academic side of things. It is also about the social side of things. For many young people, the experience of going to university is transformative in terms of their outlook, personal development and access to university societies and everything else. I was fortunate when I went to university. The first year enabled me to get used to living in a large city, away from my family. Of course, the first year is when students make friends, and they are often the people they live with in their second and third years. I feel great sympathy for young people who have had that opportunity taken away from them.

I have also on occasion been quite critical of some universities, lecturers and university unions that in my view have not always done everything they can to get back to proper, in-person teaching. My understanding is that, at the start of this term, only four out of the top 27 universities had actually gone back fully to in-person teaching. I question whether that is appropriate, and I also question whether now is the time to be talking about strikes, when university students have already had their education impacted so much. I appreciate that often it is a hybrid approach, whereby seminars and tuition are done in person while lectures are done online, but I also talk to many university students who would really appreciate in-person lectures because the virtual ones are no substitute for accessing lectures given by experienced academics. It is not quite the same level of tuition as they were getting before the pandemic. In fact, a *Times* survey of students who started university before the pandemic showed that 60% thought that their education had been either severely or moderately impacted during the pandemic. I think that many students share that view. I understand that some universities have made arrangements for partial reductions, but I am not sure how significant that is and, of course, the majority of universities have not done that.

[Tom Hunt]

I have some concerns about whether decreasing tuition fees from £9,250 to £3,000 would be the right thing to do in the long term. As I said earlier in my speech, 75% end up not paying back their debts in full. Currently the Government lend £17 billion in loans. In March 2021, I believe that the outstanding amount was £141 billion, which is a significant amount of money. If we decrease the £9,250 to £3,000, who would fund that? Would it be the taxpayer? Ultimately, I think that is what we would be looking at: more taxpayer subsidy for university education.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Interim results of a Muslim Census survey show that almost 10,000 Muslim students are foregoing university or are being forced to self-pay. In 2013, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, committed to looking into options for alternative student finance for those who want to access higher education but not pay interest. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is high time that the Government pick up that work from 2013 and look at and present the options for the many students affected across the country?

Tom Hunt: I do think it is important that the Government look at access to university education and ways of making it more affordable, but I also believe that the taxpayer is a key stakeholder. I will come on to that very shortly. There is a fundamental question whether we think it is the right thing for 50% of people to go to university. That was the aspiration of the last Labour Government and I am glad that the current Government abandoned that 50% target. I do not think that that was the right thing to do. Many of those 50% going to university will benefit from it, get skills and qualifications, and make a very positive contribution. However, the reality is that, because the education system has not in the past created multiple pathways for young people, including technical education or an apprenticeship, young people kind of meander aimlessly into university, under pressure from their school and their parents, when university is perhaps not right for them. There is no God-given right to go to university for three years, perhaps to study a course that is not of great benefit to the country, so I question whether that is the right approach.

It is critical for levelling up that we invest in apprenticeships and skills. For those growing up, there should be an academic pathway, and those convinced that that is the route for them should be encouraged to go down that route, but people should not end up in university simply because there is no alternative, which often happens. If we are arguing for greater taxpayer subsidy of university education, surely it is reasonable for the taxpayer and the Government to have a far greater say in who goes to university, what they study and how that benefits UK plc, because at the moment there is not always a sense that that is the case.

I think there is great sympathy from all Members for what university students have had to go through over the last 22 months, and there is a reasonable case for their not having to pay full tuition fees for what has been a disrupted educational experience, with almost none of the same advantages, in terms of societies and socialisation. However, in the long term, the Government are right to focus on the further education White Paper

and on getting rid of the 50% target, and realising that it is not all about university. It is not unreasonable to consider the taxpayer. Often, those on reasonably low incomes, who work hard, actually subsidise the university education of people from more privileged backgrounds, who may or may not be undertaking a course that is beneficial to UK plc. That is not reasonable.

I do not support the petition with the higher education system as it is currently is. If we had a much smaller pool of university students, perhaps we could consider it at that time, but I do not believe that it is in the taxpayers' interest to back this petition.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): We will come to the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 5.30 pm. Given the number of Back-Bench Members here, I will not set a time limit.

4.42 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. The petition calls for debates between MPs and university students, as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) highlighted, on reducing university fees to £3,000 a year. Considering that more than 1,800 of my constituents called for this, we might struggle to facilitate that particular demand in Slough—which, by the way, is the youth capital of Britain: the town or city with the lowest average age.

The petition points to a particular issue with higher education today: that students—our constituents—do not feel listened to. For years, the Government and universities have skyrocketed fees at will, without listening to students, robbing them of a voice on a matter that will impact them for the rest of their lives. They simply do not feel heard. I will focus my speech on ensuring that their voices are at the forefront, and I encourage the Minister and her Department to listen carefully to that voice.

When fees were introduced in 1998, they stood at £1,000, but they have now risen to an eye-watering £9,250, with university fees last at £3,000 in 2005. The Government anticipated that their grand plan to triple fees in 2012 would create a market in fees, but in reality almost all universities began charging the maximum amount, in part due to Government-backed loans and a lack of incentive to offer anything lower. Early fears of a reduction in applications were allayed; but, nearly a decade after these new fees were introduced, it is quite clear that they have created another crisis—for recent graduates. Unsurprisingly, students' expectations of what a university course provides during their studies and once they graduate have risen alongside their fees. If we consider that the decision to go to university, often taken at 17, is one that will have a financial impact for decades to come, I do not blame them.

The perceived benefits seem to be waning. One third of working-age graduates are not in high-skilled employment. Almost half of parents would prefer their child to take up a vocational qualification ahead of university. In 2020, for the second consecutive year, the rate of graduate employment fell—a problem that has been compounded for graduates entering an extremely difficult job market over the past two years.

Many of the conversations around fees were reignited by the pandemic, as students questioned the value for money of online classes. Between September and December 2020,

half of students reported that moving fully to online learning would have a negative impact on their academic experience, and one third have indicated that their courses are, and were, poor or very poor value for money. Astronomical fees and subsequent debts have forced students to evaluate whether a graduation gift of an average debt of £45,900 is worth it. That is without considering the cost pressures of accommodation; those who for religious reasons are unable to take an interest loan, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) has just noted; and the mental health pressures of university studies. After all that, the Government's own calculations indicate that only 25% of current full-time undergraduates expect to pay off their debt in full.

On the set thresholds and time limits on debt repayments, I am sure the Minister will say how everyone is treated equally under the system, but I am afraid that is simply not true. Not only have the Government already moved the goalposts on repayment agreements, but they are set to do it again. In fact, most recent reports indicate that Ministers plan on reducing the salary threshold for loan repayments to below £25,000. That, alongside a rise in national insurance, is an unforgivable squeeze on lower and middle earners, while leaving wealthier students largely unaffected. It is no wonder that current students and graduates are concerned about the impact that their studies will have on their future. Will the Minister guarantee that students will be listened to and their concerns about loans, repayments and debt taken seriously? Education has the potential to change people's lives and provide a better future. It should not limit people's prospects before their adult lives have even begun.

4.48 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

I know from speaking to students that many face extreme financial hardship as a result of the covid-19 crisis. In fact, the National Union of Students criticised the Government for ignoring the needs of students throughout the pandemic, but this goes back further, because successive Conservative Governments have failed our young people, who have been disproportionately hit by austerity. Under the Tories, young people have struggled, even when they are in work, to get a decent start in their adult lives. The Tories have run down our aspirations and standards and shattered our local communities, so that people increasingly believe that young people's lives will be worse than their own generation's.

This is not just about education maintenance cuts, enormous hikes in tuition fees and the burden of soaring debts. The whole current university system compounds inequality. In particular, a 2017 report found that students from poorer backgrounds are deterred from applying to university due to the fear of student loan debt. Meanwhile, in recent decades universities have been treated as private businesses, left at the mercy of market forces while top salaries soar, so it is no coincidence that the University and College Union is currently balloting staff at over 150 universities across the UK on cuts to pensions, pay and the attack on working conditions. As Jo Grady, the UCU general secretary, said:

"If the government pushes through regressive student loan changes,"

it would be

"a tax on education and aspiration."

Any move to lower the salary threshold at which students repay their loans would be regressive and would further risk less-privileged students being put off entering higher education. At a time when the economy is crying out for a skilled and educated workforce, it makes no sense for the Government to deny young people access to the education that they need.

I agree that tuition fees of £9,250 a year are just too high—I oppose tuition fees altogether. The lesson from the Government's tuition fee fiasco is simple: use progressive taxation, by taxing wealthy working adults, to invest properly in public universities. That way, every student can access free higher education. We all benefit from an educated society. Education fosters and nurtures people's talents, and overcomes injustice and inequalities.

Tom Hunt: Does the hon. Member agree that sometimes young people have ended up in university when they could have been better off doing an apprenticeship or engaging in technical education?

Apsana Begum: I agree that a number of different options should be, and are, available for students across the country, but a significant number of young people who would like to go into higher education do not feel that that option is open to them.

Education fosters and nurtures people's talents, overcomes injustice and inequalities, and helps us to understand each other and form social connections. I am proud that Labour's 2017 and 2019 manifestoes committed to ending the failed obsession with the free market in higher education, to abolishing tuition fees, and to bringing back maintenance grants at the required level. Education must be a universal right, not a costly privilege. A thriving higher education sector is critical to our economy, our culture and, ultimately, our future.

4.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey.

Governments invest in what they value. I am so grateful to the 2,474 people in York who signed the petition, and in particular to the University of York and York St John University, which worked so hard throughout the pandemic to ensure that students were well supported and cared for, and that their financial needs were met.

We have to face facts: we are experiencing a crisis in higher education funding right now. Although the UCU is right to highlight particular concerns about staffing and the fact that staff are consistently being given casualised contracts—which does not represent good investment in a quality university workforce—we also have to acknowledge that pay for our academic and support staff has fallen by 20% over the last decade, pensions have been cut, and inequalities relating to gender and disabilities, and for black, Asian and minority ethnic staff, have grown.

The current higher education funding system is so broken that we have to find a different way of looking at it, and that comes down to the fundamental principle of where we invest for the future of our economy. If we value higher education—as we should—we should invest

[*Rachael Maskell*]

in it and in the students who want to obtain qualifications and contribute to and progress our economy, so that we can be world leaders not just economically but in research and in the other things of which we have been so proud in decades past.

The pandemic has been the most challenging time not only for academic staff, who had to learn overnight how to deliver courses online, but for students, who have been paying for tuition that they have perhaps never received and for practical experiences that they might never have. I have certainly spoken to many students in York, including archaeology students who were unable to go on digs and science students who were unable to get into the labs. They feel that they have missed out on major parts of their education and are therefore bitter about the fact that they have had to pay for an education that they have not received and that there is nothing on the horizon. I have said previously in this House that the Government should introduce a degree-plus programme whereby after graduating people can continue to access their university by way of catch-up—whether through seminars or through practical experiences—to give them the opportunity to catch up on the valuable education that they have missed.

We have heard about the societies and social activities in which students engage to formulate that holistic perspective on life, which is so valuable in our education system. I thank our student unions, which have made a massive contribution during the last 18 months. In York they have been leading on the support that students needed, putting in place facilities for them to continue their education and get vital wellbeing support, which I know so many people have valued. However, there is a bitter taste in their mouth. They have written to me to say that they want to be included not only in the debates about their future and their contribution to their courses, but in discussions about student financing.

Many students will not pay off their debts, although I know that the Government are tempted to lower the repayment threshold to an earlier point in their career after graduating. Many people who have degrees are very low earners, particularly if they work in the voluntary sector or in public services, whereas many who go straight from school to an apprenticeship or into employment can be incredibly high earners. Personally, I do not support a graduate tax as an alternative to university tuition fees. I believe that we should be investing in the education of young people and, indeed, mature students, and paying for it through our general taxation system. It is a simple formula and principle: the more someone earns, the more they pay and the more they invest in other people's future. It is fair and proportionate and, I believe, very much the way forward. I would welcome the Government looking again at the whole issue of student finances and removing the penalty that students have to pay for their education, when it should be an investment in the future.

Students have also had to pay for homes they have not lived in over the last year, and lockdown also impeded their opportunity to work. They have faced the jeopardy of having to pay fees and other costs, which has had a terrific impact on students' financial and personal wellbeing. That must be recognised. We know that young people today have more significant challenges

concerning their wellbeing and mental health, and the fees just add to that. When people reach the loan repayment threshold, it is often at a time when they are starting to think about future housing or starting a family. The barrier of having to start paying back student loans pushes those opportunities even further away, and I know that, right now, young people feel that those opportunities are running away from them.

If we train someone to be a soldier, we as a state are proud to invest in that person, who will learn the necessary skills and then work in that field. Yet when we train nurses, they have to pay for that privilege, even though during the pandemic they contributed by finishing their degrees early and working in our hospitals. They had to pay for that education. The same goes for doctors and allied health professionals; they have given so much during the pandemic. My local student body reminded me today not only that students have been asking for financial support, but that they have heard the news that on graduating they will have to make national insurance contributions as well. Therefore, instead of receiving support they will have to pay out even more.

We have to recognise the barriers that fees represent. They are a barrier not just to people with lower socioeconomic wealth, as my hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) have described. They are also a barrier to mature students, who are very much welcome in the health professions and other spheres. When people have gained experience of life, they then have to decide whether they can give up work in order to study. If the barrier of tuition fees is taken away, we could address the workforce challenges faced by the health sector and many other fields. Our economy is desperate for engineers, teachers and scientists, and for investment in infrastructure and the future of our country. The economy is struggling and we do not have the skills base that we desperately need. As we can see so readily, that is having an impact on our productivity. The barrier of tuition fees is yet another factor deterring us from being the successful country that we long to be.

As we look at wider Europe and, as always, to Germany, we see that, while students may pay a small administration fee at the start of each semester—€150 to €200—their education is free, and yet it has the strongest economy, a growing economy, an economy that we envy so much. If we are to learn from good practice elsewhere in the world, it is important that we look at investing in the right places. Nothing could be more valuable than investing in education, in science and research, and in opportunities for our future.

As we approach the economic events of the year—the Budget and the comprehensive spending review—there is a real opportunity to look at how higher education is valued by the Government, and the investments they want to make in it. Higher education leads into areas such as high-quality research, which has been so hampered over the last year. It is therefore important to get right not just the tuition side, but the research formulas for the future. In exiting the EU, we have lost many opportunities; we want to see those opportunities return so that we can be that place of excellence. That is what draws students from across the world to study here in the UK.

We must recognise the real cost of covid to students and to universities. Universities are constantly trying to balance the books. York has certainly invested in students during this pandemic, and it is now looking to the Government for investment. We know that tuition fees represent a broken system that creates barriers. It is therefore important to take a deep breath, look again and ensure that we have a funding system from Government for our higher education sector, no longer placing that burden on our students, who deserve so much more.

5.2 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I pay tribute to the petitioners, who have done so well in bringing this petition to the House for debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for leading it off.

I want to start by saying that in Scotland, of course, education remains free. That makes a massive difference when looking at graduate debt because the average debt on graduation in Scotland is around £12,000, compared with anything between £43,000 and £50,000 in England, depending on where the data comes from.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) asked an important question: what is education about? Is it for personal benefit or for the common good? That is ultimately what the debate should be concentrating on. In schools, we educate children not just for their own benefit but for societal benefit. Are we simply providing young people who embark on tertiary education—who will go on to contribute economically and societally to our nations—with a service for which they should pay, or is it about more than that? As legislators, we need to be clear.

Post Brexit, the UK's economic success will rely on a well-educated population. We know that there are skills shortages in many areas, including science, engineering and healthcare, to name but a few. But it is not just at graduate level. It is also at technician level and at apprenticeship level—it is at many different levels. Therefore I do not think we do young people a great service—this has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members—by encouraging as many of them as possible into higher education when it might not be the best pathway for them.

I have mentioned already that in England the typical graduate will start with a debt of anything between £43,000 and £50,000—depending on what source is used—because of tuition fees and, of course, the student loans that they take out. For some, that will be impossible to repay, as has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Ipswich. That was also recognised by the Office for National Statistics, which said that student maintenance loans should be treated as a deficit in the Government's accounts. That ONS announcement ended the fiscal illusion that kept student debt off the Government's books. We already know that England has the highest tuition fees in the industrialised world, and the ONS has confirmed what many of us have been saying for a long time—this is not saving public money in the long run.

The Government remind us regularly of how economically astute they are, but we can see that, with student loans to pay for high levels of tuition fees, they are simply shifting fiscal responsibilities on to a Government

30 years in the future. But the real issue for our young people is that the short-term fiscal gains for this Government are won off the back of our young people. Continuing to charge fees of more than £9,000 a year in England is morally wrong. And we know that three quarters of student loans will be written off eventually. The Government need to start looking to Scotland's lead and slash student fees or, better still, abolish them completely. Of course, with the student loans come spiralling interest rates. That has to be taken seriously as well. We have to look at what, realistically, we are asking young people to pay back.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) highlighted the difficulties for his young people—they make his the youngest constituency in the UK—in the graduate job market. Many of us and many young people will be asking, “Is the debt really worth it for graduate jobs that might be paying £18,000 or £19,000 a year?”

Often, we talk about apprenticeships and college places. The problem is that there is still not parity of esteem. We hear Ministers advocating college and apprenticeships for young people, but I wonder how many of them are advocating that for their own children, because many parents continue to see apprenticeships as second best. We need to change that; we need to look at countries such as Germany in that regard. When Ministers and parents all consider that university is the gold standard of post-school education, it is no surprise that young people see their place at university as a measure of success, but are we really doing young people any favours by providing unlimited access to courses that may not lead to great employment and will almost certainly lead to debt? In Germany, technical education is considered to be of equal value; for youngsters and their parents, there is no stigma about skills-based courses. That is what we need to get to.

Last week in the Select Committee on Science and Technology, in a session looking at science funding, the Nobel laureate Sir Paul Nurse said that

“we have rushed too much to send everybody to universities”.

We need to think carefully about how we change that.

Often in these debates, hon. Members cite the number of young people going to university as the measure of success, but the metric that we should be using is the number of young people going on to positive destinations. We in Scotland are leading the UK, with 93% of our young people in training, education or employment. The hon. Member for Ipswich mentioned different pathways for our young people, and we need to look at that more.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) talked about encouraging those from disadvantaged backgrounds and how we can support them to enter the job market. There are lots of things we can do, but we should make university attainable for them by restoring the tradition of free higher education, as we have done in Scotland. We have done more than that: we have maintained education maintenance allowance for those in schools or further education, and bursaries for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. This package works: Scottish 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are 67% more likely to apply to higher education institutions than they were 15 years ago. As others have said, Scottish students graduate with the lowest debt in the UK. We firmly believe that access to university should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

[Carol Monaghan]

We have a problem if we only educate graduates, because we need a full range of different skills. I quite often use the term “tertiary education” because the lines between further and higher education are far more blurred in Scotland, with many other further education colleges delivering degree courses. We also have movement between further education and higher education. For example, a youngster might do part of their training at an FE institution and then enter a third-year university course. We need to look at how we allow access to such courses.

Paying for education is a duty not only of Government, but of business and society, including the taxpayer. We need to ensure that we have a well educated population that can provide economic growth in different businesses and sectors. We have a duty to fund the education of our young people—whether that be further education, apprenticeship education, or higher education—to benefit society and fuel that growth.

The hon. Member for York Central mentioned the Budget and the spending review. That is important because when we are looking at university funding, budgets count and science funding counts, and this Government have pledged £22 billion for research funding. We want to see some movement on that over the next few weeks. It would be good to see a strong statement in the Budget on that funding. We also need clarity on participation in Horizon Europe, which we still do not have. Until we get this sorted, we are putting our research sector at a disadvantage.

Finally, I congratulate the petitioners on bringing the debate to the House. I know it is difficult just now, because we are living with covid, but in the coming few years, it would be good to see some university students observing these debates.

5.13 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Welcome to the Chair, Ms McVey, and congratulations on your elevation.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, and the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for presenting it. I listened to him with interest. He is right when he talks about the very interrupted last 18 months that students have endured and the great challenges they have faced. Many Members across the Chamber highlighted the deep frustration among students in this country, which is quite understandable, and perhaps their rising anger about what they have been through. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said when voicing concern about graduate employment, this is a really difficult time for many young people as they emerge from what should have been an amazingly formative part of their lives, only to find their prospects so reduced, despite the difficulty they have faced and the financial commitment they have made. That is the difficulty that some of us were in 30-odd or 40 years ago, emerging from university in the early '80s when things were so difficult.

My hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) also spoke about the issues facing students in the past 18 months. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse specifically spoke about disadvantaged students

and cited the survey about Muslim students and the difficulty they face in financing their higher education. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central talked about how we should fund this in the future and about progressive taxation. Back in my day, that is how a university education was funded. I do not think any of us back in those days saw education as transactional; it was not individualised in the way that it is today. We have to disconnect the current view of education—that it is all about the individual—and make it about what the individual can gain from it, how they can realise their potential and how that potential can benefit not only them but those around them: society, their communities and others. That is what higher education should do.

I accept that higher education should not be for all, but it should be an aspiration and an opportunity for those who have the ability to benefit from it, with society benefiting in turn. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) mentioned how higher education is viewed in Germany, which has a population 60% larger than the UK's and where a great many go on to higher education, with nominal admission fees, because there education is seen as being for the greater good.

We also have to bear in mind that higher education is part of our global reputation. We should celebrate and build upon it, rather than seek to reduce it. I say that not only for the institutions themselves. With such a great resource on our doorstep, why would we not use it? We do not want only international students to come to the UK; we want all those in the UK who have the ability to benefit from it.

Almost 600,000 students across the country signing the petition is significant. I have to say to those students who did not sign the petition, why not? They should think about it next time. It is a really important demonstration of the frustration and of the demand for change. The last 18 months have instilled a culture of precarity, uncertainty and instability among students. They have been some of the toughest months that any student in any generation has faced.

I remember what was going on in my community during the Government's mismanagement of the return to campus in September 2020, when we did not have testing facilities available in towns and cities across the country. The great migration was not anticipated. The uncertainty created by poor guidance affected not just students, but teachers and lecturers. Sadly, this led to regrettable scenes of students being locked up in student accommodation. Demands from the student body were woefully neglected in the road map out of the January lockdown, and we saw unjustified intervention by Ministers in what I regard as campus matters. Among student cohorts and the sector, there is an indelible impression that the Government have failed to support them.

Given that education is devolved and we have heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, we do not have to look far to see how supportive and hands-on the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Governments have been. No wonder the tenor of students has risen; it is more than understandable why such a large proportion of the student body want fees to be cut to the level that was introduced in 2006.

Although I empathise with these calls, I want us go further. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said, higher education should be about people's ability

to learn, not their ability to pay. In my opinion, reducing the maximum rate of student fees merely tinkers with the fees' structure without offering root-and-branch reform. The trebling of student fees by successive Conservative Governments, including when in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, established a funding model that has contributed to the marketisation of the higher education sector, whilst at the same time increasing the casualisation of the workforce and risking the student experience. The fee system in its current guise is holding young people back—we have heard about a great many of them in Slough—and at the same time failing to provide the stable funding that our universities need. It is not even delivering what was promised for the taxpayer.

To those who say that reducing the maximum student loan rate is preferable to not reducing it, I reply that I am not prepared to advocate for a partially effective solution. On the basis of independent analysis by bodies such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a policy of reducing fees to £3,000 would have disproportionate impacts on different sections of society. For example, the IFS's student finance calculator reveals that if a cap of £3,000 is put in place, the top 10% of earners would see their repayments fall by around 40%, while lower earning graduates would see little or no change. Looking at this policy from a gender perspective, we see that for men repayments would reduce by an average of 30%, compared to a reduction of just 20% for women. I am sure you are also outraged by that, Ms McVey. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse that this disproportionately impacts Muslim students. Although the maximum cap on tuition fees is not an inherently sexist or classist policy, in reality it affects many and it has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities in our society. That is not something that I am prepared to put up with.

I am also not prepared to put up with a fee structure that aggravates precarious student living, does nothing to alleviate the mental health concerns of thousands of students, and alienates working-class young people from advancing to higher education. Faced with fees of £9,250 a year, how could anyone expect a working-class student on free school meals to be instilled with the confidence to go to university? The figures bear this out: last week, the Department for Education's own figures demonstrated that the gap in progression rates between pupils who receive free school meals and those who do not has increased to 19.1%, up 0.3% since last year and the largest gap since 2005-2006. Again, although the policy of student fees is not necessarily a causal factor in this damning record, it certainly is a correlative factor. I repeat that the gap is the largest since the introduction of tuition fees in 2006.

The effects of the current fees system have also decimated the part-time study model so often relied on by working parents and mature students. Since 2008 the number of part-time entrants has plummeted by 50%.

Tom Hunt: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) that the key thing for those low-income young people should be educational outcomes, and not necessarily whether or not more of them are going to university?

Matt Western: The current vogue term is outcomes. I often ask, "What was the key outcome of Keith Richards going to art school?" I do not think he actually finished

the course, so it was not a terrific outcome. Outcomes can be measured in all sorts of ways, but my fear is that the Government—I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman supports them—are looking to monetise that and equate it with some sort of financial value for what is being produced. However, as we have heard, we cannot equate that with a monetary figure. I know of many people who were on super-low incomes in their first couple of years post-university but who turned out to be fine entrepreneurs and set up their own businesses. How would we measure that?

Carol Monaghan: I like the word outcomes; I think it is a good way of describing the position we get to. However, I do not distinguish between those from a disadvantaged background and those from a more privileged or affluent background. We will have parity of esteem when the same number of youngsters from different backgrounds are going to the same types of places—so, whatever percentage going to university from that lot, and whatever percentage going to college from this lot. The problem is that those from a more affluent background are more likely to go to university, even though it might not be the most appropriate place for them.

Matt Western: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Going to university is seen as a rite of passage for quite a few people. It is seen as the obvious next stage of their education. That is fine, to an extent, but what we as a society should be doing is giving encouragement and opportunity to the many who do not aspire to or imagine that they could go to university. I felt that myself back in the day, wondering what was and was not possible for me. I never imagined that that was something I could consider. I am sure that a lot of young people must feel that too, and we have to change that. Other societies do, as we have heard.

We should be much more ambitious about the sort of education system we want. I look at nations such as South Korea, that have a higher proportion going into higher education than the UK. I believe that we can achieve that by changing how we approach our schooling and how we give that opportunity to students, both through civic universities and through programmes such as Uni Connect, which sadly has had its budget cut by a third, but which was doing a terrific job in reaching those hard-to-reach young people who did not think that university was necessarily for them. Those sorts of programmes, along with foundation courses and foundation years, could do so much to help students coming through further education and realising that, maybe, the next step should be higher education. We need to invest more in those sorts of things.

While I understand the many concerns of the thousands of students up and down the country, and sympathise with their calls for a higher education system that is suitably funded while delivering on students' expectations, I believe that the answer lies in a multi-step approach. First, as I have alluded to, I am committed to abolishing the fee regime in its current guise. That means that debates regarding repayment rates, characterised by Martin Lewis as regressive and a "breach of natural justice", would be consigned to history. Graduates would no longer be burdened with as much as £57,000 in graduate debt and would start their working lives free from the stress and financial pressures of repayment.

[*Matt Western*]

We have only to look at what is happening on campuses across the country and the immense mental health pressures faced by so many young people, due not only to the pandemic, but to the issue of graduate employment opportunity and having that debt hanging over them. Those of us who have ever been in serious debt at any stage of our lives know that it is an awful place to be. Those of us who have ever been in serious debt at any stage of our lives know that it is an awful place to be. The hon. Member for Ipswich described the prospect of having the debt hanging over him and the difficulty it posed when getting a mortgage or other loans. It can make life incredibly difficult, so it is far easier not to consider it. The Government need to rethink their approach to the availability of maintenance grants. That might finally tilt the balance in favour of the thousands of working-class men and women on free school meals, who have been denied the belief that they can progress to higher education due to a burdensome funding model.

I want a culture change to complement a fee system change, such as adequate student mental health provision and funding, and tackling those rogue student landlords in private student accommodation who give the sector a bad name. There is much to address to improve the lives of our students. I want more teachers and lecturers on full-time secure employment contracts, to reverse the drift towards casualisation that we have witnessed in the past decade.

Following the events of the past 18 months, it is critical that the Government work collaboratively with the sector to address the many issues it faces. Through the co-operation of the National Union of Students, individual student unions, the University and College Union and the institutions themselves, so much positive work has been done on our campuses to get through the worst difficulties of the pandemic. We have seen some interesting initiatives, such as the Welsh Government's support for institutions to improve ventilation in lecture theatres. Those sorts of ways that the Government can help have the effect of shoring up the entire student experience.

I believe the petition is a great call for change. While replacing the student funding model will naturally bring about an improvement in the student experience, it can be fully revolutionised only through a plethora of other initiatives that directly seek to ease the burdens on students. If any generation deserved to have their call for change heard, it is this generation. No wonder almost 600,000 students signed the petition. I add my congratulations to the petitioners on achieving this debate, and I thank the House authorities for allowing it to proceed. I look forward to working with the sector, the students and all stakeholders in the coming months, to address some of the cries for change. I very much see this debate as the first step in that process.

5.32 pm

The Minister for Further and Higher Education (Michelle Donelan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for opening the debate, which I am very pleased to participate in. The petition, as we have heard, considers a wide range of topics, from tuition fee levels, representation of students in Parliament and accommodation costs to the impact of covid-19 on the prospects of future graduate careers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich passionately spoke about the importance of the Government's skills agenda and investment in alternative and vocational options, as well as higher education, which I will come back to. It has been a privilege to work so closely with the higher education sector; it has enabled me to see at first hand the extraordinary way in which students have dealt with the challenges they have faced over the last 20 months. Many Members spoke about those challenges, from the restrictions placed on face-to-face teaching to being in lockdown away from family. All that is on top of students' fears and concerns for their own health and that of their family and friends, which will be familiar to us all.

I want to put on the record that the resilience that students displayed has been nothing short of extraordinary. Being their voice in Government during this difficult time has been a privilege. I want to sincerely thank staff across the higher education sector, who have faced unprecedented challenges and have shown that they are resilient, resourceful and innovative while maintaining the delivery of teaching and learning at the quality expected by the Government and the Office for Students. I have visited numerous universities and have spoken with many staff over the past 20 months, and I have heard incredible stories of how staff worked to move content online and adapt their teaching almost overnight. To staff and students, I say a heartfelt thank you.

However, I am not here just to thank the sector. Members will be aware that I pledged at the very start of the pandemic to prioritise getting students the support that they need, and students and staff have been given unprecedented financial support as a result. I thank all Members who supported those important interventions. We made an additional £85 million of student hardship funding available for higher education providers to distribute to students in the academic year 2020-21, in addition to the sizeable £256 million of student premium funding already available for providers to draw on to support students experiencing hardship, or to provide mental health support. We also worked with the Office for Students to create a new mental health support platform with £3 million of funding.

Last week, I announced that the maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by a forecasted inflation of 2.3% for loans issued in the 2022-23 academic year. The same increase will apply to the maximum disabled students' allowance, to the grants for students with child and adult dependants who are also attending full-time undergraduate courses, and to the non-means-tested loans that the Government provide for students undertaking masters and doctoral degree courses. Such statistics are easy to overlook when they are fired off in debates, but those with students in their constituencies, as we all have, will know the very human and personal stories that make those financial interventions so important.

The first point raised in the petition is the important and complex issue that we have heard about regarding the rate of tuition fees. The petition asks for the maximum cap to be reduced drastically from £9,250 to £3,000. I understand the importance of, and the motivation behind, that view. Like those supporting the petition, the Government want a fair system that offers value for money; is sustainable; and provides enough funding to support high-quality teaching that leads to good outcomes,

meets the skills needs of our country and maintains the world-class reputation of our higher education providers. Tuition fee levels play an important part in all those goals, but when we boil it down we cannot get around the fact that tuition fees must be at a sufficient level to achieve those aims. That leads me to the most obvious point: the funding implications of reducing tuition fees by so much.

Higher education providers in England gain, on average, approximately half their income from student fees. Therefore, reducing fees by more than two thirds to £3,000 for domestic students would create an estimated funding loss of a staggering £6.5 billion per year. Total funding for university courses would cover less than 40% of their cost of delivery in that scenario. Positive motivations aside, the consequences would therefore be disastrous for the higher education sector. We would force many providers out of the market overnight, and remaining courses would not have the funds required to deliver the high-quality tuition and experience that students deserve.

The only other option would be to force the taxpayer to pay the difference. To me, that prospect seems incredibly unfair, given that graduates will go on to earn, on average, £100,000 to £130,000 extra during their working lives than non-graduates—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich made. That brings me to my next concern: many of those who would benefit would be the higher earners, and it is likely to make university harder to access and to excel at for the lowest earners. Rarely do I agree with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), but I do on that point.

Our student loans system, on which the vast majority of students rely, is rightly based on the principle that those who gain the most will make the greatest contribution. That is why the size of an individual graduate's loan repayments depends on their earnings—if they earn a lot, they pay more; if they earn less, they pay less. In many cases, people do not finish paying off the debt. A reduction in the amount that graduates need to pay back through a tuition fee cut would therefore benefit higher earners by thousands of pounds, while lower earners would see little to no change on their repayments. In fact, the very lowest earners would see no financial benefit from this at all.

Worse still, those thousands of pounds, now in the pockets of already high earners, would have come at the expense of universities, who would no longer be able to give such generous financial support and bursaries to students. People who know me well will know that I fought tooth and nail for better access and support for disadvantaged students, so the idea that we would do anything that would take away from their ability to go to university if they desire to do so is completely contrary to my views and those of the Government.

I also remind the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) that, actually, we have record numbers of disadvantaged students who have gone to university this year, and we had record numbers of disadvantaged students going to university last year. In fact, a disadvantaged student in 2020 was 80% more likely to go to university than they were 10 years ago. That staggering statistic shows that the impact of tuition fees is certainly not the one being painted by Opposition Members.

As I mentioned, I think we all have very similar motivations for being here today. My focus, when looking ahead, is on how we can get the best value for students and support the most disadvantaged while maintaining the highest quality and standards that we are internationally renowned for. Although a cut in tuition fees would not help, it is also clear that raising fees would be equally wrong, so last week I was pleased to confirm that tuition fees will be frozen for the fifth year in a row. Compared with a situation where tuition fees had risen in line with inflation each year, that freeze means that a student on a three-year degree course has saved over £3,400—a real-terms reduction that I am sure supporters of the petition would welcome.

Carol Monaghan: May I ask the Minister when we are likely to see the recommendations of the Augar review implemented, including significantly reducing the student fees that are being paid?

Michelle Donelan: We are considering the remaining recommendations made by the independent panel chaired by Philip Augar, including on fees, funding and student finance, and we plan to set out our full conclusion on that shortly. I urge colleagues not to refer constantly to media speculation, because we have not yet made an announcement, but it will be coming shortly.

Following on from that, as part of our consideration of the recommendations made by Augar, I and my ministerial colleagues are still in the process of building a post-18 education system that massively improves the value and quality of learning and equips learners with the skills they need to get those high-wage, high-skills job opportunities. The way we drive up quality in our higher education system is not by diverting money from universities to high earners, but by investing in a system that focuses on high-value skills. That is the way to promote genuine social mobility. We have already delivered on several of the recommendations made by Augar in our first response to that, including investment in the further education estate, increasing funding to 16 to 19-year-olds, a commitment to introduce a lifelong earning entitlement and the Prime Minister's lifetime skills guarantee.

Matt Western: This is not a difficult question, but I want to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). When the response to the Augar review is made—I think it is now two years, or two and a half years; I have lost track—will the Minister commit today to making that in the Chamber to us and not through the media?

Michelle Donelan: I look forward to when we announce our response to Augar shortly, and I am confident that there will be several opportunities for hon. Members to question either me or the Secretary of State for Education in the Chamber. I will pledge to ensure that that happens.

Moving on to the next element of the petition, I am very pleased to see the issue of student representation raised here today and I agree with the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on just how important that and listening to students really is. I know that Members present here today are no doubt excellent campaigners. I am sure we would all agree that no one holds us and higher education providers to account on these issues better than students. The view that has driven our work—from the National Union of Students, the Office for

[Michelle Donelan]

Students, Universities UK and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education—is to ensure that students know their rights with regard to higher education and can feel confident in exercising them.

For those less familiar with this, I recommend the excellent work done by the Office for Students' student panel, which I have met several times since I have been in post. I am meeting it again next week. Over the past two years, the panel has made some really important points, pushing me and other Ministers, and it has certainly been a positive influence in the Office for Students. I am passionate about giving students more of a voice and more direct influence over student life than ever before, so seeing the panel directly inform the policies and decision making of the Office for Students is really inspiring. I know that the panel has played a fundamental role in informing the early development of the Office for Students' next strategy—on which it will be shortly consulting—in shaping its statement of expectation on harassment and sexual misconduct, and in informing how student hardship funds can best be utilised.

I remind hon. Members that there is a process in place for students who feel that they have not had the expected quality or quantity of lessons, and they can complain to their university. If they are still not satisfied, they can go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which is helping students to reclaim thousands of pounds where the quality of learning has fallen below standards. In fact, the OIA has already made recommendations for financial compensation totalling £450,000—again, showing just how important it is that the student voice is not only heard, but listened to and acted on. I encourage any student with a particular issue or concern to speak up and engage with the process.

The petition also raises the important issue of accommodation costs for students, which was raised by hon. Members. Again, it is an important factor in our mission to achieve genuine social mobility in the wake of covid. Higher education providers and private accommodation providers are of course autonomous and responsible for setting their rent agreements, but that should not stop the Government being there to advocate for and, where necessary, directly support students, which is why I ensured that providers were able to use the additional £85 million of student hardship funding to support students who were struggling with accommodation costs last year. I have also worked hard to ensure that providers' rental policies have students' best interests at heart, and that providers are listening to those interests that are being advocated strongly. If students have concerns about any issues relating to university-provided accommodation, they can of course complain to their university and then go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Matt Western: On accommodation costs, the Minister will be aware that there are many campuses across the country where there is no accommodation owned by the university itself—it is all in private hands. Will she provide the data that show the rate of increase in cost and how that has tracked over the past five years, relative to inflation? My understanding is that it is exceeding inflation.

Michelle Donelan: I will take that away and write to the hon. Member with the specific data that he has requested.

I will bring my speech to a close by picking up on the final point raised in the petition, which is particularly dear to my heart as a result of speaking to many hundreds of students about the uncertainty of their future careers. We have talked a lot today about universities, but job security and our economy also depend on the skills revolution going on in the whole of the further and higher education system. Apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications and T-levels are just some of the skills-focused offerings that will allow thousands of people to gain the skills and experience that they need to secure a high-wage, high-skilled job in future. New skills really are the fuel of social mobility, and universities are just one way to acquire those skills. I am proud to advocate for limitless ambition in what we can achieve through higher education, and I will continue to work to give students the best chance to succeed in the post-covid world.

5.48 pm

Tom Hunt: I thank the Minister for her very detailed response to the debate, and I also thank the shadow Minister, the spokesperson for the Scottish National party and the other Back Benchers present. I feel confident that this issue has been debated thoroughly and that many different views have been shared. Clearly, this is a huge issue, and we await the Government's response to the matter.

It seems to me that a key point here is that there are different views about the £9,250 level and whether it is too high or about right. The reality is that for many people who go to university, it is still a good investment, because students come out of university with a qualification that enables them to earn a good salary and have a very fulfilling career. Sadly, for some that is not case. Some people who go to university might have been pressured into it. I do not underestimate how transformative university can be in a positive way, but it is not for everyone. For many people, going to university might not have been the right decision.

Matt Western: The hon. Gentleman talks about an investment as a personal investment, which is the crux of the issue. It is not just the cost to the individual, because there is a cost to us as taxpayers. Should it be a socialised cost, which is a cost to all of society as an investment in our future generations who might pay our pensions, look after us or teach our children? Or should the cost be paid by the individual?

Tom Hunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In the first case, many taxpayers would want more of a view on the courses that people were studying at university. They would question some of the courses being studied and whether they offer value to the taxpayer. The system might look very different from what it does at the moment.

I agreed with a lot of what the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said about technical education and parity of esteem. She is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who chairs the Education Committee, has talked about the dinner party test. He says that people might talk

about how good apprenticeships are, but when it comes to their own kids they advise them to go to university. If someone at a dinner says, “Charlie has gone to Oxford University”, and someone else says, “Bella got an apprenticeship with Jaguar Land Rover”, most of the excitement will be about Charlie, not Bella. Ultimately, we need to change that perception.

Higher education is important, but it is just part of the story and part of the debate when it comes to the future of our young people. The FE White Paper and the skills improvement boards are a real step forward. Giving local business more of a role in shaping the FE curriculum is important. It is about an ecosystem approach and linking together schools, FE colleges and universities, if there is one in the area, and local business. I see it as trying to link up young people with opportunities in the country and specifically in their area, because we do see opportunities in different sectors and young people without the skills to take advantage of those opportunities.

A lot of people still look down on technical education. They do not see it having the same inherent value as an academic pathway. It is not about saying to people from lower income backgrounds, “The academic pathway is not for you, so here is the technical route.” It is absolutely about a whole-society approach, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said, and taking away snobbishness about technical education. And it is not about downgrading or devaluing a university education; it is just admitting that we must have multiple pathways. That is crucial for the levelling-up agenda that the Prime Minister has made clear time and again. Thank you, Ms McVey, for chairing today’s debate; you have done so superbly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 550344, relating to university tuition fees.

5.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Animal Testing

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Julie Elliott (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Please leave other Members and staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the Chamber.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 581641 and 590216, relating to animal testing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. The first petition, which calls for all animal testing in the UK to be banned, has attracted 236,000 signatures. The second, which calls for a phasing-out of animal experiments, has attracted more than 83,000 signatures and remains open.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my friend and colleague the late Sir David Amess. I am sure that everyone here will agree that it is particularly pertinent to remember him for, and praise his efforts in, fighting for animal rights. Indeed, on his last day in the Commons Chamber, he asked the Leader of the House to find time for a debate on World Animal Day. It is also relevant to note that he was a signatory to early-day motion 175, which, among other things, called on the Government to stop funding animal experimentation, which has been proven to be a failed practice, and to increase funding for state-of-the-art human-based research. I have no doubt that he would have been here to support the petitions, and it would be a fitting eulogy if the Government were to act on them.

The number of people who signed petition 581641 reflects how important the matter is to so many people. That is not surprising when we consider that every two minutes in the UK, a dog, cat, rabbit, rat, monkey, goat, sheep, mouse or fish is subject to animal testing, conducted on them against their sentience and welfare rights. Animal testing is a significant industry in the UK, where 3.4 million procedures took place in 2019. Let us not forget that animal tests have a 90% failure rate.

The UK Government responded to both petitions on 4 August, and, perhaps predictably, both responses used a very similar standard text. I hope that by opening the debate with a focus on the Government’s response to the first petition, I will also address some of the concerns raised in e-petition 590216. Before analysing the Government’s response, however, I will say a few words on how the petition came about.

Sarah Austin, who is here today, is a member of the collaborative partnership Merseyside Animal Rights. Sarah believes that the animal model for human medical research is outdated, and she is certainly not alone: her petition attracted signatures from the length and breadth of our countries, including 681 from my constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk. Indeed, there are a fair number of Scottish signatures, which is to be expected. Although animal welfare is a devolved area that the Scottish Government take seriously, animal cosmetics and scientific procedures are reserved to the UK Government.

[Martyn Day]

Sarah's work exemplifies how a single locally run voluntary group can influence like-minded people all around our nations. Without so many signatures, the debate would not be happening. It also shows how animal rights philosophy has advanced since the 18th century, when the English philosopher and legal theorist Jeremy Bentham wrote "An Introduction to the Principle of Morals and Legislation", posing,

"the question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?"

That is an early endorsement of the idea that the interests of animals are a moral and legal consideration.

Just last month, during the debate on real fur sales, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), set out how the UK Government have

"introduced landmark legislation in this Session that will recognise animals as sentient beings in UK law"

and that they are

"establishing an expert committee to ensure that animal sentience is considered as part of policy making."—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 320WH.]

That is a clear acknowledgment from the Government that animals can experience feelings and sensations. That is progress, but will it take another 240 years to acknowledge that animals, as sentient beings, deserve the same consideration as humans, and have the right not to suffer at our hands? We can exhibit social evolution sooner rather than later by taking steps now to ban animal testing across Britain. Will we be judged to have missed an opportunity in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which is currently being scrutinised in the other place, or do the Government have the courage to step into the 21st century and urgently consider enshrining in law other viable options for scientific research that do not involve animal suffering?

We should be aware that it is not a new concept. In 2004 *The BMJ* published the article, "Where is the evidence that animal research benefits humans?" That called for urgent clarification on clinical relevance of animal experiments, yet here we are 17 years later debating the issue. Some 10 years on, the same journal published, "How predictive and productive is animal research?", which argued that,

"our ability to predict human responses from animal models will be limited by interspecies differences in molecular and metabolic pathways."

The BMJ is not alone in highlighting medical failures of animal testing. In 2004, the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* reported:

"Change is needed. Thirty years of experience with subcutaneous xenografts, human tumours implanted under the skin of the mouse, have satisfied few because so many drugs that cure cancer in these mice fail to help humans."

With these few examples in mind, allow me now to discuss the Government's response in some detail. They state that scientific research using animals is vital in understanding how biological systems work in health and disease. I have already touched on how there is a long-standing and growing body of evidence showing that non-animal methods of scientific research are superior. I am aware that the charity People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—PETA—recently produced

literature highlighting other available methods for research into brain diseases and disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. These include neuroimaging techniques, which can be done non-invasively in diverse groups of patients and healthy volunteers, and can be coupled with tissue and cell sampling, micro-dosing, epidemiological analysis and other human-centred research methods. It is simply logical that human-based studies provide human-relevant data as well as sparing animals from immeasurable suffering.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy response said that the Government were overseeing the development of the three Rs technique, referring to replacing, reducing and refining the use of animals in research and its delivery of robust regulation. I can think of many words to describe regulation that allows factory-farmed puppies to be daily force-fed chemicals directly into their stomachs for up to 90 days with no pain relief or anaesthetic, but robust certainly is not one of them. I have not seen any evidence that the use of animals in research is being replaced, reduced or refined. The Minister might cite the top line in the publication of the most recent Government statistics, which states that in 2020 there was a decrease of 15% in scientific procedures carried out on living animals from the previous year. In case we forget, the report reminds us that the national lockdowns affected activity at research establishments last year.

Alarmingly, there was also an increase in the number of regulatory practices involving cats, dogs and horses in 2020 compared with 2019. According to the BEIS response, the Government

"believes scientific research using animals plays a vital part in our understanding of how biological systems work in health and disease."

The response further states:

"The use of animals in science supports the development of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies... Many products which would be unsafe or ineffective in humans are detected through animal testing thus avoiding harm to humans." Unfortunately, however, there is growing scientific criticism of those statements. Let me bring one quote from another peer-reviewed journal to the Minister's attention, which was published two years ago. A *ScienceDirect* article asserts that:

"Human subjects have been harmed in the clinical testing of drugs that were deemed safe by animal studies."

That is a very sobering thought. Given the evidence for viable options that are now available, the Government response is certainly ambiguous when it states that,

"animals must only be used where there is no alternative."

They say that, in addition to "robust regulation", the Government achieve this through

"support/funding for non-animal alternatives."

I and, I am sure, others here today would be most grateful if the Minister gave us the detail of how funding for "non-animal alternatives" has been increased and how that correlates to a decrease in animal experimentation. And when I say "detail", I do not mean the headline figures that are mentioned in the Government response. I mean: tell us the minutiae of the funding that has been targeted towards human-based research.

My final question on the Government response is directed at where it says:

"Under UK law no animal testing may be conducted if there is a non-animal alternative available."

As the limited examples that I have cited today show, non-animal alternatives are available, so my question is this: are animal testing establishments breaking the law? The elephant in the room is of course:

“In the UK, no animal testing may be conducted except for a permissible purpose enshrined in law.”

In short, the 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act needs to change. That is the nub of this petition, of the petition that is still open and of early-day motion 175, which my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) tabled.

If this Government really are

“committed to supporting, funding, and accelerating cutting edge technologies that allow animal use to be replaced or avoided”,

as they say in their response, let them put their money where their mouth is and enact that commitment. At the same time, they should remove animal experimentation as an “alternative” in scientific procedures, and simultaneously expedite effective cures and treatments for humans. I certainly hope the Government will take on board the petitioners’ request to ban all animal experimentation.

6.11 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing this important debate on behalf of all those people who have signed the petition and for giving such a persuasive speech, covering so many of the different areas that we need to talk about when debating this issue.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, more than 319,000 people have signed the petitions, which shows the huge strength of feeling on the issue across the UK. More than 200 people in my constituency of Putney have emailed me on animal welfare issues, ranging from testing, to warfare experiments, to sentencing. And nearly 300 of my constituents in Putney have signed this petition. I am sure that many more would have signed it if they had known about it. There is strong feeling about this issue, so I am glad to be debating it.

I have long believed that the UK should lead the world in high animal welfare standards. We are a nation of animal lovers, so this issue speaks very much to our British values. I became a vegetarian when I was 12, at school, because quite honestly the food was better on the vegetarians’ table and so I joined them. They were better company as well; we had a great time. Then I started looking into animal welfare issues. I am really grateful to organisations such as the Body Shop, Cruelty Free International and PETA for the information that they make available in order for us to understand what is quite a secret practice and the suffering of animals that goes on in animal testing. When I found out about that, I became a very committed animal rights activist, and have been ever since.

I am really glad and proud that the UK banned cosmetics testing on animals in 1997 and extended that to cosmetic ingredients in 1998. However, despite that—according to Cruelty Free International—in 2020 alone, 2.88 million experiments were carried out on animals in the UK. The UK reports conducting more animal tests than any other country in Europe. I think that that is not very well known by the public.

The Environment Bill, for which I was on the Bill Committee, was a perfect opportunity to make progress on this issue. I was really disappointed that the Government voted down a new clause that would have required the Secretary of State to set targets to reduce animal testing. The Government’s resistance to change in this area is very frustrating and, I think, the reason why so many people signed this petition—they want to see more action.

It is welcome that animal testing practices have improved and advanced greatly over recent years and that non-animal methods of research have also developed and improved over time, so it is time for a rethink. We should not let the scientific community just continue with this practice for lack of ever being questioned about it. I remain concerned at the lack of transparency around animal testing and project licence applications, as well as the continued permissibility of severe suffering, as defined in UK law.

Animal testing is not the answer to protecting people and the planet. In fact, there are major scientific problems with animal experiments. Significant differences in our genetic make-up mean that data from animal experiments cannot be reliably translated to people. The current reliance on animal experiments may well be holding back the progress that patients so urgently need. More than 92% of drugs that show promise in animal tests fail to reach the clinic and benefit patients, mostly for reasons of poor efficacy and safety that were not predicted by animal testing. If animal testing was 100% proven to really work, I do not think we would be having this debate. However, the fact that it causes suffering and does not work means that we absolutely need a rethink. Most animal tests have not been validated to modern standards, to prove that they do predict effects in humans, and there is a reluctance on the part of Government and regulators to do this.

As has been said, a growing range of cutting-edge techniques provide results that are directly relevant to people and can replace, or at the very least immediately significantly reduce, the use and the suffering of animals. These new-approach methodologies include the use of human cells and tissues, artificial intelligence, and organ-on-a-chip technology.

I echo the calls for the Minister in his response to give information about funding for these non-animal alternatives and about the route and deadlines by which we will move away from the suffering of animals in testing and to non-animal techniques. Put simply, there are better ways to make progress in public health and the environment while reducing and eliminating the suffering of animals in laboratories.

While we are speaking in this Chamber, a debate is taking place in the main Chamber on animal welfare. We must join these two things up. We cannot make progress on one side and, on another, continue this barbaric practice. If the UK is serious about its commitment to animal protection, the Government must stop the suffering. They must take decisive and ambitious action to phase out animal experiments and phase in the use of cutting-edge, human-relevant, non-animal techniques. Modernising medical research in this way will deliver major benefits, which the people of Britain want to see for people, animals and the economy.

6.17 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Ms Elliot. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing this debate and for helping to maintain pressure on the Government to retain their historic commitment to banning the inhumane practice of animal testing. I also pay tribute to organisations such as Cruelty Free International and For Life On Earth for the vital campaigning they have done over many years on this issue.

This is a very timely debate, following the tragic death of Sir David Amess. As Members will know, Sir David was passionate about animals and had long been admired for the animal welfare campaigns he led throughout his time in Parliament. Most notably, he was responsible for introducing the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988. His legacy on this issue will continue. Last week, I was proud to be asked to take over an early-day motion tabled by Sir David relating to the banning of trophy hunting imports. I encourage all MPs to support early-day motion 86 if possible.

My thanks also go to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for tabling the early-day motion in June on a public scientific hearing on animal experiments, which not only made clear the pain and suffering that animals are subjected to in the name of science, but gave shocking examples of the practices that continue to take place on our shores. I was proud to sign that EDM, which highlighted the consistent claims of scientists that animal testing has largely been a failure and urged the Government to mandate an independent and rigorous public scientific hearing to stop the funding of animal experimentation and instead increase investment in world-leading human-based research, such as state-of-the-art organ-on-a-chip and gene-based medicines, to end the unnecessary suffering of animals and prioritise treatments and cures for humans.

On the point around vegetarianism made by my good and hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), I am a life-long vegetarian too, and I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is also a vegetarian, so there is high representation in this debate of people who do not eat meat. I thought it important to highlight that.

It is with deep sadness that I am compelled to speak in today's debate, given our country's historic stance against animal cruelty. The UK was the first country to establish a ban on animal testing for cosmetics and their ingredients when, almost a quarter of a century ago, we introduced the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. That was reinforced by the EU's cosmetics directive in 2004, which established an EU-wide testing and marketing ban on finished cosmetic products tested on animals, and later prohibited testing ingredients on animals and introduced a full marketing ban, outlawing the sale or import into the EU of cosmetics tested on animals anywhere in the world.

Despite leaving the EU, the UK has retained what is now the cosmetics regulation; however, despite the ban, EU producers of substances used in cosmetics have been required by the European Chemicals Agency to carry out tests on vertebrate animals to comply with the requirements of the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—more commonly known

as the REACH—regulation. That means that the European Chemicals Agency now routinely requires some widely used cosmetic ingredients to be used on hundreds of thousands of animals in order to comply with REACH in the EU.

Worryingly, since leaving the European Union our Government have introduced UK REACH, effectively replicating EU chemicals regulation in UK law. Furthermore, the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are now under no obligation to follow the recent landmark ruling in the Symrise appeal. As many Members will be aware, Symrise AG, a major German manufacturer of flavours and fragrances, successively appealed against a European Chemicals Agency directive to carry out animal testing. Symrise argued that under the EU cosmetics regulation its products could not be tested on animals because they would no longer be able to be sold or marketed in Europe.

It is no surprise, given the UK's long and leading role in banning animal testing that there are such strong public sentiments against the process and that almost a quarter of a million people signed the e-petition calling for our Government to outlaw the practice. Indeed, in my constituency several hundred people registered their objection and urged the Government to do the humane thing by banning all animal testing in the UK, not just for the development of cosmetics but for all household products and medicines. The Government's response has been disappointing, using the often used but unsubstantiated argument that

“scientific research using animals plays a vital part in understanding how biological systems work in health and disease.”

The reality is that, almost a quarter of a century after setting a global precedent on the issue, the UK is now on the verge of allowing those inhumane practices to take place once again. As I alluded to, many prominent campaigns in recent years have helped to raise awareness of the practice, which many believed had been consigned to history once and for all more than two decades ago. More recently, For Life On Earth publicised disturbing footage showing the factory farming of thousands of laboratory dogs here in the UK. The clip showed the savage procedure, in which the force-feeding of an animal takes place via a tube. The footage is horrific. There is further concern, given that UK-bred laboratory dogs and all other laboratory animals are excluded from the protection of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. My thanks to FLOE for exposing that barbaric practice alongside high-profile figures such as Ricky Gervais, Peter Egan and rescued laboratory dog Scarlett Beagle in their public campaign this year.

As colleagues on both sides of the House have said so eloquently, animal experiments must be banned immediately and funding should be redirected to progressive human-based research, which has a far better track record of success. I would be grateful for clarity from the Minister about the current regulatory guidance on animal cosmetic testing in the UK, as well as on what position the Government plan to take on the Symrise ruling. In addition, I urge them to reconsider their assessment of force-feeding, given that it is currently classified only as mild suffering under Home Office licensing.

The Government must acknowledge the concerns and evidence-based assessment of leading campaigners and scientists, including the *British Medical Journal*, the

Food and Drug Administration, the US-based National Cancer Institute, and many scientists working in the pharmaceutical industry. They must heed the concerns raised in early-day motion 175, as well as the e-petitions that are the reason for today's debate. They have repeatedly insisted that, despite leaving the EU, they would continue to uphold the highest standards of animal protection. For that to be the case, they must develop an animal-free approach to further protecting human health, and continue our legacy as the world leader in tackling animal rights abuses.

6.23 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for opening the debate and congratulate the petitioners on bringing this important topic forward for consideration. Some 810 of my constituents signed e-petition 581641.

Before I begin, I too pay tribute to Sir David Amess, the Member for Southend West, a longstanding and vocal advocate for animal rights. I am sure that he would have been here to speak passionately on this issue if not for his tragic passing. His presence is sorely missed. I send my deepest condolences to his family and staff.

Animal welfare is an issue close to my heart, and one that constituents often contact me about. I am honoured to have the opportunity to represent them in this debate. Perhaps the best place to start is where public opinion stands on this matter. Earlier this year, YouGov conducted online polling in Scotland, in partnership with Cruelty Free International. The findings were clear: overwhelmingly, the public do not support animal testing. Some 79% of Scottish adults believe that it is unacceptable for experiments on animals to continue when other testing methods are available. Some 62% were in favour of the Government setting deadlines for the phasing out of animal testing. The majority of Scots consistently agreed that testing on cats, dogs and monkeys is unacceptable.

The Scottish Government have made many commitments to strengthen animal welfare legislation, but the issue of testing on animals for scientific research remains reserved to the UK Government. The Government's response to the petition notes the global requirement for animal testing in medical research. The legislation is frankly outdated, as science has developed. We now know that 90% of drugs tested on animals eventually fail in human trials. That prompts the question: why, in 2020 alone, were 86,000 experiments allowed to go ahead, despite being found to have caused severe suffering to the animals involved?

That other nations continue to test on animals does not mean that the UK cannot seek to become a leader in alternative methodologies and tests. We banned the use of animal testing for cosmetics in 1998, ahead of other countries, such as China, which required animal testing until only very recently. If we look back to the YouGov polling, 76% of Scots believe that finding alternatives to animal testing should be a funding priority in the science and innovation space. In fact, Cruelty Free International is of the opinion that by not doing so, and continuing to rely on animal experimentation, we are stifling scientific development. Will the Minister commit Government funding to research into such alternatives?

The Government have argued that the current law is clear that animal experiments should be conducted only where there is no alternative. Will the Minister explain why no applications for animal testing were refused at all last year? It is hard to believe that they were all necessary. For example, hundreds of skin sensitisation tests were carried out on mice last year, despite alternative non-animal-reliant tests being available.

Ending animal experiments can only be a positive change. In today's society, there is no excuse for allowing them to continue. The Government have introduced animal sentience legislation, for which I am sure we are all grateful, but to allow animal testing to continue is in direct contrast to that legislation's aims. I hope the Government's commitment to animal welfare extends to all animals, and that they will seek to outlaw the unnecessary suffering caused by testing. To do so would bring Government policy much more in line with public opinion.

6.28 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliot. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on opening the debate and on the forceful and cogent argument he put forward to make the case for the petitioners. I also thank good and hon. Members across the House who have spoken so forcefully on this issue. I support petitions 581641 and 590216, signed by more than 320,000 petitioners, quite a number of whom were from my constituency.

I wish to declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human-relevant science. It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to pay tribute briefly to the late vice-chair of the group, Sir David Amess. He was an unwavering voice for animals in laboratories and a champion for human-relevant science. He will be remembered as a tireless and principled campaigner for animal welfare. I hope that Members from the Government side, who are absent from tonight's debate, will step up and take on Sir David's mantle.

The APPG on human-relevant science is a discussion forum in which politicians, the human-relevant life sciences sector, the third sector, scientists and stakeholders can promote new-approach methodologies that provide unique insights into human biology, transform our ability to understand human disease, and develop new and effective medicines more quickly, without the use of animals.

I certainly take on board the point made earlier that the stats seem to show a slight reduction in the number of animals used in testing in 2020. However, that might be a consequence of the pandemic. In the 10 years up to 2019 the average annual decrease in animal testing was only about 1% a year. On that trajectory, animal testing looks like it is set to continue for another 90 years.

The case for transition to human-relevant science is absolutely compelling. A growing range of cutting-edge techniques provide results that are directly relevant to people and that can replace, or at the very least significantly reduce, the use of animals. Such new-approach methodologies include the use of human cells, tissues, tissue cultures, artificial intelligence and organ-on-a-chip technology.

Significant differences in the human race's genetic make-up mean that data from animal experiments cannot be reliably translated into humans. In fact, the current

[Grahame Morris]

reliance on animal experiments may well be holding back the progress that many patients so urgently need. More than 92% of drugs that show promise in animal tests fail to reach the clinic and do not benefit patients, mostly for reasons of poor efficacy and safety that were not predicted by animal testing. In disease research, the picture is similar. Decades of efforts towards understanding neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, and towards finding effective therapies for them, have been huge failures due to the majority of animal experiments lacking human relevance.

The APPG on human-relevant science has held several meetings by Zoom over the past year, examining two main areas: funding barriers and regulatory barriers. As it stands, the funding made available for research via the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research—the NC3Rs that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk referred to—is not sufficient to support the transition to human-relevant research. Indeed, the NC3Rs's annual budget amounts to only around £10 million. By comparison, the Association of Medical Research Charities estimates that the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health Research provided a combined total of £1.8 billion in funding for UK medical research in 2019, while medical research charities provided £1.9 billion.

The economic potential of animal-free methods is huge. By providing results that are directly relevant to people, new-approach methodologies can accelerate the development of effective treatments that will transform patients' lives and reduce the economic cost of ill health. I hope the Minister will respond to the important point raised earlier that over 450 skin sensation tests were carried out on mice in 2020, even though validated non-animal tests were and are available. In 2020, not a single application for licences to conduct experiments on animals were refused permission.

There is major public support for replacing animal testing with human-relevant techniques, and the petitions that formed the basis for today's debate attest to that. A YouGov poll also shows enormous public support. The Government must take decisive and ambitious action to phase out animal experiments and phase in the use of cutting-edge, human-relevant techniques. Modernising medical research in this way will deliver major benefits for people, animals and the UK economy.

6.34 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I am grateful to speak in such an important debate; official parliamentary petitions on the banning of animal testing have gained hundreds of thousands of signatures from people across our country. As Members here today will know, this was not the intended day for this debate. Sadly, remembrance proceedings following the shocking death of one of our colleagues meant that this debate was rightly postponed. I send my heartfelt condolences to the wife and family of my hon. Friend, Sir David Amess. We have lost a parliamentarian of enormous experience, intellect and warmth. He was someone with an infectious smile, and used that cheeky smile without being reprimanded by Mr Speaker when

he somehow squeezed into virtually every single debate the need to make Southend-on-Sea a city. Sir David also did a great deal of work on animal rights. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) mentioned, I am very sure that he would have spoken in today's debate. He was responsible for introducing the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988; he campaigned against puppy mills and wildlife trafficking; and, this year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) noted, he tabled an early-day motion to end animal experiments.

We need to adopt modern methods that do not require the suffering of animals. That is why we are all here today; it is in the spirit of kindness, co-operation and humanity that this issue should be considered. In 1998, animal testing on ingredients exclusively used in cosmetics was banned in our country. That same year, we saw a modern-day low point of 2.7 million procedures involving animals, even though the overwhelming majority of that testing was unsuccessful, as my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson) noted. That testing proved to be of absolutely no use for human advancement. It peaked in 2015 to 4.1 million procedures, and while the number of experiments had been falling, last year there was a 6% rise since 1997. Previous statistics have indicated that we have topped the grim leader board for the most animal experiments per person in the European Union. Our three Rs policy to replace, reduce and refine, limiting the number of animals used in science and pushing licence applicants to consider alternatives is clearly not having the desired effect. That is why I feel the Government need to change their policy.

We are a nation of animal lovers. My inbox is often overflowing with concerns about animal rights and legislation impacting on animals. Survey after survey indicates that public acceptance of animal testing is dependent on there being no viable alternative. How can we allow such barbarity within our science when modern-day alternatives exist? Innovations such as complex cell models—CCMs—offer the potential to use human tissue to provide data that is far more relevant to patients than animals tests, and could even replace animal procedures in their entirety. There are a plethora of approaches; some areas of research are even being held back by animal testing. A recent report on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's research noted that an

“important obstacle to progress in the field of neurodegenerative diseases is the heavy reliance on animal models which are failing to capture key features of human biology and disease.”

This shows that, in part, moving forward and modernising our scientific trials and testing can benefit both humans and animals, making scientific methods more relevant to human health.

As a vegetarian—and as noted by other speakers—I feel that we should be a world leader in scientific innovation. Have we not moved on from such brutal acts on sentient beings who have no say? Sadly, the Government's record on protecting animals is not promising. As usual, they focus on grandiose language and gestures rather than implementing policy that will effect change. They delay animal welfare legislation on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and on increasing sentences for animal cruelty, and instead choose to legislate on trophy hunting rather than the simpler and more effective measure of the Home Secretary simply no longer issuing licences.

Recent media reports suggest that the Home Office could pave the way for a return to animal testing for cosmetics, so I ask the Minister today for the Government's plan. We need a review of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. We need to commit to properly ending animal testing for good, ensuring that we eliminate avoidable procedures on animals, and banning the export and import of animals for research unless with specific Home Office consent; and we need to commit to proper investment in non-animal-based research methods and technologies to encourage further innovation and work in this field.

We need to use this opportunity to press forward and invest in our future with the scope and opportunities for change. If the Government fail to grasp this challenge, I fear that this outdated practice will simply proliferate.

6.41 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his comprehensive exposition of the issue we are debating today. I want to echo the tributes paid to David Amess. We very much feel his presence in this debate, despite his absence, as a great champion of animal welfare. I am sure his colleagues in the main Chamber, who are currently debating the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, have David Amess at the forefront of their minds as well.

I know how interested my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran are in this issue, as I suspect citizens across the UK are, as evidenced by the tens of thousands of signatures to the petitions we are debating. That can be said with some confidence because of a survey carried out by the UK charity, FRAME, which undertakes research into alternatives to animal testing. In a survey conducted last year, it found that 84% of respondents would not buy cosmetics if they knew that any of their ingredients had been tested on animals. Based on my experience as an MP in this House since 2015, I can say without hesitation or equivocation that I receive more emails about animal welfare-related issues than about any other issue currently facing politicians or this Parliament today. I can see some nods of agreement. I am sure we are all in the same boat in that regard. People care about animal welfare issues profoundly and deeply. It is something that I think every constituent shares with every other constituent. There is no disagreement on it and we have to take note of it.

The sad fact is that, despite widespread public abhorrence of animal testing, it is a significant industry in the UK. Home Office statistics show that 3.4 million procedures involving animals took place across the UK in 2019. Unfortunately, there is growing consensus that not enough is being done truly to represent a significant and consistent decrease in animal experiments. We have heard much about that today.

Evidence shows that people in Scotland and Wales believe that more should be done to prioritise humane and human-relevant science. I suspect that the good people of England feel exactly the same. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of people believe that where alternative non-animal research methods are available, experimenting on animals becomes even more unacceptable. It is worrying to learn that animal tests have been undertaken in Europe and the UK for which there are accepted, validated alternatives. What my North Ayrshire

and Arran constituents and I what to know is: why is testing in such circumstances permitted? Why is it, for example, that tests are carried out where a substance is dropped into the eyes of a live rabbit that causes damage and blindness or where a lethal dose of botulinum is injected into mice that causes paralysis and suffocation within days, as documented in the short briefing from Cruelty Free International? Why are these tests carried out when non-animal viable alternatives are available?

When asked about specific species in research, the overwhelming view of the public is that testing on animals such as dogs, cats and monkeys is unacceptable and that alternatives to animal testing should be a funding priority for science and innovation, yet the UK remains one of the top users of primates and dogs in experiments in all of Europe. We know that recent developments in evolutionary and developmental biology and genetics have significantly increased our understanding of why animals have no predictive value for the human response to drugs or the pathophysiology of human diseases.

What is needed—what my constituents want to see—is the UK Government to mandate a rigorous public scientific hearing to reduce the unnecessary harm involved in animal experiments and ban this immoral practice, pursuing alternatives instead. We need greater transparency in the animal research industry and a commitment by the UK Government to understand the sentience of animals and their welfare in relation to the outdated methods of animal testing.

I am sure that my constituents and those of every Member in this Chamber would be shocked to learn that although the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill enshrines in law the ability of animals to experience joy and feel suffering and pain, the UK Government do not recognise animals undergoing scientific experiments as having sentient rights, as they are excluded from the protection of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and its “unnecessary suffering” clause. That is an unacceptable state of affairs, especially in view of the fact that in a previous debate in which I participated, on the testing of cosmetics in animals, the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said that testing on animals is carried out

“only where there are no practical alternatives”.—[*Official Report*, 1 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 111WH.]

Clearly, that is not the case—perhaps the Minister can comment on that and provide clarification—as has been pointed out in some detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk. There is an apparent contradiction, so I hope that the Minister can clear it up today.

New approach methodologies do not use animals and instead use advanced in vitro and in silico technologies to model diseases, test treatments and investigate biological processes in humans. With the new medicines manufacturing innovation centre to be based in Renfrewshire, we in Scotland are well placed to spearhead a paradigm shift to next-generation human-relevant medicine. That is the kind of shift that we need to see and which our constituents want to see, as the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) indicated.

In the debate on 1 May 2018, I remember the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth saying that the Government would continue to tighten regulations

[Patricia Gibson]

on animal testing. Will the Minister tell us today what tightening of regulations has taken place over the past three and a half years since the previous Minister gave that commitment? It is also the case that, in that debate, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth said that an independent trade policy would provide “opportunities” to look at this issue. Will this Minister tell us what exactly has been looked and what actions that looking has brought about, as I am sure we are all keen to know? I hope it is not the case that we have had three and a half years of drift and delay on this matter, because that would be most disappointing.

We have been told repeatedly that Brexit offers the opportunity to raise the bar on the quality of the products that we import, as well as on animal welfare issues. My inbox—I am sure many other Members would echo this—is filled with messages from constituents who fear that standards will fall, not rise. Nevertheless, if Brexit really does offer that opportunity, as we have been told, to go further on issues such as animal testing than we did before, can the Minister update us on what advantages have been taken so far of these much-lauded opportunities, which were so loudly proclaimed at the time? Again, I am sure that we are all keen to know.

Like many in this Chamber, I represent tens of thousands of constituents who are very exercised about these matters, so I hope that the Minister can reassure us on these points and the other questions raised today. We are keen to hear progress on this issue since anything that is, or is perceived to be, unnecessary cruelty to animals is anathema to the overwhelming majority of people, and has no place in our society.

6.50 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak for Labour today, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I am, however, a stand-in. I apologise on behalf of the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who is unable to be here because he is in the Chamber for the Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for opening and leading this important and timely debate. We are considering e-petition 581641, which received 235,000 signatures from across the UK, including 657 in my own constituency of Newport West. The petition called on the Government to ban all animal testing in the UK, including for

“the development of cosmetics, household products and medicines.”

We are also considering e-petition 590216, which received over 83,000 signatures from across the UK, including 106 people from Newport West. The petition requires Ministers to

“recognise the urgent need to use animal-free science and publish a clear and ambitious action plan with timetables and milestones”.

These two important petitions have received support from more than 300,000 people. I thank all those who signed the petitions for ensuring that this matter was brought to the House today.

There have been important steps forward since the introduction of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough

(Mr Dhesi) pointed out, it was a Labour Government who banned the use of animal testing for cosmetic products in 1998, and I proudly acknowledge that. I also welcome the fact that the Conservative Government banned animal testing for household products in 2015. For many years, the UK has been a leader in instituting protections against unnecessary animal testing. That is good and how it should be, and Labour encourages Ministers to do more, go further and keep the faith. We should continue to lead on this issue and to find alternative research methods, as has been eloquently outlined by fellow Members.

We should all work together to completely eliminate animal testing. That is the place that Members across the House and thousands of people across the country want us to reach. Our responsibilities as Members require us to do our best by our constituents, but we also have a responsibility to our natural world, wildlife and animals. To honour that responsibility, we must be ever vigilant, and that is why this debate is so important. It provides us with another opportunity to look at animal welfare, our approach to animal testing and what we can do to keep our animals safe.

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act admittedly contains strong language, stating that animal testing must be a last resort and, importantly, that stringent requirements for licensing are necessary. However, the Opposition are deeply concerned that Ministers in this Government may fail to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of animals. When the Minister winds up the debate, I would be grateful if we received a guarantee that every effort is being made to reduce the suffering of animals in research.

The latest Home Office report let the cat out of the bag when it confirmed that 2.88 million procedures were carried out on living animals in 2021. While this number is a 15% decrease on the previous year, the most obvious reason for the reduction was the pandemic rather than any reduction inspired by a change in Government policy. That was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). Of those 2.88 million procedures, 1.44 million were carried out for the creation and breeding of genetic alterations, but the other 1.44 million were for experimental procedures on live animals. It is easy when we talk on such scales for these animals to become just another statistic and to forget the very real pain that they were experiencing.

Some 18,000 procedures conducted were carried out on specially protected species, including horses, cats, dogs, monkeys and primates. In 2020, there were tests on 1,700 for experimental procedures. It is important to understand those figures and digest the scale of the challenge ahead of us. I ask the House to think, for just a moment, about the pain and suffering those animals were put through in the last year alone. Many were brought over in small shipping containers from Africa and Asia before being subjected to all manner of experimentation and testing. However, the suffering extends far beyond protected species. Of the 1.44 million experimental procedures, 100,000 caused mild or moderate pain to the animals; more worrying is the fact that more than 50,000 animals experienced severe pain during those procedures. That is serious, and it has to stop.

Some will argue that the research is a necessary evil and a key component of scientific discovery, but I have to disagree. As times change, views change, and so too

must our behaviour. Indeed, as we have heard, there is still no consensus on the efficacy of animal testing. How a compound interacts with mice might prove to be the opposite for humans at the clinical stage, as cited by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk.

An article by Pandora Pound and Michael Bracken published in *The BMJ* in 2014 states:

“The current situation is unethical. Poorly designed studies and lack of methodological rigour in preclinical research may result in expensive but ultimately fruitless clinical trials that needlessly expose humans to potentially harmful drugs or may result in other potentially beneficial therapies being withheld.”

Only £10 million is invested in the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research each year, compared with the billions of pounds invested in basic research, as my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Easington pointed out. If we do not properly invest in alternatives, how can we ever hope to solve the problem? I would like the Minister to outline the steps that will be taken to ensure that alternatives to animal testing receive the funding and focus they need and deserve.

There must also be greater accountability on the part of researchers to publish the results of their studies. When research can cause suffering to animals, for it to be worthy of investment—particularly of public money—we need to see what researchers are up to and why. Can the Minister indicate when the Government will announce the review to identify and eliminate avoidable testing?

Another simple question for the Minister is whether the Government will commit to eliminating any and every unnecessary test, and will they do that now? Finally, how will the Brexit arrangements affect the previous agreement with the EU under the chemical REACH regulations? There is a danger that new post-Brexit arrangements will lead to a duplication of animal testing, rather than a decrease. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for highlighting that in his speech, and I look forward to the Minister’s response on that point in particular.

I want to see greater transparency in the issuing of licences so that the public can see when and why animal testing takes place. Can the Minister outline which steps the Government will take to create a more transparent method for licensing applications?

This debate is not difficult. More than 300,000 people signed the two petitions before the House, so we know there is clearly widespread interest in seeing action and progress on the issue. Indeed—I suspect the Minister will already know this—a 2016 study by Ipsos MORI found that 74% of people felt that more work was needed to find alternatives to animal research. While the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 made a difference and moved us forward, there is more to do. It is clear that efforts to invest in research that is effective and does not harm animals must be redoubled.

This issue is not political. As others have said, I think very much of the late Sir David Amess, who showed huge commitment to animal welfare over his many years in the House, and I wish his dog Vivienne well in the Westminster Dog of the Year competition. This has been an interesting debate, and I am grateful for the opportunity to reiterate Labour’s calls for action to do away with harmful and unnecessary animal testing once and for all.

6.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in my fifth week in office, Ms Elliott. I am hugely grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and other colleagues for raising these important issues today, not least in the week in which the comprehensive spending review will be settled. I will then have a chance to look at the overall allocation of funding within the ecosystem for which I am responsible as Minister for Science, Research and Innovation.

I reassure colleagues, and those in the Public Gallery and elsewhere, that I take this issue very seriously, and I will explain my background in the sector.

I echo the comments made by a number of Opposition colleagues: if we are to provide a legacy for Sir David Amess, we ought to come together on this issue. I welcome the tone of everybody’s contributions, in particular that of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), which highlights the lack of partisan politics in this matter and the need to seek cross-party consensus. I welcome her reference to this Government’s 2015 ban on cosmetics tested on animals and the 1997 Labour Government’s ban. This country has taken and will continue to take the matter seriously, and we should be proud of that.

I was asked about 36 questions, which I will try to cover, but I want to flag in particular the important opening points made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, who spoke about the moral and legal considerations at the heart of the issue—he is right: this is not just a utilitarian argument, but a moral and legal issue about the values that we hold as a country—and about the importance of recognising that sentience confers an additional responsibility, which is enshrined in legislation but merits saying. Our obligations to mammals, for example, are much greater than our obligations to insects. That might be controversial in some places in this country, but I think that in this Chamber, people will understand the difference. I think that was an important and well-made point.

The number of signatories to the petitions indicates the strength of the public view on the matter. I sincerely thank all hon. Members for the quality of their contributions. I suspect the reason that there are not more colleagues on the Government Benches is that the main Chamber is currently debating the Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, and while hon. Members have been speaking in this debate, I have been watching Conservative Members speaking in that one. It is fair to say that there is strong cross-party support for getting the framework for animal research right.

I thank and pay particular tribute to those who have spoken, including the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who raised the issue of values and the important role of companies such as the Body Shop and campaigns such as PETA—I echo those considerations. Transparency for consumers when purchasing goods is quite an important factor in driving the culture change that we need to see, and I support her on that point. She, like other Members, mentioned the importance of technology and the human-on-a-chip and organ-on-a-chip technologies that may hold the opportunity for us to completely liberate ourselves from reliance on animals.

[George Freeman]

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) raised the important issue of force-feeding and factory farming. I think the whole House would like to move away from any reliance on factory farming, but while there is such a reliance, it is important that that activity is carried out to the highest standards and that public trust is supported by sufficient accountability.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised an interesting point about why no applications are turned down, which I will come to. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned the importance of complex cell models and highlighted the need for us to review the workings of the legislation. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) highlighted quite powerfully the big difference between the amount of money—around £3 billion—spent on broader life science and medical-related research compared with the £100 million, or £10 million a year, spent on this issue. He made an important point about ensuring that the matter gets enough attention.

Grahame Morris: The Minister is being very thorough on some of those points. We are not, as he alluded to in his opening remarks and again just now, arguing for the outcome of the comprehensive spending review to be huge additional resource. It is about skewing the huge sums of money that are available towards this particular area. That would be more efficacious and beneficial for everyone concerned.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I was about to say that the National Institute for Health Research—for which I was responsible in my previous ministerial role but one, as Minister for life sciences—puts about £1 billion a year into research on the practice of health. I will happily raise the issue with the relevant Minister at the Department for Health and Social Care, because quite important part of the NIHR's remit is to build confidence in health research.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised the important issue of accountability on the rate of progress, and the opportunities arising from the UK's departure from the EU. I will try to come to all those issues in due course, and if for any reason I miss any, I will happily write to Members with the answer that I would have given had I had time.

I am personally passionate about this agenda for a whole raft of reasons, not just because I have a much beloved cat and dog as pets. Like everyone in the Chamber, and I think most people in this House, I feel very strongly that we have a duty of care as human beings to the animals around us. Also, having had a career in medical research before coming to Parliament in 2010, I have seen for myself the importance both of using every piece of technology to try to remove dependence on animals in the development of medicines and of carrying public trust in the research process with us.

As hon. Members have set out, in the life science sector a quiet revolution is going on, in which the traditional model of drug discovery—which typically takes 15 years and \$2 billion, and has an 80% failure rate—is being quietly transformed by revolutions in genomics and informatics, allowing us to move from a paradigm in which the industry would typically try to develop one drug that suits all through a long and

complex cycle of theoretical drug discovery targeting, in silico chemistry, then through into in vitro models, animal trials, human trials, and marketing and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence approval.

The revolution in genomics and informatics allows us to begin to target patient groups, develop drugs around particular blood types, genotypes and phenotypes, and cut out a lot of the long, traditional drug discovery process. It is a revolution that I am passionate about, not just because it will in due course reduce, and possibly even eradicate, the need for us to rely on often unreliable animal models. Members will have heard me talk in other places about the need to move away from necessary but imperfect models of human disease.

Mr Dhesi: The Minister is being generous with his time. I take on board his points about the quiet revolution in genomics and medical science more generally, but while that is taking place, millions of animals are being terrorised and killed. It is not benefiting us or them, so when will we set some deadlines and targets for the elimination of animal testing?

George Freeman: I understand the hon. Member's point and I will come to it. I could not quite agree that our reliance at the moment on animal testing is of no use at all; it is of important use in defining certain elements of toxicity and safety. It is not perfect, but to say that it has no use is not fair. I will come to his point about how quickly we need to make progress.

Part of my passion for this is that I tried to found a company developing toxicology artificial intelligence—predictive software that would predict the toxicology of compounds so that we do not have to rely on animal models. I care sufficiently about it that I took the trouble to do that. Let me share with colleagues one thing that I discovered in that process, which speaks to the delicacy sometimes around transparency. Passions in this sector understandably run very high. I know that colleagues will be shocked to discover that, in the course of putting together a company to develop toxicology software, one needs to be able to understand the experiments that are currently being done in order to model them better using software. That meant that on the board of the company we had somebody from Huntingdon Life Sciences so that we could understand the processes that we were having to replace.

The presence of that person on the board was alone sufficient to attract huge and violent attacks from Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty. Of course, who on the board did they pick on? Was it any of the eight men, of whom I was one? No. They picked on the company secretary—the member of the board least responsible for the company. She lived alone in a cottage in the fens, and woke in the middle of the night to find 20 people in balaclavas daubing her house with red paint, calling her a bunny killer. I flag that story because it speaks to the passions and the need for a balanced approach, in the way that colleagues have raised the issue today.

If we are to be transparent and accountable, we need to ensure that that transparency and accountability can be shared, and that we are not putting particular people at risk. However, I share the point that we need to do everything we can to ensure that the quiet revolution accelerates, and that we reduce the reliance on animals for research as fast as we possibly can and to as great an extent as we can.

Allow me to describe briefly the framework that we have in place. Why is the use of animals in scientific research justified at all? It is justified because, at the moment, it is vital for identifying benefits to humans, animals and the environment. We have to try to balance that dependence with our commitment to the highest animal welfare standards. That is the basis on which the current law is drafted. The balance between those two elements is reflected in the fact that we have a dedicated Act to make sure that animal welfare and animal research are properly integrated. The responsibility for managing that Act lies with the Home Office and the Home Secretary, not with me, but I will raise the issues mentioned today with the Home Office.

The Act specifies that animals can be used in science only for specific limited purposes where there are no alternatives—a crucial point—and provides protection for those animals through the requirement for application of the three Rs: replacement, reduction and refinement. Today's debate raised three related but separate issues that contribute to the Government's overall strategic direction and policy: first, the benefits derived from the use of animals in science where there are, as yet, no alternatives; secondly, the regulatory regime that facilitates such use; and thirdly, our support and commitment to the funding of the three Rs in order to accelerate progress away from reliance.

Let me take each in turn. At the moment, animal testing research plays a vital role in understanding how biological systems work in health and disease. It is crucial to our understanding of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies for both humans and animal health, and it supports the safety and sustainability of our environment by helping to reduce dependency on chemicals. Animal research has helped us to make life-changing discoveries for new vaccines and medicines, transplant procedures, anaesthetics and blood transfusions—not least the development of the covid-19 vaccine, which was made possible because of animal research.

While I accept that we need to try to move away as quickly as possible, one must remember that we are using animals only because it is the way we have evolved towards minimising exposure of human beings to dangerous drugs. I assure hon. Members that if we were to completely remove all animal use from medicines research, we would expose our own kith and kin to much higher risks. That would quickly be seen as irresponsible.

We need to find a way of substituting those pre-human tests as quickly as possible. Although much research can be done into non-animal models, there are still purposes for which, sadly, it is essential to use live animals, as the complexity of whole biological mammalian systems cannot always be replicated using validated non-animal methodologies. That is especially the case where human medicines are developed.

Grahame Morris: The Minister is being generous, and he will want to make progress. An example of a drug that went through extensive animal testing through the established processes is thalidomide. Animal testing is not infallible. We have discovered subsequently that some drugs that have been through established animal testing can be repurposed. We have now discovered that it is an extremely effective drug against leprosy and other conditions. There is rightfully scepticism about statements that animal testing will ensure that drugs are completely safe, because that is not the case.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am not suggesting that the current system is 100% perfect at all. In fact, I made it clear in my earlier comments that, often, animal models are not perfect predictors—he is right to say that. But it is equally the case that, without the animal models, an awful lot of drugs would be taken forward into humans with hugely damaging side effects and no benefits. The point is not that once something has been through animal testing it is a perfect drug. Going through animal testing prevents exposing humans to potential drugs that are simply unsafe. It is not perfect, but that is the situation. He is right to point out that animal testing itself is not a guarantor of efficacy.

The truth, sadly, is that without testing of medicines using animals at the moment, we would not know whether medicines are safe or effective for use in humans or animals, and that would limit the availability of medicines to treat disease and of chemicals that could be used for a wide range of purposes in many industries. There is a human health and safety part to this. In order to protect workers in the chemical and agricultural industries, we need to ensure that we understand any toxicity of those chemicals before they are used. Without the testing of chemicals on animals, where no alternative methodologies are available, we would not know what hazards they present. Many products that are not safe in humans or the environment are detected through animal testing, thus avoiding harm downstream.

Ruth Jones: Will the Minister give way?

George Freeman: Yes, but I do have to make some progress.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way. None of us would disagree that we want to keep humans safe, but a lot of people have concerns about the repetition of unnecessary tests, and about Constant, ongoing testing for chemicals, cosmetics and such. It would be great if the Minister could address that issue.

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, which I will come on to. Animal testing is required by all global medicines regulators. I want to be clear that this is not a UK phenomenon, but it does include the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, which is widely held to be setting the global benchmark, not least in vaccine discovery. Animal testing of chemicals is sometimes required under UK law, often relating to the quantity manufactured to protect the safety of workers exposed to those materials in large amounts and the environment when chemicals may find their way into the waterways, soil or atmosphere. All testing of chemicals on animals under REACH, the EU regulation on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, is subject to the "last resort" principle, which means the manufacturer must always—it is a legal duty—consider alternative approaches first and, in some cases, secure the agreement of the regulator before proceeding.

In order to obtain these benefits that accrue, it is necessary to exempt such animals from the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and put in place specific protections for them in a dedicated Act. A number of colleagues raised the question of why this is not covered by the 2006 Act. It is actually the other way round. We have specifically put the use of animals in research into their

[George Freeman]

own legal framework under the dedicated Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, known as ASPA, which, as I say, is the responsibility of the Home Office. The underpinning principle of ASPA is to protect animals which are sentient, in terms of their capacity to experience pain, suffering and distress. Therefore, protection of animals on the basis of their sentience is the very principle established in the legal framework.

ASPA protects animals in a number of ways. It requires a three-tier system of licensing for individuals conducting procedures on animals, the programme of work that will use animals and the place where animals will be used. Licence holders are required to undergo training and a competency assessment, and to have legal responsibilities to have systems in place to protect animals, in compliance with ASPA. Licences are granted only if the scientific purpose is permissible under the law and the research is conducted in line with the three Rs. That means work can be conducted in animals only if there are no alternatives, the minimum number of animals are to be used to meet the scientific objectives, and the level of harm caused must be limited to the minimum needed to achieve the approved scientific outcome. Thus, it is illegal in the UK to use an animal in science if the scientific objective can be practicably met using a validated non-animal alternative.

ASPA requires that all animals need to be housed and cared for in accordance with the code of practice published for this purpose. The regulator enforcing the Act operates a system to assure compliance of licence holders with the Act and the conditions of their licence, including inspection, audit, review of reports and managing cases of potential non-compliance. Under ASPA any testing required by another UK regulator is permissible. The requirement for such testing is set by the relevant expert regulator, such as the MHRA or the Health and Safety Executive.

With regard to testing of cosmetics, animal testing has been banned in the UK since 1998, and it is illegal to test cosmetic products or their ingredients on animals to meet the requirements of the 2009 regulations for cosmetics. However, ingredients used in cosmetics may require animal testing under other legislation, including REACH, for example to assess the safety of workers in manufacturing plants. Such testing can be lawful in the UK and is not in conflict with the bans under the cosmetics regulations. Under UK regulations to protect the environment and workers from the risks of chemicals, animal testing can be permitted under REACH where required by UK regulators. Again, however, such testing can be conducted only where there are no non-animal alternatives.

That brings me to the importance of the development of those alternatives, which, as the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, I am also committed to, because it is a huge sector for this country to lead in. In the report on post-Brexit opportunities that I wrote for the Prime Minister earlier this year, I argued that the UK should use our freedoms from the EU regulatory bloc to reach for the top and to regulate in these emerging areas of technology in order to build consumer and investor confidence. This is one of the areas where we could set the gold standard—we could set the benchmark for international groups to follow. That is why the

Government actively support and fund the development and dissemination of the three Rs—replacement, reduction and refinement—programme. This is achieved primarily through funding for the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research—NC3Rs—which works nationally and internationally to drive the uptake of technologies and to ensure that advances are reflected in policy, practice and regulations on animal research.

It is fair to say that the NC3Rs is viewed as being world-leading. Since its launch in 2004, we have committed £100 million through its research, innovation and early career awards in order to provide new three-R approaches for scientists in academia and industry. I am delighted to say that the relevant research council has increased funding by another 8% in the last year. That includes almost £28 million in contracts through its CRACK IT Challenges innovation scheme to UK and EU-based institutions, mainly focusing on new approaches for the safety assessment of pharmaceuticals and chemicals.

I checked earlier today, and it is not fair to say that nothing has come of that work. There is a whole raft of very important incremental improvements, including the development of *in silico* models of cardiotoxicity with Professor Rodriguez and *in vivo* models of liver tox and kidney tox, as well as the development of virtual dog modelling as part of the £2.5 million programme for the digital dog, to substantially reduce dependence on dogs in research.

The NC3Rs and the MHRA work to bring together stakeholders in academia, industry, Government and animal welfare organisations in order to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas and the translation of research for the benefit of both animals and science. That has led to changes in international regulations, and the NC3Rs has just recently launched a new £2.6 million call for the development of the virtual dog, to draw together technologies across the country. Building on the work of the NC3Rs, UK Research and Innovation is also funding a portfolio of research involving humans, animal models and non-animal technologies.

As hon. Members have highlighted, breakthroughs in stem cell research, cell culture systems, lab-on-a-chip, organ-on-a-chip, new computer modelling and imaging technologies, and the place of AI all provide a powerful nexus for technological approaches that will reduce, and in due course eliminate, the need for us to rely on animal models, but we have to move at a pace at which we can guarantee human safety in the development of new drugs. In 2015, the non-animal technologies road map for the UK was published by Innovate UK and the NC3Rs, in partnership with the research councils and the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. The NC3Rs and Innovate UK are currently reviewing the impacts of the investments that were made—a review in which I will be taking a keen and close interest.

In the time available, let me try to respond to some of the specific questions that were raised. The hon. Member for Easington raised the statistics on the number of experiments, but the number of experiments is not the same thing as the number of animals. One of the metrics that we are driving is to reduce the number of animals used—I just wanted to flag the difference between those two.

Animal sentience is already enshrined in law. It is a very important principle, which is precisely why we have a separate legal framework.

Various Members asked why we are not doing more to promote alternatives. I want to highlight that the existing law prevents the testing of animals, if there are alternatives. I am keen to make that very clear and to ensure that the whole industry understands that obligation.

The hon. Member for Easington raised the issue of the failure of medicines in humans, which I have tried to address. Nobody is suggesting that the use of animals is a guarantor of efficacy and safety in humans, but it is an important barrier to the unnecessary exposure of humans to unsafe medicines. I agree with him that we need to move as quickly as possible to find alternative ways to do that.

A number of colleagues mentioned the statistic that 90% of animal experiments fail. That is the same point, really. If “failing” means that those experiments do not perfectly predict efficacy and safety in humans, that is true, but the point is the other way around: those experiments are done to make sure that those things we know will not work in humans are prevented from going near humans. They are not the definitive and final test. The hon. Member for Putney mentioned that work is being done to improve the predictive quality of animal tests, which is a really important point, and we need to continue to manage that work. International bodies such as the OECD and the International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use are working on that issue, but following this debate I will be asking for reports on what progress has been made. I will be happy to share that information with colleagues who are here today.

Colleagues asked whether the funding for human-based research has been increased. The £100 million figure is over 10 years. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council has increased that figure by 8% for this year, and I assure Members that, following the comprehensive spending review, I will be looking to make sure that number is not reduced and, if possible, is increased. That is important, primarily for animal welfare and trust in research, but also because moving away from unnecessary and avoidable animal experiments and towards more accurate models as quickly as possible is good for UK life science, research and drug discovery. The hon. Member for Putney raised the issue of the balance between animal and non-animal testing, and I reiterate that using animals is allowed only where there are no non-animal alternatives.

Colleagues raised the issue of animal testing establishments breaking the law. There is a very robust system of licensing and inspection of such establishments, and any non-compliance is appropriately dealt with through a range of remedies, which start with advice, letters of reprimand and retraining, but ultimately lead to fines and prosecutions. I reassure Members that, from my point of view, any evidence of malpractice needs to be treated with the very highest degree of urgency, because public trust in this system is absolutely key.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran raised the issue of botulinum. To reassure the public, that was only the case for botulinum as a registered medicine being tested before it goes into humans. The issue of force feeding—which is a controversial term—was raised. I have checked the reason for that, and it is about making sure that the correct dose is administered, but again, the point is well made: we need to make sure that is being done in the most humane and sentient-friendly way. The hon. Lady also raised a question about the tightening of regulations. Those regulations are always being reviewed. This year the Home Office commenced a regulatory reform programme to ensure that leading regulatory practice is followed, and again, following this debate, I will be asking for an update about what improvements have been made. Finally, the hon. Lady raised the issue of tightening of regulations for cosmetics post-EU exit. We are now in the same position as the EU: testing on animals for cosmetic marketing is allowed only if no non-animal alternatives exist. The controversial case of Symrise is currently with the European Court of Justice.

In conclusion, some excellent points have been raised today. I will not repeat them all; I think I have set them out. I will be raising them with the Home Secretary and the Home Office, and while I do not believe we are yet at the point where we can completely move away from reliance on animals, I make it very clear that we need to move faster. We need to reiterate to the public that that is our intent, and that we have a duty of care and a commitment to better drug discovery. I believe deeply that genomics, phenotypics and data are key to that, and I hope all Opposition Members will join me in making the case for better use of data in the NHS to support drug discovery, because that is a key argument that is often not made. I am very happy to accept the challenge of providing a personal guarantee to the hon. Member for Newport West that, as Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, I will make every effort to avoid all unnecessary suffering.

7.29 pm

Martyn Day: On behalf of the Petitions Committee, which scheduled today’s debate, I thank all Members for their attendance and their contributions. It has been a very well-informed debate and an extremely consensual one, and I am grateful for the tone in which the Minister responded. I am sure that I speak for the other Members present when I say that if there is anything we can do to assist him in accelerating the quiet revolution, we will be happy to do so, because with 3.4 million procedures taking place, that revolution needs to be turbo-charged. I remain of the view that animal testing should be banned, because it is cruel and ineffective.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 581641 and 590216, relating to animal testing.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 25 October 2021

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Remedies Authority: Call-in Powers

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government are today announcing that they intend to make new powers to enable the Secretary of State for International Trade to call in certain investigations conducted by the Trade Remedies Authority (TRA).

These powers will ensure that the Secretary of State for International Trade has oversight for, and may direct, transition review investigations where she considers it is needed. The call-in power only applies to transition reviews and reconsiderations of transition reviews, and does not apply to new investigations. Where the call-in power is exercised, the Secretary of State for International Trade will set out her reasons for doing so in a statement to the House of Commons.

One of the advantages of being an independent trading nation is that we can adapt our domestic rules to UK economic circumstances.

The Government will always do everything in their power to defend UK industry and jobs and to allow our world-leading companies to compete on an equal footing.

The UK has always been a strong supporter of free trade. But free trade does not mean trade without rules. Rather than restricting free trade, trade remedies can help ensure that free trade is also fair trade. All major trading nations have a trade remedies system in place and many of these allow for greater ministerial involvement in decision making than the UK currently allows.

As announced on 30 June 2021, the Government will continue to consider whether wider changes might need to be made to the trade remedies framework to ensure it can consistently defend UK industry. DIT will continue to work collaboratively with the TRA on this process and in the application of the call-in power where the Secretary of State decides it is needed.

[HCWS351]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Homelessness Prevention Grant: One-off Payment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): The Government have protected renters across the country throughout the pandemic, providing an unprecedented £400 billion support package for the economy, a six-month stay on possession proceedings to protect renters from eviction, and extended notice periods. Thanks to this

support, the vast majority of private renters (93%) are up to date with their rent. We are spending almost £30 billion supporting people with their housing costs in 2020-21. With the UK economic recovery gathering pace, we are continuing to help people into work and increase their earning potential—the most sustainable route to financial security. We are investing billions through our plan for jobs and the lifetime skills guarantee.

We recognise, however, that some private renters have rent arrears built up as a result of the pandemic and vulnerable households may need additional support.

We have therefore announced an exceptional one-off payment of £65 million that will be made available to local authorities in 2021-22 through the homelessness prevention grant. The additional funding will support local authorities to help vulnerable households with rent arrears to reduce the risk of them being evicted and becoming homeless, including helping households to find a new home where necessary. Local authorities will target funding to those who need it most and help them to get back on their feet.

The investment builds on the £310 million in funding already available to local authorities through the homelessness prevention grant—a £47 million uplift on last year to help fully enforce the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—which is part of the overall investment of more than £750 million this year to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

This announcement underlines the Government's commitments to building back better from the pandemic, supporting renters and tackling homelessness and rough sleeping. The funding will ensure local authorities are given the resource they need to make this a reality in local areas. It will allow us to build upon the success we have had in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping with the number of families in temporary accommodation now at the lowest level since 2016 and a 37% decrease in rough sleeping recorded in the 2020 annual rough sleeping snapshot compared to 2019.

The £65 million funding is in addition to the recently announced £421 million household support fund to help vulnerable families in England with essentials over the coming months, which will be distributed by councils to those who need it most, including for example through small grants to meet daily needs such as food, clothing, and utilities. Further support is also available to renters through the welfare system. This includes £140 million in discretionary housing payments funding, which is available for local authorities this financial year to distribute to support renters with housing costs.

[HCWS352]

Slough Borough Council

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): Our local councils play a vital frontline role in our communities and our democracy. Everyone in the House recognises what they do and the importance of making sure they are able to contribute to our levelling-up agenda. We need our councils to be able to make our towns and cities great places to live, where everyone, no matter what their circumstances, has the

opportunity to thrive and can take advantage of effective and efficient service delivery. We need our councils to be able to support our most vulnerable citizens, for example through children's services and adult social care. In doing so, we need councils to make the most of every penny they receive from hard-pressed taxpayers to secure better outcomes. This will build confidence and trust between local authorities, local councillors, and the communities they serve. That is why the situation at Slough Borough Council is of such concern.

Slough Borough Council was one of a small number of local authorities to request exceptional financial support during the covid-19 pandemic. The Government agreed in principle to this request subject to the outcome of an external assurance review. This review considered the council's financial position and the strength of its wider governance arrangements, and provided an assessment of the council's ability to achieve financial sustainability without further recourse to public funds.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) led on the financial aspects of the review. Jim Taylor, former chief executive of Salford City Council, Trafford Council and Rochdale Borough Council, led on governance. I would like to thank Jim Taylor and CIPFA for their hard work. Copies of the reports have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The reports paint a deeply concerning picture of mismanagement, of a breakdown in scrutiny and accountability, and of a dysfunctional culture at Slough Borough Council. The council's internal controls and processes are inadequate, and the overview and scrutiny function is not equipped to operate effectively. Service delivery is hampered by ineffective core corporate functions such as IT and HR, and the residents of Slough are poorly served by the council's struggling revenues and benefits service. The council's contract management is weak and has resulted in rushed procurement, missed exit opportunities, and has delivered poor value for money. There is little evidence that the council understands the entirety of its commercial investments and their impact on its finances. The staffing structure lacks the capacity and capability to deliver on the challenges the council faces without external help. It is only very recently that senior members have grasped the seriousness and urgency of this situation and established it is not solely a result of financial accounting assumptions. The council cannot demonstrate a track record of making difficult decisions or of taking decisive action to bring about improvements. The reports confirm that, as indicated in the section 114 notice issued by the council earlier this year, the council's expected requirement for additional financial support in 2021-22 has risen from £15.2 million to over £100 million.

The review shows unequivocally that Slough Borough Council has failed to comply with its best value duty of continuous improvement, as required by the Local Government Act 1999. The financial challenge is acute, and the review has concluded that the council cannot become financially self-sustaining without considerable Government support.

To quote the review:

"An authority struggling to comply with its best value duty displays the following characteristics:

- an overreliance on interim officers
- a lack of corporate capacity
- many inadequate internal processes

signs of distrust among and between councillors and senior officers

the absence of effective scrutiny, transparency, and public consultation

insufficient capacity to achieve the change required

instances of poor-quality advice to members

a lack of understanding of how some meetings should be conducted? In some cases, members not understanding their role

significant unknown past liabilities yet to be determined.

Slough Borough Council has been displaying these characteristics over past years until present day and has failed its best value duty despite the concerted efforts in the last few months. It is unable to resolve the difficulties on its own."

Expressed in formal terms, the Secretary of State is satisfied that Slough Borough Council is failing to comply with its best value duty and he is considering exercising his powers of intervention to secure compliance with the duty. To that end, and in line with procedures laid down in the Local Government Act 1999, officials in my Department have today written to Slough Borough Council, asking for representations on the external assurance review and on the proposed intervention package. That letter also recognises the hard work of many of the staff at Slough Borough Council.

The proposed package is centred on the appointment of commissioners to exercise certain and limited functions as required, for a minimum of three years. The proposal is for the council—under the oversight of the commissioners—to prepare and implement an improvement plan, and report on the delivery of that plan to the commissioners every six months.

In detail, the council would be required to:

Complete, within three months, an assessment of the functional capability of all service areas to identify the gaps in capacity and capability.

Prepare and agree, within six months, action plans to the commissioners' satisfaction to address any functional shortcomings.

Undertake any actions the commissioners require to avoid incidents of poor governance or financial mismanagement that would jeopardise the council's ability to meet its best value duty.

Prepare and agree, within three months, a fully resourced improvement plan which should include action plans to deliver: financial sustainability; improvements in democratic services, including the audit and corporate governance functions; a scrutiny function that is fit for purpose; improvements in internal audit; properly functioning procurement and contract management functions; improvements in the council's IT function; an officer structure and scheme of delegation which provide sufficient resources to implement the improvement plan.

It is also proposed that Slough Borough Council will:

Devise and implement a programme of cultural change to rebuild trust between officers and members within six months.

Following the review of Council companies, within six months consider the roles and case for ongoing operation of each subsidiary company—except Slough Children First.

Take steps to enable better and evidence-based decision making, including enhancing data and insight functions.

I hope and expect Slough Borough Council will take the lead on this path to improvement. Given the gravity of the review's findings, the Secretary of State must consider what would happen if the council failed to deliver the necessary changes, at the necessary speed.

The Secretary of State is, consequently, proposing to direct the transfer to commissioners of all executive functions associated with:

The governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making by the council.

The strategic financial management of the council.

The oversight of collection of revenues and the distribution of benefits by the council.

All non-executive functions relating to the appointment and dismissal of statutory officers, and the designation of those persons as statutory officers at the council to the commissioners.

These powers are for use should the council not satisfy the commissioners in their improvement processes. I hope it will not be necessary for the commissioners to use these powers, but they must be empowered to do so if they consider the required improvement and reforms are not being delivered.

The commissioners will report to the Secretary of State at six monthly intervals on progress. They will also work closely with Trevor Doughty, the children's services commissioner for Slough Borough Council already in place and reporting to the Secretary of State for Education.

This will ensure that the improvements that he has overseen to date through the Department for Education's statutory intervention continue to be made, and that services for Slough's vulnerable children and families continue to be delivered to an acceptable standard. Similarly, the commissioners will be mindful of the interests of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the consultancy support available from the Department for Work and Pensions to improve the revenue and benefits service.

We are inviting representations from the council on the report and the Secretary of State's proposals by Friday 5 November. Given the conclusion of the review that

"Improvement for Slough Borough Council will rely on stability in political leadership, and it would be advisable that the council moves towards a four yearly election cycle at the earliest opportunity", we are also seeking views on how best to achieve this.

We want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council, and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Slough, to make their views on the Secretary of State's proposals known. Should the Secretary of State decide to intervene along the lines described here, he will make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act and appoint commissioners. I will update the House in due course.

Government do not take these steps lightly and recognise and respect the role of local councils in our communities and our democracy. Slough Borough Council is a rare case of failure. Most local authorities in England have a good record of service delivery, transparency, probity, scrutiny, and accountability. It is a record worth protecting. We will take whatever steps are necessary to uphold the good name of local government and to root out practices that do it down.

Finally, I urge council leaders across the country to read these reports. I know the local government sector—officers and members—will be saddened by the news that a council is failing. I would encourage all to make sure that they are not making the same mistakes as those that are described in this review. Local people deserve better than this from their local councils.

[HCWS353]

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