

**Thursday
18 November 2021**

**Volume 703
No. 73**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 18 November 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

BBC Licence Fee

1. **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What plans she has for the future of the BBC licence fee.
[904200]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): The Government have committed to maintaining the licence fee funding model for the duration of the charter period. Ahead of the next charter review process, we will undertake a detailed look at the TV licence model to ensure that it is fit for the future.

Alun Cairns: I warmly welcome the encouraging comments made by the Secretary of State, publicly and in the Chamber, on the BBC. There is the potential to cut or at least freeze the licence fee. It raises over £3.5 billion a year, much of which is used to create quality broadcasts. However, significant sums are used to squeeze out competition from the independent sector. This is the most regressive form of taxation, akin to the poll tax, so does she agree that a freeze or a cut would be not only a welcome boost to hard-pressed families, but a way of facilitating innovation within the BBC and encouraging competition from outside, creating a much more dynamic broadcast provision?

Ms Dorries: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. My priority is to secure a settlement that delivers value for money for those hard-pressed constituents and for the licence fee payer, while making sure that the BBC can continue to provide those very high-quality services to which he just referred. I have been having constructive discussions with the BBC and I believe that we are close to reaching an agreement. I hope he understands that I am unable to comment further while negotiations are taking place and are ongoing.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): When the Secretary of State is thinking about the future of the licence fee, will she talk to those in the independent sector that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned? Far from saying that they are being squeezed out, they will tell her that the

BBC and the system we have of a mixed economy in our creative industries in this country are underpinned by the quality of the BBC. It exercises a gravitational pull that is the envy of the world. I know she thinks deeply about these things, but let me say that it should not be tinkered with just because of ideology; this should be a practical decision on her part.

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his comments. He is absolutely right; I do speak regularly to the independent sector, including Channel 4 and other bodies within the sector. I take his comments on board and hear what he is saying. The BBC is a beacon for Britishness—for all that is British; it is a beacon across the world for broadcasting excellence. But even the editors of the BBC and those who run the BBC accept that there have been some problems. They are being dealt with and that is part of the ongoing discussions. I know that he is particularly concerned about this, but I am sure that he appreciates that while negotiations are ongoing I am limited in what I can say.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In 2017, the BBC agreed to take over the funding of free TV licences for over-75s in return for increased income from increases in the licence fee and other commercial funding streams. The BBC's behaviour since, in abolishing free TV licences, shows that it cannot be trusted. For its disgraceful treatment of pensioners, will the Secretary of State use the funding review in 2022 to scrap the licence fee altogether and let the BBC compete on a level playing field with other broadcasters?

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. On the charter review, the mid-term review begins—and we will start discussions—next year. The charter renewal, which is the point at which the future of the licence fee will be decided, does not take place until 2027. As I have just said, in those discussions the editorial perspective and a number of layers and things recently highlighted during the response to the Serota review are all under consideration, and my hon. Friend's comments have been noted.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We have spent much of the past two weeks talking about standards in public office, and on this side of the House we care deeply about the independence and impartiality of the BBC. I know that the Secretary of State also cares, to the extent that she actually has the time to police the BBC political editor's tweets and publicly rebuke her. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be highly inappropriate for a Government Minister overseeing licence fee negotiations to seek to influence editorial decisions, including how the Prime Minister was interviewed, and use the threat of reducing BBC licence fee funding while doing so?

Ms Dorries: There were four elements to that questions. On the tweet, I did not rebuke Laura Kuenssberg, somebody who is perhaps the best in the business—very professional; a very polite tweet. Some people, particularly some Opposition Members, do seem to have a problem understanding a composition of 240 characters; the tweet was completely misinterpreted. I was not rebuking Laura Kuenssberg and I never would.

LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Sport

2. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What steps she is taking to help support LGBTQ+ inclusion in sport. [904203]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I completely agree with the hon. Lady that sport is for everyone and inclusion is vital. We continue to see some progress in this area—for example, I pay tribute to Josh Cavallo for his leadership in becoming the first top-league male footballer to come out as gay while still playing professionally. I hope that we see others follow his lead.

At the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, we work closely with Sport England and UK Sport to ensure that people from all backgrounds feel included in sport. As part of that work, the updated code for sports governance will soon require sports governing bodies to agree a diversity and inclusion action plan. That will further support LGBT+ inclusion in sport throughout the country.

Hannah Bardell: I very much share the Minister's sentiments regarding Josh Cavallo, who has bravely come out, but he is still the only male gay footballer in the professional game in the world. Given the fact that we still do not have any other openly gay male footballers, what message does the Minister think it sends that Qatar—a country that strictly represses homosexual people, with homosexual acts punishable by a decade in prison for non-locals and death for local Muslims—is set to hold the next World cup? Does he agree that nations that treat LGBTQ people in such an abhorrent way should not be gifted international competitions like the World cup?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have frank conversations at international level with our counterparts around the world on issues such as human rights and, indeed, gay rights, and we will continue to have those conversations. I would also like to focus on the power of sport to highlight inclusion and diversity and to bring us together. I will focus on the positive things that sport can do over the major sporting events in the coming year, as will, I am sure, the whole House.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Inclusivity applies not just to the LGBTQ+ community, which the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) rightly highlighted, but to people of south Asian and, in fact, all minority heritage. With that in mind, does my hon. Friend share my consternation that the former chair of Yorkshire county cricket club had not even read the seminal Fletcher report on the lack of inclusivity at the county? Does he agree that the response to Mr Rafiq's brave testimony given in this House must be not only to clear out the Augean stables at Yorkshire but to ensure that the institutionally racist blocking of minority-community talent is stopped forever? We need a Kick It Out for cricket, right now.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes some very important points. I applaud his Select Committee's work this week in giving Azeem Rafiq a platform to make the comments that he made. It was difficult to hear because it was harrowing testimony. My hon.

Friend is absolutely right that the Fletcher report, which is pretty old, was clearly not acted on and should have been. I assure him that we have had frank conversations over the past couple of weeks with the England and Wales Cricket Board and others involved in cricket. I have had reassurance that the ECB takes the issue seriously and will act, and Tom Harrison has promised me that, with every fibre of his being, he will take action. But he and I know that we will judge the ECB on its deeds, not its words, and if it fails to act appropriately, we will not hesitate to intervene further.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I am sure the Secretary of State will join the Minister in congratulating Josh Cavallo, the only top-tier footballer in the world currently playing to have come out publicly as gay. He will be an inspiration for LGBT kids everywhere who love football. Does she agree that it is a damning indictment of football in this country that no professional player in the game who is currently playing has felt safe enough to come out publicly? Will she join me in calling on football bodies on these islands to look urgently at why that is and to do all they can to create an environment in which players feel safe to come out and be the role models we all need?

Nigel Huddleston: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; we investigated these very issues when we worked together on the Select Committee. It is a sad indictment of football that there has been an environment in which so many people do not feel they can express who they are—that is a terrible situation to be in. I agree that we all need to work together across all sports, not just football, to ensure that people feel comfortable in who they are.

Sports Bodies' Bids to Host Major Sporting Events

3. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to help support bids from sports bodies to host major sporting events. [904204]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Government are fully committed to working with event organisers to bid for and host major sporting events. Over the past 15 years, some of the world's most iconic events have taken place in the UK. That has cemented our position as a global home for these events, and we have an exciting programme of events in 2022, including the Commonwealth games, the women's UEFA European championships, and something close to your heart, Mr Speaker, the rugby league world cup.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister for that response. It was great to see that the Department was successful in two of the bids in the spending review, but, as the Minister is aware, there was a third unsuccessful bid, which was to bring the Ryder cup back to England for the first time since 2002. Will the Minister confirm that it is still very much his ambition to continue with this 2031 Ryder cup bid? If it is, would he like to visit the Belfry in my constituency, which would be a perfect location for the event, so that he can see for himself the fantastic facilities that are on offer there?

Mr Speaker: It has to be a yes.

Nigel Huddleston: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend and pay tribute to him for all the work that he does with the all-party group for golf. As he mentioned, there is ongoing work to explore the potential of a possible English bid to host the 2031 Ryder cup for the first time in England since 2002. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and UK Sport are in close contact with the key partners and venues, and our collective teams continue to work together to conclude this feasibility work and decide on the next steps. It is about the work as well as the finances here, and we will continue to work on this matter in every way that we can. I would be more than happy to visit his constituency and the Belfry and perhaps get round quite a few holes, including the last one.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you and I both support major sporting events coming to the UK, but I want to return briefly to the situation in cricket. The lesson for all sports is that those who fail to deal with cultures of racism and prejudice will ruin our country's reputation, not build it. I know, Mr Speaker, that you and I, and all Members, Ministers and shadow Ministers in this House were heartbroken listening to Azeem Rafiq yesterday, but, as the Minister has said, it is deeds not words that will make a difference, and that goes for the Government as well. Will the Minister place in the Commons Library any and all correspondence that he has had with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and can he tell the House what discussions he has had with it about its powers and resources and whether they are enough to deal with what we know, and have known for a long time, are chronic problems in sport?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady and I are at one in terms of the intent and what she said there about the abhorrence of what we have heard in cricket this week and, indeed, over a period of time. She is also absolutely right about issues in broader sport. I will happily place whatever documents are appropriate in the Library—I cannot promise to do so with every single document or discussion, because, as the hon. Lady knows, there are sometimes confidentiality and frank discussion concerns that inhibit our ability to put out every single piece of correspondence, but I will happily talk further with the hon. Lady, one to one, about this issue.

Harmful Content Online

4. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What progress she has made on introducing legislative proposals to establish a new regulatory framework to tackle harmful content online. [904205]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): The draft Bill was published in May 2021. Pre-legislative scrutiny is under way, but we expect the Joint Committee to report by 10 December. This scrutiny is a vital part in ensuring that the Bill delivers what we need to protect people online. I look forward to hearing the Committee's recommendations, which we will consider fully.

Owen Thompson: A Facebook whistleblower recently revealed that hateful political ads are five to 10 times cheaper for customers in what has been referred to as

subsidising hate. Facebook has since banned companies from targeting ads based on users' political beliefs, sexual orientation or religion, but these decisions should not be left to tech billionaires who could change their mood at any time. It is the Government's job to regulate, so what proposals can they come up with to take account of the views of the whistleblower in calling for further action to end subsidising hate online?

Ms Dorries: I take this opportunity to thank the Joint Committee for the work that it has undertaken, particularly gathering the evidence from Frances Haugen and others. We have taken a huge body of evidence. The Joint Committee is doing that very work at the moment. I am confident that every one of the examples that the hon. Gentleman has just highlighted will be legislated for in the regulatory framework, which will be given to Ofcom, to regulate those online platforms once the Bill becomes law. I appreciate his interest. I would also appreciate his input when the Bill passes through the House.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the key principle of the online safety Bill should be that offences that exist offline should be applied online—not only to those who post content with the intent of harming others, but to the platforms that host such content—and that we need to have ongoing close parliamentary scrutiny of which offences should apply and how?

Ms Dorries: This is a novel and groundbreaking Bill that will legislate in a way that has never been done before, in a new sector and a new environment. Ongoing scrutiny on a regular basis once the Bill becomes an Act will be extremely important. We will look at how we are going to manage that within the Bill.

Gambling Review White Paper

5. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Whether she plans to publish a White Paper on the gambling review. [904206]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I thank and commend the hon. Member for her energetic campaigning and leadership on this issue over many years as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for gambling-related harm. We had a constructive meeting, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and a Member for a fine constituency in Scotland—the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan)—just yesterday. We are in the process of preparing a White Paper that will set out our vision for gambling regulation in the coming months. I look forward to working closely with members of the APPG on this issue in the weeks ahead.

Carolyn Harris: The recent Public Health England report into the impact of gambling harm found that at-risk gamblers were twice as likely to gamble online than the rest of the general gambling population, so can we be assured that the forthcoming gambling White Paper will protect those most vulnerable to gambling harm by ensuring that restrictions to online stakes are introduced at the same level as those to on-land stakes?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to refer to those who suffer acute harm. Yesterday I met many people whose relatives have committed suicide, or who have lost their homes and whose families have been destroyed, to discuss the issue. I agree with the PHE report that online gambling can often be a lot more pernicious and addictive than in-person gambling. We will certainly be looking at that. We are acutely aware that the restrictions introduced to land-based stakes for fixed odds betting terminals could be applied online in some way, and are carefully studying how that could be calibrated.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will my hon. Friend look seriously in the White Paper at the abusive use by gambling companies of VIP rooms, through which companies deliberately target those who are gambling massively and losing massively to encourage them to gamble more and lose more? It is an immoral practice. Will he make certain in the White Paper that the Government will deal directly and immediately with this issue?

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend again for our meeting this week. I agree that actively encouraging—indeed, even inciting—people to gamble more without reference to affordability or their ability to pay is a damaging practice. We certainly intend to address that through the White Paper.

Football Index Collapse

6. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to help ensure that those responsible for the collapse of Football Index are held to account. [904207]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): The Gambling Commission has revoked BetIndex's operating licence and senior members of that company have surrendered their personal management licences. The Gambling Commission has also referred the company to the Insolvency Service to consider whether the directors breached insolvency or even fraud laws. We look forward to the Insolvency Service's report on the conduct of those directors.

Liz Twist: Too many of my constituents have been in touch to say that they have lost substantial amounts of money on the Football Index, so will the Minister explain further what is being done to help the Gambling Commission to understand these complex betting propositions in order to ensure better protections for customers, such as my constituents?

Chris Philp: The Government commissioned a detailed report by Malcolm Sheehan QC that was published towards the end of September. The report looked to ensure that all the relevant lessons are learnt, so that people who gamble are protected. Regarding those who lost money to BetIndex, the wind-up proceedings are ongoing at the moment and it is likely that some amounts will be available to be reimbursed to creditors, which would include customers. We should obviously let that process unfold.

Touring Musicians: Support to Work in Europe

7. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What progress the Government have made to help support touring musicians work in Europe. [904208]

13. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What progress the Government have made to help support touring musicians work in Europe. [904216]

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): We are working hard to help touring musicians to work in Europe. Arrangements are, in many areas, much more workable than has been reported. I am pleased to say that after this week's very good announcement from Spain, 21 member states now offer visa and work routes for musicians and performers. Accompanied portable musical instruments do not require a carnet and splitter vans are not subject to EU cabotage rules. We recognise, however, that challenges remain. I had a very productive meeting with the sector yesterday to work through remaining concerns. We also continue to work with the remaining six member states that do not allow visa and permit-free touring.

Chris Elmore: I appreciate what the Minister says in terms of Spain, although it should be pointed out that the industry is saying that it has been working with its counterparts in Spain and actually the Government have not been terribly helpful, so it has been up to the community themselves. The Minister mentions cabotage rules. As she has been working with the industry, will she set out when these issues will be resolved? It is all well and good having meetings, but if things are not resolved, we are destroying options for our talented musicians to travel around Europe. They cannot take their speakers and mics and all the other things that they need in order to do their jobs. The Government really should be doing so much better on this issue.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising his concerns. I reiterate that there has been a real team effort on this. We have had fantastic working with our embassy in Madrid, with the industry and with Ministers from across Government, so I would push back on that. We discussed some of the technical issues on transportation only yesterday with the Department for Transport, and there are various things that I am going to take away and discuss with the Secretary of State for Transport. These are very live issues. There is a debate later today where we can discuss these things in more detail, should he be minded.

Alex Davies-Jones: I wholeheartedly welcome the news that musicians will no longer need visas to go on short-term tours in Spain, and I am hugely grateful to those in the sector, particularly the Association of British Orchestras and Live, who have worked so tirelessly on the matter. This just goes to show that these problems are not insurmountable and can be overcome. However, as the Minister stated, there are still six member states where problems persist. Will she provide an update on the discussions she is having with those six member states so that musicians and touring bodies are able to carry out their work overseas?

Julia Lopez: Yes, we are hopefully going to use this moment with Spain to make progress with the remaining countries. As there are only six left, we think that we can make a lot of good progress, and we will be having meetings accordingly.

Internet Connections: Rural Communities

8. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help improve internet connections in rural communities. [904209]

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): Thanks to the work of the industry and record Government investment, we are making phenomenal progress to deliver the biggest broadband roll-out in UK history, and also tackling the digital divide between rural and urban areas. Some 60% of UK homes and businesses can now access gigabit-capable speeds, and over 97% can access superfast broadband. But there is much more to do, and I recently updated the House on our Project Gigabit delivery plan to target early coverage of those without superfast.

Selaine Saxby: I still have constituents in North Devon who are not part of either the rural roll-out programme backed by Building Digital UK or any commercial roll-out. However, some villages with commercial gigabit-capable fibre are being over-fibred by taxpayer-funded BDUK contracts. Will my hon. Friend work with organisations such as Connecting Devon and Somerset to give them more powers to edit contracts so that taxpayers' money is not used to over-fibre?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a formidable campaigner for her constituents in North Devon. I was glad to respond in more detail to some of her concerns in a debate we had last week. The telecoms market is thriving, as she knows, and there is a lot of movement on the ground. I assure her that officials in BDUK are working extremely closely with Connecting Devon and Somerset and local suppliers in Devon so that we can avoid over-build where possible. I am sure that we will be in touch very closely throughout this process to make sure that her constituents get what they need.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The digital divide between cities and valleys is getting wider in south Wales. Gigabit broadband is essential for our economy, yet it has barely begun in Blaenau Gwent and we are being left behind. Will the Minister prioritise working with the Welsh Government and Ofcom to deliver better internet so that levelling up is not just a hollow slogan?

Julia Lopez: I am very keen to work with the Welsh Government, in so far as I can be helpful, with their roll-out. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of tackling the digital divide. This is going to be a real issue. We are very cognisant of it and looking to do all we can to make sure that there is not that disparity between those with great internet access and those who do not have it.

Horse Racing

10. **Matt Hancock** (West Suffolk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support horse racing. [904212]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I commend my right hon. Friend for his continued active advocacy on behalf of British horse racing and Newmarket in particular. I am pleased to tell the House that racecourses are accessing £21 million from the sport survival package. They have also had £28 million in cash-flow and hardship funding, in addition to which the Horserace Betting Levy Board provided £97 million in 2019-20 to support the sport.

Matt Hancock: I am very grateful for the work that the Department and the Minister have done in the pandemic to support horse racing, but as a major contributor to the economy and soft power, and with one in three jobs in Newmarket in my constituency connected with horse racing, is it not vital that we strengthen further the horserace betting levy to ensure that all betting makes a contribution and to ensure that we get the support for horse racing, which is such a glorious sport?

Chris Philp: I agree entirely about the importance of horse racing to the UK, both economically and more generally. As I have said, the levy contributed £97 million in the year before the pandemic, about 10% more than the forecast. Even in the pandemic year 2020-21, it contributed £80 million, so generally speaking the levy has returned more money than was initially expected. However, we are always willing to look at evidence, so if there is anything that my right hon. Friend would like to send in that we could carefully consider, I would be delighted to look at that.

Topical Questions

T2. [904228] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Our world-class arts, culture and heritage received another huge boost in the Budget and spending review, with more than £850 million to protect museums, galleries, libraries and local culture in every corner of the country. The Budget also contained a number of measures to back our booming tech sector. The Budget also contained measures for football pitches and tennis courts, to the value of £205 million of investment across the country. In the meantime, we continue to make good progress on our trailblazing online safety Bill. I met the Joint Committee two weeks ago, and I look forward to receiving its report.

Antony Higginbotham: Culture and heritage are so important to our local communities, and that is particularly the case in my constituency of Burnley and Padiham. We have some real gems, like Townley Hall and Burnley Empire theatre. The latter would be a real benefit to our town centre, but it is in need of regeneration and restoration. What is the Department doing to help communities restore some of these assets so that we can make them better?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend raises an important question. Historic and cultural buildings, such as the Empire and Townley Hall, are at the heart of their

communities, and we are determined to protect them for future generations. I am pleased that eight organisations in my hon. Friend's constituency received just over £1 million from the culture recovery fund, as well as £20 million from the levelling-up fund, and a grant of more than £1 million from Historic England's high streets heritage action zone initiative. I urge my hon. Friend to contact Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to explore further funding opportunities.

Mr Speaker: I remind everybody that we need to be short and sweet in topical questions to get everyone in.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): After the Owen Paterson scandal, where the Government did not like the fair process that was set up and just ripped up the rules, now the Government have changed the job description for the chair of Ofcom to give failed candidate Paul Dacre another go and put a lobbyist whose firm has represented Facebook, Apple and Sky on the panel to scrutinise candidates. Will the Secretary of State restart the process with the original job requirements and an independent panel free of any conflict of interest, and confirm that she will accept the recommendations of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport when it reports on the prospective candidate?

Ms Dorries: As the hon. Lady knows, the appointments process follows due process, is in line with the governance code for public appointments and is under the auspices of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. We are very careful to follow that code to the letter, and that is exactly what we are doing. As the process has already been launched and is under way, as the hon. Lady knows, I cannot comment further.

Rachael Maskell: It seems that theory and practice just do not add up. As we have repeatedly heard, Government corruption is not restricted to this place. The public appointments process has led to a litany of political appointments, notably Tory peer Baroness Tina Stowell as the chair of the Charity Commission after the DCMS Committee rejected her appointment. Her tenure was marked by political manipulation rather than independent governance. The current process for a replacement is being led by John Booth, who donated £200,000 to the Tory party. Will the Secretary of State recommence the appointment process, removing all political interests and ensuring full independence of the appointment panel, and then—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to get other people in on topicals. It is unfair for people to take all the time, when it is Back Benchers' Question Time as well. Please, we have to help Back Benchers. I call the Secretary of State.

Ms Dorries: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady mentioned sleaze and this Government about four times: I thought she was going to enlighten us on the earnings from Mishcon de Reya received by the Leader of the Opposition, but she failed to do so. She also failed to mention that this Government appointed Vera Baird, the former Labour MP for Redcar, as the Victims' Commissioner. The process is fair. It is overseen by the Commissioner for Public Appointments and a code of governance.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can I have a meeting with the Minister of State to share my concerns about the telecommunications code?

Mr Speaker: I am sure it is a straightforward yes, and then we can move on.

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): Yes.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Up and down the country, local councils are setting their budgets for next year. Due to the lack of help in this Government's Budget last month, there will be more closures of leisure centres and swimming pools. When will the sports Minister step in to provide funding to stop these devastating losses?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, we have stepped in to support sport to the tune of £1 billion during the pandemic, with £100 million specifically to support leisure centres, to enable them to survive during covid and then remain open. We are always willing to work together with local councils, which also have skin in the game and responsibilities for the delivery of local leisure facilities, to ensure that everybody can swim.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Last night I met the national Girl Guide advocates, who spoke passionately about the need to tackle online abuse and cyber-flashing, which is made much more scary when it is anonymous. I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State cares deeply about these issues. Will she meet me to discuss the ten-minute rule Bill I am introducing next week to look at choice of verification?

Ms Dorries: I am happy to.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Channel 4 makes an enormous contribution to job growth and region-based media production. In fact, of the 200 independent media production companies that Channel 4 has commissioned over the past two years, almost 140 rely on the broadcaster for at least half their work. Will the Minister concede that the privatisation of Channel 4 will endanger hundreds of jobs and make a mockery of the Government's levelling-up agenda?

Julia Lopez: We are currently looking at all the consultation responses we have received on the question of whether to move ahead with the privatisation of Channel 4. We will look at the question of the independent sector and its health. The sector is thriving at the moment and the impact of the public service broadcasting sector on it is reducing, but it is something we will look closely at.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Joe Nihill, a 23-year-old former Army cadet from Whinmoor in my constituency, tragically took his own life after accessing so-called suicide forums. His mother Catherine and his sister-in-law Melanie are running an inspirational campaign to ensure that what happened to Joe does not happen to other families. As we wait for the online safety Bill to progress, will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Catherine and Melanie on their inspirational campaign and in sending a firm message to tech giants that they will now have to take action to remove these suicide forums that prey on vulnerable people?

Ms Dorries: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating his constituents. He is absolutely right, and the online harms Bill and the regulatory framework that will accompany it will do just what he asks. Those online platforms and online giants have the ability right now to remove those harmful algorithms that direct children and young people to suicide chat rooms. I call on them to start that work, because if they do not, the Bill will be here in the new year and they will be subject to huge fines and possibly criminal action.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The actions of Football Index can only be described as scandalous. The Scottish National party called for an inquiry, and that has been delivered. Can the Minister guarantee that the actions the Government take as a result of the inquiry will ensure that such shameful behaviour by the gambling firms will never be repeated?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I thank the hon. Member for his question. We are taking this very seriously. As I said on an earlier question, a detailed review by a QC is being conducted already to make sure that the regulatory action—whether by the Gambling Commission or, in different circumstances, the FCA—is appropriate. It is important that these gambling firms are looked at very carefully, and it is our intention that the Gambling Commission do that.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Can I reiterate the earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) about the collapse of Football Index, and reiterate the need for Ministers to look at the issues of better redress and the failings in this case, on behalf of my constituents affected?

Chris Philp: Yes, it is being looked at extremely carefully, and I can assure the hon. Lady that that work is going on.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Offences Against the Person Act 1861: Section 24

1. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve prosecution levels relating to section 24 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. [904187]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): The recent rise in reports of spiking is incredibly concerning. The Crown Prosecution Service will always treat maliciously administering poison as a high harm offence. In 2020-21, the CPS brought 222 charges under section 24, which was an increase of 22% on the previous year.

Chris Elmore: It is truly horrendous to see reports in recent weeks about the huge numbers of people who are being spiked and then unable to find any sort of recourse to the criminal justice system. I am sure the Attorney General agrees with that. Does she further agree that it cannot be right to simply wait for the police to tell the Government how they can improve the levels of prosecution and bring about new charges? It really should be now for the Government to review the legislation to ensure that the victims are able to find redress and that those people who undertake spiking are prosecuted with the full force of the law.

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue, and I share his concern. I am really pleased that the Home Secretary has asked the National Police Chiefs' Council to urgently review the extent and scale of the issue. Of note is that there was an increase of 46% in the number of prosecutions brought by CPS Wales for offences under section 24. On the point about the legislative framework, he will know of course that section 24 is not the only avenue for redress. There is section 23, and section 61 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which can be used in appropriate circumstances.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Women and girls in pubs and nightclubs understandably feel vulnerable to having their drinks spiked, being spiked by needles or being supplied with dodgy and illegal drugs. The maximum penalty under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 is 10 years in prison. How many of those who have been prosecuted have been sentenced to 10 years?

The Attorney General: As I mentioned, several legal bases may be invoked in regard to these circumstances. Section 23, which covers poisoning that endangers a person's life, carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. CPS figures show that there were 10 charges for that offence in 2020-21. Section 61, which is an offence to administer a substance to a person without their consent, again carries a maximum of 10 years in prison. Again, there were 10 charges for that offence in 2020-21.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Chilling reports of women being spiked by injection are just the latest example of the epidemic of violence that has left women and girls feeling unsafe. The latest figures show there were 1,223 reports of spiking under this Act, yet only 88 convictions, so will the Attorney General confirm her Government's support for Labour's amendment, tabled in the other place, calling for a wide-ranging review into the prevalence of spiking and the response of the criminal justice system when investigating these offences, or will she continue to allow women and girls to be failed by this Government?

The Attorney General: As I mentioned, the Home Secretary has already asked for an urgent review on the scale of this particular problem, about which we are very concerned. We are supporting the roll-out of pilot initiatives to improve the safety of women at nightlife venues. The £5 million safety of women at night fund and the £25 million safer streets fund will support projects that target potential perpetrators, seek to protect potential victims and deliver programmes intended to address offending behaviour.

Supreme Court Judgments: Scottish Parliament Legislative Proposals

2. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for the Government's policies of the Supreme Court judgments of 6 October 2021 on the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament relating to its legislative proposals on the (a) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and (b) European Charter of Local Self-Government. [904188]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I welcome the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court to agree with the Law Officers that all provisions raised by virtue of our reference under section 33 of the Scotland Act 1998 were outside the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. It is for the benefit of all citizens throughout the UK that both Governments operate within their respective powers, as set out in the Scotland Act 1988. That is why this decision is important.

Robin Millar: I thank the Attorney General for her answer. Many, indeed all of our laws are crafted carefully, thoughtfully, and often after vigorous debate, and many offer important protections. Will my right hon. and learned Friend reassure the House that any devolved gender recognition legislation will not constrain or reinterpret the protections under the Equality Act 2010?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend raises an important point about our devolution settlement, and the Government are clear on their position as set out in our recent response to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. First, the protection of single-sex spaces is extremely important; secondly, we must ensure that transgender adults are free to live their lives as they wish, without fear of persecution, while maintaining checks and balances in the system. Finally—this is not directly related to the GRA, but it is important nevertheless—we must ensure that under-18s are protected from decisions that they could make that are irreversible in the future. Any legislation that the Scottish Parliament may pass in that regard will not affect this Government's position on our Gender Recognition Act.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): To return to the original topic, perhaps the Attorney General should take this opportunity to congratulate the Scottish Parliament on voting unanimously to incorporate the convention on the rights of the child, and follow Holyrood's example, instead of trying to stymie it. Three little subsections of the Act were ruled incompetent, as they would limit the powers of this Parliament and reserved public authorities to contravene children's rights. Will the Attorney General explain why her Government fought so hard for the powers to breach children's rights, and will she ensure that the powers are transferred to Edinburgh to complete the job? In short, let us prioritise children's rights instead of this Parliament's rights to trample all over them.

The Attorney General: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I take greater instruction from the President of the Supreme Court who stated in paragraph 77 of his judgment that there had been a decision by the Scottish Parliament to draft and enact a provision whose plain meaning did not accurately represent the law. That could not have been Parliament's intention in enacting the Scotland Act 1998, and that is a decisive and emphatic statement from the Supreme Court. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that if the Scottish National party really cared about children's rights, it would stop obsessing about constitutional division and instead focus on reversing the plummeting standards in Scottish schools.

Asylum Seekers: Channel Crossings

3. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Whether she has had discussions with the Home Secretary on proposals in the Nationality and Borders Bill to intercept small boats and return asylum seekers to France. [904189]

11. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the Nationality and Borders Bill proposals to intercept small boats and return asylum seekers to France. [904198]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): The traffickers organising these dangerous crossings are putting lives at risk, and it is vital that we do everything we can to protect them and prevent them from operating from France. We must break the business model of criminal gangs exploiting vulnerable people. Our position is clear: people should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, and they should not risk their lives by making these dangerous journeys across the channel.

Martyn Day: There is a duty on ships to rescue persons who are in danger at sea, in both customary international law and in binding international conventions such as the 1974 international convention for the safety of life at sea and the 1982 UN convention on the law of the sea. Given the UK Government's supposed commitment to an international rules-based system, how does the Minister square that with clearly flouting those rules?

The Attorney General: The Home Office is taking lawful action in the channel to disrupt the traffickers' life-threatening and criminal business model, and that really should not be in question. This Government are taking urgent and necessary measures to fix our broken asylum system, stop people traffickers, and deter illegal entry, and I am most disappointed that the hon. Gentleman and his party do not see fit to support that.

Alan Brown: The Home Office proposals are immoral, dangerous and, as we have just heard, illegal, because they break international law. This Government want to force others to do their bidding by breaking international law on their behalf. Any QC and Attorney General worth their salt would be telling the Home Secretary to forget her plans and not to break international law. Why will the Attorney General not step up to the plate?

The Attorney General: The UK prides itself on its leadership within the international system and it discharges its international obligations in good faith. We have a proud history of providing protection to those who need it and to migrants who have a lawful basis to be here. My personal background is one such case of reference. Let me just say this. I have acted for the Government in court on several immigration and asylum cases—many, many of them—and I can tell the House that our asylum system is broken. Our Bill fixes it and it is a shame that the hon. Gentleman voted against it.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that it would not be practical or possible in law for international law to condone illegal immigration?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are international rules and conventions, which bind state parties, on our duties when it comes to maritime law and our obligations. We honour those duties and take them very seriously. We also have a domestic regime of immigration and asylum, which we are able to modify and change now that we have left the European Union.

Rape Conviction Rates

4. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on (a) the role of the CPS in improving conviction rates for rape and (b) the end-to-end rape review targets for rape prosecutions. [904190]

5. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What recent discussions has she had with the CPS on increasing the number of successful prosecutions for (a) rape and (b) serious sexual assault. [904191]

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): The Law Officers regularly meet ministerial colleagues, as well as the Director of Public Prosecutions and others, to drive forward progress on what we all want to see: justice for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. Last week, I went to meet RASSO—rape and serious sexual offences—prosecutors at the Crown Prosecution Service west midlands, and was pleased to congratulate them on helping to secure several recent convictions, including that of a double rapist, Daniel Jones, who was later imprisoned for 17 years for his appalling crimes.

Alex Cunningham: A recent report from the National Audit Office states that rape cases are most at risk of collapse as people withdraw. Does the Minister agree that the Government are failing rape victims, who can wait years for their cases to be heard, leading many of them to withdraw from the process? Can he explain why the Government opposed Labour's proposals, which would have enabled the fast-tracking of rape cases and the pre-recording of victims' evidence?

The Solicitor General: That is because there are already active measures to pre-record evidence, as the hon. Gentleman should know. He is absolutely right that we need to speed up the system. That is why "RASSO 2025" was published by the CPS; that is why there is a joint national action plan between the police and the CPS to improve file quality; that is why there is an end-to-end rape review; and that is why the Government have put £80 million into the CPS to ensure that justice can be done.

Selaine Saxby: Local community safety partnerships across Devon and Cornwall estimate that in 2019-20 there were 23,000 victims of sexual assault across the two counties, including in my own constituency. How will the Minister ensure that local leaders are given the powers and tools they need to hold all criminal justice agencies, including the CPS, to account locally for delivering the progress that is so needed on prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent question. She is a tireless champion of this issue in North Devon. Every agency, from the police to the CPS to Whitehall Departments, has been mobilised to drive improvements in outcomes for these complex

and sensitive cases. As well as launching "RASSO 2025" by the police and the joint national action plan, the Government are investing heavily in the recruitment of ISVAs—independent sexual violence advisors—to support complainants through the court process. I will just say this: it is early days, but initial data is positive. The number of rape prosecutions in the second quarter of this year was 14% higher than in the last quarter pre-covid, and the number of convictions 16% higher over the same period.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The rape review lumps together spending on tackling domestic violence and rape. The headline figure is £176 million, but £125 million of that is for refuge accommodation. That is vital, but it is nothing to do with improving victims' experience of the criminal justice system or improving rape convictions. Can the Minister explain just how much new funding he has secured from the Treasury to support rape victims to get justice?

The Solicitor General: I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman raised that point. He is absolutely right that refuge accommodation is very important, but it is not everything. One of the things that I am very proud of is that an additional £27 million is going on recruiting 700 independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic abuse advisers. Those individuals can provide critical support to people who, frankly, might find the whole process forbidding. Also, we have done work to publish the victims' code in April 2021, which provides victims with the rights that they deserve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I understand the Minister's response well, but this is not just about cases going to court more quickly to have them processed. It is also about those ladies and rape victims who are very vulnerable and very lonely. What will happen in the time period until the case is heard to ensure that they have the assistance and help that they need, from every point of view?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. One of the other things that we have done is to increase funding for rape support centres by two thirds so that individuals know that they are not alone. The constant refrain from individuals will be, "I didn't feel supported", but it would be quite wrong for the message to go out suggesting that there is not that support. This is what victims said after a case recently in my county of Gloucestershire. Victim B said:

"I would just like to say how happy I am with the whole criminal justice system. The support offered is amazing."

Victim C said:

"The support from the police and GRASAC (Gloucestershire's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre) has been amazing".

That support is out there and we want to make sure it is there in ever greater quantities.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the Solicitor General to his place for his first departmental questions. He brings massive personal experience to cases of this kind and has prosecuted exactly these sorts of cases. Does he agree that there has been significant improvement in the treatment of victims, particularly after the revision of the Crown Prosecution Service legal guidance—for example, in the awareness of trauma and the impact that that has on victims—and

in getting the right balance in dealing with digital evidence? Is it not important now that we maintain the capacity of the courts system to bring these cases to trial in the timeliest fashion in terms of judges, court availability and quality, experienced advocates to deal with these important prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. As always, he is absolutely right: we have to strike this important balance in respect of digital evidence to ensure that the evidence to put people behind bars is appropriately obtained without compromising the right to a fair trial. No one here wants to do that. He is absolutely correct about capacity as well. The Lord Chief Justice has made that point very powerfully and it is one to which we are acutely alive.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I also welcome the Solicitor General to his place. When asked by Sky News about rape prosecutions, the Prime Minister said that the CPS is not taking rape prosecutions seriously enough. He also refused to commit to the Government's promise in their rape review to restore rape prosecution rates to 2016 levels by the end of this Parliament. Does the Solicitor General agree with the Prime Minister's comments? Is this not just another example of victims being abandoned by this Government?

The Solicitor General: No, that is not the case at all. The really important thing is to look at the actions. One of the things that I was very heartened by in this year's spending review is that the additional funding that is going into the CPS is extremely significant—it is £80 million. To put that into concrete terms, that means that there will be an additional 100 RASSO prosecutors. The ones I met in CPS west midlands were incredibly motivated, diligent, decent and determined individuals. The Prime Minister is very clear about wanting to see improvements, and he is getting behind it by providing pounds, shillings and pence.

County Lines Drug Dealing: Prosecutions

6. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting offences relating to county lines drug dealing. [904192]

The Attorney General: The CPS's early investigative advice on county lines with the police is making a difference. The majority of county lines offending relates to drug convictions and human trafficking. This year—although these figures do not relate to county lines offending alone—the CPS has secured 36,000 drug convictions and 238 human-trafficking convictions.

Duncan Baker: I want to place on record my thanks to Norfolk police; last month, it arrested 12 county lines drug dealers in a week-long crackdown against drugs across Norfolk. That is to be hugely applauded. I just want to check: do the police have the right support and, more importantly, does the CPS have all the tools that it needs and the resources to prosecute drug-dealing across our country successfully?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I applaud his police team in Norfolk for their great results. In the east of England, Operation Orochi has led to significant terms of imprisonment imposed on 42 offenders convicted. As of October 2021, the number of county lines operations covered by the operation has been more than halved. They work closely with the police, leading to a high volume of convictions since November 2019.

Covid-19: Recovery of Criminal Justice System

7. **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps she is taking with (a) the CPS, (b) Government Legal Service and (c) Cabinet colleagues to support the recovery of the criminal justice system since the easing of covid-19 restrictions. [904193]

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): The Law Officers frequently meet the CPS and colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and elsewhere to progress the recovery of the criminal justice system. It is welcome that the Government have significantly increased the budget for the CPS with an additional £85 million at the 2019 spending review and a 12% uplift over the period of this spending review, to help to recruit and retain prosecutors and modernise digital infrastructure. Court capacity plainly plays a part, too; I commend my hon. Friend for his work to increase the judicial retirement age, which will make an important difference.

Edward Timpson: You will know, Mr Speaker, that I was delighted that the Government took up the cudgels of my private Member's Bill—the Magistrates (Retirement Age) Bill—and are now legislating to raise the retirement age of magistrates from 70 to 75. On its own, however, that will not solve the substantial backlog that we still have in our courts, particularly our magistrates courts. What other measures can be taken in the meantime, over and above what is already happening, to ensure that we can get through it? Justice needs to be done fairly, but also efficiently.

The Solicitor General: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point. Magistrates courts hear more than 90% of all criminal cases—a point that is not always given the emphasis that it might be. In some parts of the country, magistrates courts have cleared their backlogs completely; indeed, some did so many months ago. To support that recovery, the Government took measures including sitting additional courts on Saturdays and installing plexiglass in more than 450 courtrooms. We want to keep up that momentum with the so-called trial blitz courts planned for later this year. We are fortunate in this country to have dedicated and public-spirited magistrates who continue to do an exemplary job in ensuring that justice is done.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. If we are brief, we might just clear all the questions.

CPS Prosecutions: Hate Crime

8. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting cases of hate crime. [904195]

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): Hate crime can have a devastating impact on individuals and communities. In the last year, the CPS prosecuted more than 10,000 such offences; in 79% of those cases that resulted in a conviction, the court agreed to impose a sentence uplift to reflect this important aggravating factor. Let the message go out: those who seek to divide our society through hate can expect a robust response.

Bob Blackman: Hate crime is clearly a serious concern right across this country. Do local Crown Prosecution Service areas have all the resources that they need to take these measures on and prosecute people for hate crime?

The Solicitor General: Yes, and those resources are growing. CPS London North maintains hate crime co-ordinators and inclusion and community engagement managers to provide a single point of contact on all aspects of hate crime prosecution. It has achieved some of the highest sentence uplift statistics anywhere in the country, with increases handed down in 83% of cases.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

9. **Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme in 2021. [904196]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): In 2021, the unduly lenient sentence scheme has continued to ensure that the seriousness of offending is properly reflected in the sentence imposed. More than 100 cases have been heard by the Court of Appeal this year. I have personally presented cases, securing an increase in the sentence imposed on a rapist earlier this year.

Laura Trott: Along with many in this House, I have become increasingly concerned about unduly lenient sentences for rape, especially in relation to crimes committed against minors. Last month, a man was jailed after being found guilty of six counts of rape of a 14-year-old, two counts of sexual activity with a child, and other sexual offences; he was sentenced to only nine years' imprisonment. That follows reports that last year a man was jailed after being found guilty of raping a three-year-old in a wood; his sentence, too, was nine years.

Those prison sentences are simply not long enough. Will the Attorney General agree to look at those cases and meet me to discuss what more can be done to ensure that the sentences match the crimes committed?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend raises some very grave cases. I assure her that such offences are within the scope of the unduly lenient sentence scheme, and that the Solicitor General and I will consider every such referral to us with the greatest care.

I am proud of our work in respect of offending against minors. In three recent cases concerning child sexual abuse, offenders' non-custodial sentences were replaced with immediate custody, which I hope sends a clear message about how seriously such offending is taken.

CPS Prosecutions: Serious Crime

10. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to help improve prosecution rates for serious crime. [904197]

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): Through its three national central casework divisions and 13 regional complex casework units, the CPS continues to work with the National Crime Agency and other criminal justice partners to bring offenders to justice for a range of serious crimes, including serious and organised crime, terrorism, and serious and complex economic crime.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Serious Fraud Office has made clear that a new criminal offence of failure to prevent economic crime would significantly increase the number of successful prosecutions for fraud. What steps are we taking to bring that about?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Economic crime is not a victimless crime; it strikes at the very heart of the society that we want to be. I am pleased to see that the Law Commission published its discussion document on corporate criminal liability earlier this year. Both the CPS and the SFO provided input, and took part in a series of events to share their operational insights. The Law Commission is aiming to publish an options paper early next year, and will then work with the Government to implement any next steps.

Northern Ireland Protocol: EU Negotiations

Mr Speaker: As the House will be aware, I have previously exercised my discretion regarding the sub judice resolution to allow references to the Northern Ireland protocol on the grounds of national importance. Although there are relevant live legal proceedings, I am further exercising that discretion today in relation to the urgent question.

10.35 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Northern Ireland protocol and negotiations with the European Union.

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Let me begin by reaffirming the Government's commitment to keeping both Houses of Parliament updated on the UK-EU relationship. We remain committed to doing just that. My right hon. and noble Friend Lord Frost gave the House of Lords an update on EU relations last Wednesday, 10 November, in the form of an oral statement. Unfortunately, as this honourable House was in recess at the time, it could not be repeated here on the same day. The timing of that update was unavoidable, led by external international business. However, I recognise the importance of keeping both Houses duly informed.

Mr Carmichael: I think that that answer was more remarkable for what it did not say than for what it did, but I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. It is a shame that it was necessary, and that the Government have not seen fit to offer the House a statement. At the very least, we would have liked to hear some commitment from the Government today that there would be no triggering of article 16 this side of Christmas. The disruption that that would cause would be catastrophic, but still we hear nothing from them. I hope that the Minister will address that point when he replies to my supplementary question.

Listening to the Minister today, and to his colleagues on the airwaves in recent weeks, one could almost believe that the terms of our agreement with the European Union and the Northern Ireland protocol were nothing to do with them: "a big boy did it and ran away". It is almost as if those matters were negotiated by someone else, and were voted through the House in the teeth of Conservative opposition. However, we know that the truth is very different.

Article 16 does not exist as a "get out of jail free card" for the Government when they do not like the deal that they have done. It is a mechanism that allows for the taking of unilateral "safeguard" measures if either the EU or the UK concludes that the deal is leading to serious practical problems or causing diversion of trade. To invoke it in the way of which Ministers speak would be seen as an act of bad faith on the part of the UK Government.

What people and businesses in Northern Ireland want and need is pragmatic solutions to be reached and implemented in good faith, not more posturing. Businesses in Northern Ireland are crying out for a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement which would remove at a stroke

the vast majority of the disruption for people on either side of the Irish sea, and that is where the Government should be devoting their energy. Will the Minister please update the House on the negotiation of that and other agreements under the protocol? In respect of the question of the role of the European Court of Justice in supervising this agreement, can the Minister explain why the Government now identify that as a problem when it was clearly within the protocol when it was negotiated and signed?

The problems of which the Government now complain are all of their own making. They chose to take us out of the customs union and to put a border down the Irish sea. It was a remarkable choice for a supposedly Unionist party to make, but they made it, and we now have to live with it. This is the time for posturing to stop and for mature government to start. A recent Queens University survey found that 52% of people in Northern Ireland support the protocol; I am sure the Minister will agree that that is a significant figure. Will he now get on and make it work?

Michael Ellis: With regard to the latest on the UK-EU relationship, my noble Friend Lord Frost and Vice-President Šefčovič met in London on 12 November to consider the state of play in discussions relating to the Northern Ireland protocol. Lord Frost noted that there remain significant gaps to be bridged between the UK and EU positions. He noted that it remained the United Kingdom's preference to find a consensual way forward, but I must say that article 16 safeguards were and are a legitimate part of the protocol's provisions.

The noble Lord Frost also underlined the need to address the full range of issues that the United Kingdom had identified in the course of discussions if a comprehensive and durable solution was to be found that supported the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is in the best interests of Northern Ireland. In that context, although talks had so far been conducted in a constructive spirit, Lord Frost underlined that, to make progress, it was important to bring "new energy and impetus" to discussions. Accordingly, intensified talks are taking place this week between teams in Brussels on all issues, giving particular attention to medicines and customs issues.

This week, Lord Frost has also been in Belfast, talking to political, business and civil society leaders and will meet with Vice-President Šefčovič at the end of the week to consider progress. I will continue to keep Parliament informed.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): With respect to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who raised the urgent question, perhaps he does not know that, in line with what the Paymaster General was saying, Lord Frost appeared before the European Scrutiny Committee only a few weeks ago. We asked him questions about article 16 and the European Court of Justice and he answered them with great clarity.

It is quite clear that the EU has been intransigent. For example, it invoked article 16 with regard to the covid laws that it introduced some time ago, and disruption of trade has taken place. Regarding the European Court of Justice, we are more than entitled to ensure that we are not governed by it given the repeal in the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020.

Michael Ellis: I agree with my hon. Friend. We want a negotiated outcome, but we are willing to use article 16. There is no change in the position that my noble Friend Lord Frost gave to my hon. Friend's Committee only a few days ago.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for tabling the UQ. It is simply unacceptable and quite insulting to the House that Lord Frost would wait for this place to have risen to make a statement in the other place and that the Government would have to be dragged to this place to be subject to proper and timely scrutiny.

I turn to Northern Ireland, which has become a key pressure point in UK-EU relations. I sincerely hope that the change in tone from Lord Frost may be a sign that progress can be made, because these are fractious, painful times for Northern Ireland and we are at an unsettling moment. Political disfunction has left power sharing in a fragile state. Trust in the UK Government in Northern Ireland—an essential foundation of peace—has fallen away across all communities. Trust is hard won and easy to lose.

I say to the Minister, in the sincere hope that he listens, that this is not the context in which any responsible Government would force another high stakes, divisive stand-off. With a cost of living crisis and growing instability, the last thing the country needs is a damaging trade dispute with our nearest trading partners. Does he agree that jobs, stability and livelihoods in Northern Ireland depend on the EU and UK finding a deal in the days and weeks ahead that lowers the barriers that the Prime Minister created? Does he agree that the evidence increasingly shows that communities want a solution, not a stand-off?

Labour has called all year for solutions that would lower the barriers down the Irish sea that the Prime Minister personally negotiated. That is precisely why we need a deal. Communities know that invoking article 16 would not solve the problems. It would not end the dispute; it would simply prolong it. Therefore, to find that agreement, the people of Northern Ireland must be brought in. Does the Minister agree that it is simply unsustainable for a Government whom few trust to be making huge decisions about the future while Northern Ireland is excluded entirely from the talks? Will he confirm today that the UK and the EU will bring Northern Ireland leaders and communities into the process to speak for themselves? That is the path to a sustainable solution.

The Minister should remember what is at stake in the days ahead, and remember that those who have the most to lose from another poisonous stand-off are the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. It is in those interests and the national interest that the Government should get a deal.

Michael Ellis: We did not wait. This House was in recess and a written ministerial statement was tabled yesterday.

On the hon. Lady's substantive points, of course people are concerned about the cost of living, but the Northern Ireland protocol has real-life consequences for the cost of living. Businesses know that using article 16, should we have to do so, would alleviate pressure on the movement of goods. It is a safeguard mechanism to

improve an unsatisfactory situation; it is there not to cause disruption but to do the exact opposite. It is a mechanism agreed to by both parties to the withdrawal agreement, and it is an active part of an agreement with multiple articles—it is one article among multiple others. Article 16 is perfectly valid and available to use. However, we want a negotiated outcome. Our policy remains the same: acting within the law at all times, we are willing to use article 16 should we need to do so.

My noble Friend Lord Frost was in Northern Ireland on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week, and he met all sides. I am advised that he met representatives of the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Alliance party, the Democratic Unionist party, the Ulster Unionist party and Sinn Féin. He is, of course, keeping everyone fully informed, and he travels regularly to do so. The basis of our negotiations is contained in the July Command Paper, which this House has seen.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend reaffirm that the priority for Her Majesty's Government remains upholding the Belfast agreement, even if the European Union appears to hold it so lightly? On the subject of bad faith, cited by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), what does my right hon. and learned Friend make of the fact that 20% of the European Union's checks still occur in relation to goods going from GB to NI, despite Northern Ireland having the equivalent of 0.5% of the European Union's population? Does he agree that the bad faith the European Union is exercising in this matter makes it absolutely essential that we continue to keep under consideration the rescinding of articles 5, 7, 8 and 10, as outlined by the July Command Paper?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend is a former Northern Ireland Minister, so he speaks with authority in this House. He is right that it is of paramount importance, as I am sure all sides would agree, that the Belfast agreement is respected and protected. That is certainly the motivation of Her Majesty's Government.

It is right to say that the Northern Ireland Executive estimate that, from January to March, about 20% of all EU checks were conducted in respect of Northern Ireland, even though Northern Ireland's population is just 0.5% of the EU's as a whole. That speaks for itself.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Notwithstanding recess dates, it took until 16 November even to get a written statement on this subject, and that turned out to be a copy-and-paste job from Lord Frost's earlier statement. I am shocked and appalled that it has taken until today for a Minister to come to the House to do Members the courtesy of answering questions on behalf of the Government. I am sick and fed up of hearing excuses for why this Government allow others to hear the business of the Government and their thinking before they come here to explain it. How long can we be expected to tolerate this discourtesy?

We have yet another statement and yet another rattle of the sabre on article 16. Of course, the deployment of article 16 would simply invite an equal and opposite response from the European Union, and it would simply reconvene existing discussions in another forum. Whether or not Conservative Members want to hear it, the best way to eliminate friction from east-west trade between

[Richard Thomson]

Northern Ireland and Great Britain is for Great Britain to come back into closer alignment with the single market and customs union. Will the Paymaster General assure the House that, whatever discussions lie ahead, the Government will not in any circumstances allow Northern Ireland to become subject to the same trade friction between north and south as they have allowed to creep into the relationship between Great Britain and the European Union?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong; the reality of the matter is that a written ministerial statement is informing the House, and it was laid yesterday. He makes a point about business. I think I am right in saying that in today's *Financial Times* there is a report that Marks & Spencer says that the proposals by the EU would not cut red tape. It is important to bear in mind that negotiations are in progress; it is not the right forum, at this stage in delicate negotiations, to try to do that in this honourable House. What is right is that Lord Frost continues his discussions with Vice-President Šefčovič, and that is exactly what he is doing.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on obtaining this important urgent question. May I take up a difference with him on one thing? Will my right hon. and learned Friend the Paymaster General confirm that the triggering of article 16 should be based on circumstances and not on any particular date?

Michael Ellis: If the triggering of article 16 needs to occur, there are defined circumstances that would need to be ascertained—in my view, those circumstances are ascertained.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There is a certain irony in Ministers telling France to respect the trade and co-operation agreement in full when it comes to fish while threatening to scrap the Northern Ireland protocol. I hope only that the change in tone that I think we detect in the past week or so is a sign that the Government realise that they need to step back from the brink—both sides do, because a trade war with the EU is in nobody's interests.

The question I wish to put is about the European Court of Justice. We have heard what businesses in Northern Ireland have said about the impact of the protocol, but can the Minister tell us how many of them have raised with him the role of the ECJ, which of course the Government signed up to when they agreed the protocol in the first place?

Michael Ellis: The right hon. Gentleman should understand, and I am sure he does, that the activation of article 16 is not scrapping the protocol—it is a valid part of the agreement. He asks who has raised the issue of the Court of Justice of the European Union. What people raise regularly is the issue of sovereignty, and they say that they want their laws decided democratically by the people of this country. In my limited experience of the law, it is not normal, where there are two parties, for the courts of one party to resolve disputes between the two in an agreement. So this is not a normal situation. The European Union has shown, in the infraction

proceedings that it has already brought—in my respectful submission, in a precipitate manner—when we had essential cause to take actions to protect food supply in Northern Ireland, that this is not just theoretical; this is something the EU is prepared to do, as it has shown. We therefore need to take sovereignty seriously. Those on our side of the House do take sovereignty seriously and will continue to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the answers he has given thus far. Lord Frost is clearly involved in delicate negotiations, but they are placing great strain on the Northern Ireland Executive and the various different sections of the community in Northern Ireland. So how long are we going to allow these negotiations to go on for before we take action? Can we set a timetable for completing these negotiations, so that people can get back to running their businesses and leading their normal lives?

Michael Ellis: I understand my hon. Friend's desire to set a finite date but, as I am sure he will appreciate, that is not conducive to good diplomatic negotiations. I have no doubt that everything is being done as expeditiously as is reasonable.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): A statement should have been made in this House at the earliest possible opportunity, but I welcome the point that has been made today as a result of this urgent question. Is the Paymaster General concerned that after the chiding the Government got for putting in place a protocol that has put a border down the Irish sea, we now appear to have a Joan of Arc-like stand-off, with the Opposition holding to the protocol as if it were something precious when it is destroying business and costing businesses in Northern Ireland £850 million? That is what is catastrophic: the friction of trade within the United Kingdom.

The Paymaster General mentioned sovereignty; I represent a constituency in the United Kingdom and so do all the Members in this House—we should not be doing Brussels' work from these Benches. Brussels has destroyed part of the United Kingdom by insisting on the enforcement of a protocol in a disgraceful manner. I appeal to the Paymaster General, who knows that the Government's Command Paper in July this year said that the conditions for invoking article 16 have been met: we are now in the jaws of December and those conditions remain met, so invoke article 16, and invoke it now. Stop dilly-dallying on this issue. Put businesses out of their misery in Northern Ireland.

Michael Ellis: I take this opportunity to apologise again for an oral statement not being made on Monday. I have mentioned that a written ministerial statement was made on Tuesday, but the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point on that issue.

On the hon. Gentleman's substantive point, I agree that there is a major difficulty. The protocol is not delivering its core purpose and it is crucial that it has Unionist and nationalist party consent; otherwise, Northern Ireland cannot function, because of the power-sharing relationship with which the hon. Gentleman is extremely familiar. That is the foundation of the constitution and his point is understood.

On the business front, at least 200 companies in Great Britain no longer service the Northern Ireland market, so the hon. Gentleman's point in that respect is perfectly valid. A significant number of medicines are still at risk of discontinuation. We saw recently in one of the national newspapers that even the trees for the Queen's forthcoming platinum jubilee apparently cannot be supplied to Northern Ireland from Great Britain. There are problems with things that are, frankly, being shredded by the way the protocol is working.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that almost 100% of the roll-on roll-off lorry traffic from the EU to the Republic of Ireland goes through Great Britain—a lot of it past Kettering on the A14—would not a sensible negotiated agreement towards a comprehensive and durable settlement involve Her Majesty's Government taking responsibility for the policing of goods that go across the Irish sea to the Republic, in return for the free passage of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland if those goods are to stay in Northern Ireland?

Michael Ellis: I shall resist the temptation to ask my hon. Friend to join the negotiating team but, as ever, he speaks powerfully for his constituency, which I think is the centre point of this country, geographically, and also a centre for the movement of goods. My hon. Friend speaks with some authority on the matter and I have noted what he said.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This was all so predictable when, just under a year ago, we in this House voted for the agreement. Is it not the case, first, that the people of Northern Ireland want a compromise, and secondly, that in reality the Government just threw Northern Ireland under the bus when they went into negotiations in the name of Brexit?

Michael Ellis: Certainly not.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): To give him credit, the Paymaster General read his brief very well, but he knows very little about the sentiments of the people in Northern Ireland. Yesterday, Lord Frost held a meeting, among other meetings, with a group of people representing trade unions and civil society. They were from both loyalist and nationalist traditions and they told him very clearly, "Get on with making the protocol work." The game and the rhetoric in which this Government are engaged in Northern Ireland is very dangerous. The Paymaster General has a duty to go back to the Prime Minister and tell him to tone down that rhetoric. It could be so disastrous that we should not even be thinking of going there.

Michael Ellis: I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the rhetoric. This is a negotiation. We want a settled solution. That is our preference and that is what the negotiations with Vice-President Šefčovič are currently doing, but we do have article 16 as a viable safeguard.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the damage to the UK economy as a whole and our standing in the world were the Government to trigger article 16 and it result in a trade war with the EU?

Michael Ellis: Article 16 is designed to alleviate problems, not cause them. It is a mechanism that was written in with the consent of both parties, so that it could alleviate and act as a safeguard. Threats that are emanating from other quarters about pulling out of the TCA and the like would, of course, do the exact opposite. They would cause disruption and that is not in the interests of the people of the province of Northern Ireland. It is this side that is seeking a negotiated preferential solution.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Minister must know that the Tories are playing with fire. Threatening not to implement a deal signed 11 months ago would be outrageous. What does the Minister believe the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have to gain by showing the UK clearly to be an untrustworthy and dishonest negotiating partner while it simultaneously seeks to secure international trade deals?

Michael Ellis: We are not seeking to secure international trade deals; we are securing international trade deals. We have secured more than 60 of them so far with countries all around the world. We are a trading nation. We enjoy trading with others and we always have done. That is what we will continue to do. But I do need to repeat: article 16 is not a threat; it is a part of the agreement that was signed between the parties. It is available and ready to use.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In any negotiation, it is best to have all parties round the table, so will the Government consider bringing in the locally elected Members in order to have a meaningful negotiation which really matches the sentiment, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), on the ground in Northern Ireland?

Michael Ellis: I am pleased to be able to confirm that, as I have already mentioned, Lord Frost has already engaged with the interested parties and even on Tuesday and Wednesday this week did so in Northern Ireland. All parties are being duly kept informed, including this honourable House and the other place.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): A consequence of Brexit was always that we needed to erect a trade border between Britain and the EU, and there are only two places where that could go—either in the Irish sea, or a land border on the island of Ireland. As the Government are now trying to reverse the agreement that puts the trade border in the Irish sea, what other option are they actively pursuing—a land border, or rejoining the single market for the whole of the UK, not just Northern Ireland?

Michael Ellis: We are pursuing a negotiation and the hon. Lady will have to wait and see.

Mr Speaker: Finally, but certainly not with the least of questions, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You are most kind. The good wine always comes last.

I thank the Paymaster General for his answers to the urgent question. Back in July, the Government published a paper in which they stated clearly that conditions to

[Jim Shannon]

trigger article 16 had already been met. He referred to M&S, which has indicated this week that extra costs and extra bureaucracy on products crossing the border will cost it £9 million. Speaking as the MP for Strangford, who has got his feet clearly on the ground and knows what is happening and what the people are saying, I want to put it on the record that some businesses face going to the wall as a result. The Prime Minister repeated that assertion recently. He said that time was of the essence and that, if the current negotiations with the EU failed to arrive at an agreed outcome in a short period, the Government would move and must move immediately to take decisive action to remove the barriers to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I urge the Paymaster General to do just that: initiate article 16 and remove the barrier.

Mr Speaker: I like hearing from the hon. Gentleman, but his questions have to be shorter. If he wants to make speeches, I am sure that he will catch the eye of somebody in the Chair later.

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is right, Mr Speaker; you have saved the best till last.

Mr Speaker: Or longest till last.

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is right that Marks & Spencer makes a powerful point. Time is of the essence. Her Majesty's Government will move to remove barriers if necessary. The article 16 application has already been met and we are alive to the time sensitivity involved.

Integrated Rail Plan: North and Midlands

11.5 am

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future of the railway.

Today I am proud to announce our integrated rail plan. It is a £96 billion programme that will transform rail services in the north and the midlands—the largest single rail investment ever made by a UK Government, and an investment that, rather than being felt decades into the future, will arrive much, much sooner. This unprecedented commitment to build a world-class railway that delivers for passengers and freight, for towns and cities, and for communities and businesses, will benefit eight of the 10 busiest rail corridors across the north and the midlands, providing faster journeys, increased capacity and more frequent services up to 10 years sooner than previously planned.

When I became Transport Secretary in 2019, the HS2 project was already about 10 years old. I was concerned that costs were rising and newer projects such as the midlands rail hub and Northern Powerhouse Rail had not been fully factored into the plans. Under the original scheme, the HS2 track would not have reached the east midlands and the north until the early 2040s. Clearly, a rethink was needed to ensure that the project would deliver as soon as possible for the regions that it served, and that is how the integrated rail plan was born—through a desire to deliver sooner.

The Prime Minister and I asked Douglas Oakervee to lead the work and make recommendations on the best way forward. One of his key criticisms was that HS2 was designed in isolation from the rest of the transport network. The original plans gave us high-speed lines to the east midlands, but did not serve any of the three biggest east midlands cities. For example, if someone wanted to get to Nottingham or Derby, they would still have had to go to a parkway station, and change on to a local tram or train. Oakervee made a clear and convincing case for considering HS2 as part of an integrated rail plan, working alongside local, regional and national services, not just those travelling between our biggest cities. We accepted those recommendations and asked the National Infrastructure Commission to develop options.

The commission came back with two key suggestions: first, that we adopt a flexible approach, initially setting out a core integrated rail network, but that we remain open to future additions as long as expectations on costs and timing are met; and secondly, that strengthening regional rail links would be most economically beneficial for the north and midlands—connecting towns with the main railway networks, and bringing hope and opportunity to communities that have felt left behind for too long—and that we should bring these benefits to passengers and local economies as soon as possible. Those are the guiding principles behind the integrated rail plan that I am announcing today. It is an ambitious and unparalleled programme that not only overhauls intercity links across the north and midlands, but speeds up the benefits for local areas and serves the destinations that people most want to reach.

This new blueprint delivers three high-speed lines: first, Crewe to Manchester; secondly, Birmingham to the east midlands, with HS2 trains continuing to central

Nottingham, central Derby, Chesterfield and Sheffield on an upgraded main line; and thirdly, a brand new high-speed line from Warrington to Manchester and the western border of Yorkshire, slashing journey times across the north. [*Laughter.*] Well, I know that Opposition Members will want to hear the detail of those journey times and also to explain why their constituents would wish to wait decades more to deliver a journey almost no faster at all than under these plans.

I have heard some people say that we are just going about electrifying the TransPennine route. That is wrong. We are actually investing £23 billion to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail and the TransPennine route upgrade, unlocking east-west travel across the north of England. In total, this package is 110 miles of new high-speed line, all of it in the midlands and the north. It is 180 miles of newly electrified line, all of it in the midlands and the north. I remind the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) of Labour's 63 miles of electrified line in 13 years. We will upgrade the east coast main line with a package of investment on track improvements and digital signalling, bringing down journey times between London, Leeds, Darlington, Newcastle and Edinburgh, and bringing benefits to the north-east much, much sooner than under the previous plans. This adds capacity and speeds up services over more than 400 miles of line, the vast majority of it in the midlands and the north. We will study how best to take HS2 trains to Leeds as well. We will start work on a new West Yorkshire mass transit system, righting the wrong of that major city not having a mass transit system, probably the largest in Europe not to have one. We commit today to supporting West Yorkshire Combined Authority over the long term to ensure that this time it actually gets done.

In short, we are about to embark on the biggest single act of levelling up of any Government in history. [*Interruption.*] Listen to the numbers. It is five times more than what was spent on Crossrail and 10 times more than what was spent on delivering the Olympics, but Opposition Members still think it is a small package. It will achieve the same, similar or faster journey times to London and on the core Northern Powerhouse Rail network than the original proposals, and will bring the benefits years earlier, as well as doubling, or in some cases tripling, the capacity.

Let me set out a few of these investments. Rail journeys between Birmingham and Nottingham will be cut from an hour and a quarter to 26 minutes, city centre to city centre. Journeys between York and Manchester will be down to 55 minutes, from 83 minutes today. Commuters will be able to get from Bradford to Leeds in just 12 minutes, almost half the time it takes today. There will be earlier benefits for places such as Sheffield and Chesterfield. Trips from Newcastle to Birmingham will be slashed by almost 30 minutes, and passengers in Durham and Darlington will benefit from smoother, more reliable trains. The IRP delivers not just for our largest cities but for smaller places and towns. For example, Kettering, Market Harborough, Leicester, Loughborough, Grantham, Newark, Retford, Doncaster, Wakefield, Dewsbury, Huddersfield and Stalybridge could all see improvements, electrification or faster services, benefiting in ways they would not have done under the original HS2 programme.

We are not stopping there. Today's plan is about those places that connect and interact with HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail and the scale of ambition, with many of these projects lying outside the scope. Only yesterday, I opened the first reversal of the Beeching axe. We will be doing the same in Northumberland for the Ashington-Blyth-Newcastle line and many others. We are investing £2 billion in cycling and walking, £3 billion in turn-up-and-go bus services, and tens of billions in our country's roads. After decades of decline, with constrained capacity and poor reliability, this plan will finally give passengers in the north and the midlands the services they need and deserve.

It is not just about infrastructure; we are going to make train travel much easier as well. Today I can confirm £360 million to reform fares and ticketing, with the roll-out of contactless pay-as-you-go ticketing for 700 urban stations, including 400 in the north.

This is a landmark plan, by far the biggest of any network improvement and focused on the north and the midlands. With more seats, more frequent services, and shorter journeys, it meets the needs of today's passengers and future generations. We are getting started immediately with another £625 million for electrification between Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, bringing the total on the TransPennine route upgrade to £2 billion and counting, and £249 million to further electrify the midland main line between Kettering and Market Harborough, with work starting on the integrated rail plan by Christmas.

Communities of every size will benefit, right across the north and midlands, in many cases years earlier than planned. By taking a fresh look at HS2, and how it fits with the rest of the rail system, we will be able to build a much-improved railway that will provide similar or better services to almost every destination than the outdated vision drawn up for HS2 over a decade ago. This plan will bring the north and midlands closer together, fire up economies to rival London and the south-east, rebalance our economic geography, spread opportunity, level up the country and bring benefits at least a decade or more earlier. I commend this statement to the House.

11.15 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. We will be going out shortly to collect the plan and scrutinise it. I am frankly staggered by how this statement started, with the Secretary of State saying he was "proud" to present it to the House—proud of what? Is he proud of the betrayal of trust, the betrayal of promises and the betrayal of the investment that the north of England and the midlands deserve?

We have all seen the reports over the weekend, each one setting out the betrayal being put forward today. There is no amount of gloss or spin that can be put on it. The Secretary of State promised HS2 to Leeds. He promised Northern Powerhouse Rail. He promised that the north would not be forgotten, but he has not just forgotten us; he has completely sold us out.

As someone who lives in Greater Manchester, I am not going to take lectures on what Northern Powerhouse Rail means. We know exactly what it means. We were committing to a new line connecting Manchester and Leeds, and within a month of becoming Prime Minister, Boris Johnson said:

[Jim McMahon]

"I am going to deliver on my commitment with a pledge to fund the Leeds to Manchester route."

We were promised a new line. He has broken that promise, and he has not even got the decency to admit it.

Let us be clear: the scaling back of Northern Powerhouse Rail, coupled with the scrapping of the eastern leg of HS2, is a massive blow for our regions. The schemes would have created 150,000 new jobs, connecting 13 million people in our major towns and cities in our industrial heartlands. The then-Chancellor George Osborne first announced plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail in 2014. Since then, the Conservatives, including the Prime Minister and the Transport Secretary, have recommitted and re-promised 60 times.

This is a once-in-a-generation chance to transform opportunity across the whole country, to rebalance the economy and make it work for working people, but that opportunity now looks set to be lost. They are the very same working people who will likely face a record increase when rail fares go up next year. They will be paying 50% more to get to work than they did a decade ago, relying on a crumbling, unreliable and overcrowded system that prioritises profit above passengers. It is the same with buses, with fares up 70%, use down and not a single one of the 4,000 zero-emission buses promised by the Prime Minister three years ago having been delivered.

What is on offer? Some £96 billion that we should be grateful for, but let us unpack that £96 billion, £40 billion of which has already been committed from London to Crewe, but is being labelled as investment across the north of England. Of the £56 billion that remains, if we compare that with what the north of England would have got over the past decade had it had the same investment as London and the south-east, we are still £10 billion short. We are not going to accept crumbs off the table.

Labour would reform our transport networks so that they work for working people, with investment spread more evenly across the country so that parents are not forced to see their children leave the places where they were raised to find opportunity that is denied on their doorstep. Most importantly, Labour would put working people first, using the power of Government and the skill of business to ensure good-quality jobs are created here and in every single region of Britain.

The Prime Minister was elected on a promise to level the playing field and make things better for households across the country. We were promised a northern powerhouse. We were promised a midlands engine. We were promised that we would be levelled up, but what we have been given today is the great train robbery—robbing the north of its chance to realise its full potential, robbing the next generation of the hope and opportunity they are due and robbing 15 million people across the north of the investment they have been denied for 11 years under this rotten Government.

Grant Shapps: I just want to make sure I understand the hon. Gentleman's approach—his lines, as it were. This is £96 billion of expenditure, the single biggest investment ever. We have made no secret of the fact that some of that money is already the Birmingham to

Crewe line, the Crewe to Manchester line; last time I checked, that benefits the midlands and north, does it not? That does help.

I realise the hon. Gentleman either wrote his response before hearing what was in the statement, or decided to ignore it, because this is a brand-new high-speed line—I just want to check the geography—from Warrington to Manchester to Marsden in the west of Yorkshire. To judge by his response, he does not think that exists.

What confuses me the most overall is that the Leader of the Opposition seems to be in a completely separate place. He said:

"I oppose HS2 on cost and on merit: it will not achieve its stated objectives."—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 1006.]

So he opposes HS2. For transparency, he said that in 2015. What has he said more recently?

"The government should take this opportunity to cancel HS2".

That is the Leader of the Opposition speaking. Before the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) gets carried away, why does he not have a word with the leader of his party and work out whether they agree on his position?

This is an enormous investment. It will create three new high-speed lines. It electrifies track; just today, nearly 400 miles of track electrification was announced within these programmes. What a contrast with the 63 miles of track the Labour Government managed to electrify in 13 years in office.

I will finish by talking about the importance of the overall transport approach. This is not just about rail, as the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, but about other means of getting around. We cannot get around without a roads programme, and we have a £20 billion-plus road building programme. Labour opposes it. They do not want to build any roads, so I am not sure where he wants to run those buses he keeps talking about.

I have already written to the hon. Gentleman, and I think I am right in saying I sent the letter to the Library of the House, because he will continue to go around saying that of these 4,000 buses, none are on the road. That is factually untrue. I have written to him with the detail: 900 of those buses are ordered, many of them already on the road. I know it is the Opposition's job to oppose, but if he is already opposing his own leader, no wonder they do not have a cohesive transport policy.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Prime Minister promised that HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail were not an either/or option. Those in Leeds and Bradford might be forgiven for viewing it today as neither. That is the danger in selling perpetual sunlight and leaving it for others to explain the arrival of moonlight. On a stand-alone basis, this plan comprises some fantastic projects that will slash journey times and better connect our great northern cities, and for that the Transport team deserve much credit. My question is this: it costs us in this country £2 million to deliver a single kilometre of electrified track. The Germans can do that for less than £500,000 because they have a rolling programme of electrification. What steps has the Secretary of State taken to ensure that this new plan can be delivered to time and to this cost?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the improvements in journey times. For example, on Bradford, which has been talked about a great deal, it will be 12 minutes from Bradford to Leeds. What we called for, and what everyone was calling for, is London or south-east-style connectivity, and 12 minutes between two of the north's great cities as a result of this plan is one of those potential upgrades—not potential; it is one of the upgrades in the plan.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the cost of electrification. A lot of these things seem to cost a lot more in this country. The Rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—is carrying out an electrification challenge to bring the sector in and challenging it to build on electrification much faster than currently happens. Of course, in addition to electrification, we also have zero-carbon trains, electric trains and hydrogen trains such as the HydroFLEX, which will help to resolve some of the more difficult-to-electrify areas, although, as I say, we have full-fat electrification on nearly 400 miles of line as a result of today's plan.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, although I did read most of it in a newspaper beforehand.

I do admire the Secretary of State's chutzpah for the most bullish U-turn I have yet seen in this place. He talks of Beeching reversal; this is nothing but an HS2 reversal. Bit by bit, HS2 and its grand vision for a rail network that might actually belong in the 21st century rather than in the 19th century is being salami-sliced until all that is left is a Birmingham to London shuttle with a few token services to Manchester, benefiting few, but costing us all.

Perhaps the Secretary of State should ask for some tips from the French Government, whose high-speed rail network is now 2,800 km long, or from the Germans, who have over 3,000 km. Denmark is building high-speed rail to link with Germany's network, including an 11-mile tunnel under the Baltic sea. Meanwhile, the UK cannot even manage linking itself.

On electrification, the 2015 manifesto promised electrification to Windermere, south Wales and the midlands, and they were ditched, so forgive me if we are sceptical about today's promises not meeting the same fate. For a country that started the railway age and produced Brunel, Stephenson and Joseph Locke, England is now badly served by its transport leadership—a leadership that no number of glossy reports and reviews can paper over.

Can I ask the Secretary of State what implications this will have for Barnett consequential for both Wales and Scotland? Will Wales now receive its fair share of funding if HS2 money is being redeployed elsewhere? Can he confirm that Barnett will also apply to Scotland's funding? Given that the Scottish Government are miles ahead of the UK on decarbonisation, electrification and active travel, at least we know something useful will be done with that cash.

Perhaps it is time that levelling up applied to the DFT. Move the Department up to Newcastle, Carlisle or Doncaster, and quickly find out at what level the rest of England operates when given a shoestring to run a

public transport network that is in the 21st century in theory only. Experiencing the third-class network the north of England is expected to endure every day as compared with that in Greater London might sharpen a few minds in the DFT as to where their priorities lie in the future.

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Member knows, the Treasury is going to Darlington and the DFT has actually gone to Leeds and Birmingham. We already have 70 staff up at our Leeds office, and they will be delighted to be able to travel around much faster as a result of this plan today.

I should mention that the plan involves £12.8 billion of upgrade of the eastern core. This is upgrading the east coast main line, digital signalling and the like. We are not near capacity on those routes yet. The £12.8 billion will help with the journey up the east coast. Of course, the plan today also confirms the west coast update—the HS2 part of it rather—meaning that journeys to Scotland will be a great deal faster as a result. There are lots of benefits, when it comes to Scotland, from bringing these journey times way down as a result of this investment in HS2, and this plan today delivers on that.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, which I think is a good balance between what was hoped for and what can actually be achieved. I am sure it was an oversight that he did not mention Cleethorpes in his statement. Can he assure me that the restored direct link between Cleethorpes and King's Cross, which is in the London North Eastern Railway draft timetable, will indeed begin, I hope next year, but certainly by 2023? Can he also assure me that the east-west freight corridor from the Humber ports is still a priority?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I missed that out in my foreword and I apologise—Cleethorpes should certainly get a mention. I am working with the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, on a potential direct service from Cleethorpes to London. Just a week or two ago I visited the ports, and I know the importance of connectivity with those ports.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister repeatedly promised that HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail would be built in full. Today that promise has been broken, and Leeds and the north have been betrayed. Can the Minister explain—this is insofar as I understand the details; I have yet to read the full report—the logic of taking HS2 from Birmingham to East Midlands Parkway, building a new high-speed line from Leeds to Sheffield, but leaving a huge great big hole in the middle, which would have Victorian railway engineers scratching their heads in disbelief, to save what *The Times* says is £10.3 billion? What is the purpose of doing that?

Grant Shapps: I think I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman. One of the purposes of Northern Powerhouse Rail, which we are delivering, is to slash journey times, for example from Leeds to Manchester, and we will deliver exactly that. We will provide a journey time of 33 minutes from Leeds to Manchester, which he will know is a very significant improvement. That is not the only thing. We will also cut the journey time from Leeds to London to one hour 53 minutes, and to Birmingham

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it will be an hour and a half. All those journey times will be coming down dramatically because of the steps we are taking today. We have also announced £100 million to look at the best way to run HS2 trains into Leeds, as well as to sort out the long-term problem that Leeds does not have a mass transport system—I think it is the biggest city in Europe without one. We know there have been many attempts at that over the years, but this time we intend to ensure it is followed through. There is a lot for Leeds in this package, which includes, as it happens, getting Northern Powerhouse Rail to run to Leeds, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman's constituents will feel the benefits of that.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): The creation of economic prosperity across Keighley and the whole Bradford district is something I care deeply about, and it is linked to the creation of better transport connectivity. I am deeply disappointed by today's announcement, and in my view, the Bradford district has been completely short-changed. We are one of the most socially deprived parts of the UK, and we must get better transport connectivity. I still want Northern Powerhouse Rail to be delivered with a main stop in Bradford, so that we can unlock our economic opportunities. Will my right hon. Friend explain to the House what the Government are doing to deliver better, more reliable, and cheaper rail services for my constituents in Keighley?

Grant Shapps: Let me make sure that my hon. Friend understands and appreciates the full relevance of today: a 12-minute journey from Bradford to Leeds, which is nearly half the current journey time; at least 30 minutes off the Bradford to London journey, after the upgrades are complete. There were other plans, which were not at all fleshed out—I know Transport for the North and others had talked about building all sorts of different versions of this, and one version was indeed the TransPennine route upgrade. However, there was a problem with those other plans: I mean no disrespect to my hon. Friend, but he may well not be an MP in 2043—perhaps he will be—to see those things delivered. The advantages I am talking about such as the 12-minute journey, and 30 minutes off the journey from Bradford to London, will be delivered in his first couple of terms as a Member of Parliament.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows fine well that the promised integrated infrastructure investment is about capacity as much as travel times. The Government are just not being straight, as they are asking northerners to put up with make do and mend, rather than the infrastructure we were promised. Is that because they continue to see the north as a problem to solve, rather than an opportunity to invest in? Is this not just another broken promise from this Prime Minister and Chancellor, who have seemingly cancelled levelling up because there are Tories on the line? It appears that the Prime Minister is once again driving a train into the ditch and off the track on his way to the north.

Grant Shapps: Listening to the hon. Lady, one would think I had just come to the Dispatch Box to announce that Newcastle will have a longer journey time to London. The answer is exactly the opposite. As a result of the

plans I am announcing today, the journey from Newcastle to London will be 21 minutes shorter. One would have thought she would be standing up and welcoming today's massive investment in the train services that will benefit her constituents. Even if she does not appreciate it, I rather suspect her constituents will.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and I look forward to reading the detail of the plan. He has given us a complex statement, because there are many changes to existing plans, but it is absolutely clear that no Government have ever invested on this scale in British history. He should not take any lessons from the Labour party, which did nothing on the issue. Will he provide a bit more detail on the timescales for delivery? Specifically, when will people in Yorkshire be able to take advantage of the enhanced services he is talking about? Can he comment a little further on the environmental benefits? I am thinking particularly about the improved clearances for rail freight.

Grant Shapps: On the environmental advantages, it will interest the House to know that HS2 is being built in as an environmentally friendly a way as possible. Section 2B west is intended to be a net positive carbon contribution, not just in its running but in its entire life cycle, which will be very important.¹ I refer the House and my hon. Friend to pages 134 and 135, which contain the full timescale for when the various different benefits will arrive at different locations. In every case, the advantages will start arriving much, much sooner than under the original plans. All the people who say we should have just carried on ploughing on with the original HS2 plan need to explain why it was right to wait until the 2040s for their constituents to feel the benefits. This way, the benefits will start to be felt by this Christmas, when work gets under way on the midland main line and from work already under way on the TransPennine route.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want to follow up on the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I want to understand the new east-west division that the Secretary of State has set out today. As I understand it, our constituents moving from Leeds to Manchester will travel by high-speed train south of Leeds, then change trains to get a train to Nottingham Parkway, and then get on a new high-speed train from Nottingham Parkway to Birmingham. I think that is what the Secretary of State set out. Since we approved this plan in Cabinet, China has built 23,500 miles of high-speed line. This Tory Government have built none. We have had a review every year and the Secretary of State has just destroyed the plans. Hundreds of millions of pounds in Birmingham is predicated on being at the heart of a network, not a mish-mash. How can we now believe the plan he has set out?

Grant Shapps: I should point out that China does not have the same health and safety approach as us. It has a slightly different view of how many people it is acceptable to kill per mile of track laid, and I do not think the right hon. Gentleman is seriously considering we go down that route. I know that he represents a Birmingham constituency and I know that the Mayor of the West Midlands has broadly welcomed this package. Birmingham does very well out of it. The connection that was not

1.[Official Report, 23 November 2021, Vol. 704, c. 4MC.]

initially envisaged in the HS2 plan, between the biggest cities in the midlands, such as Birmingham and Nottingham, will now be complete with not just a parkway station, but with stations into the city centres of Nottingham and Derby connecting Birmingham. That will be fantastic news for his constituents. He asked about trains. No, people will not be changing trains. They will be on the same train all the way through.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I did not hear the Secretary of State mention the stretch between Birmingham and Crewe, which cuts straight through my constituency from top to bottom, causing massive misery to my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that discussions have taken place to improve the situation? Will he and the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), commit to continuing to listen to the proposed solutions, which would mitigate the misery and help to solve the problems faced by my constituents?

Grant Shapps: It is absolutely right that HS2 has had a big impact on a lot of communities, or it does as it is built, and there are different advantages in different places for Members and their constituents. I am delighted to assure my hon. Friend that he can continue to work with the HS2 Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, who has done wonders to improve the relationship with the communities to try to bring benefits—even where there are not necessarily stops—to communities along the HS2 line through some of the community funds and other things. I will recommit to that for my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) today.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It was five years ago on Tuesday that Tory Ministers blocked the privately financed rail electrification to Hull, and there was not one mention today of the great city of the north, Hull, and the economically important area of the Humber. Will the Secretary of State explain why passengers in Hull, who pay more for their train tickets and get a poorer service, will now have to wait even longer? I cannot see anything in the detail to show that the Prime Minister is delivering on his promise for Northern Powerhouse Rail. In the Hull and the Humber area, levelling up means absolutely nothing.

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Lady would be right if it did not matter to her constituents, for example, to be able to travel to Manchester 30 minutes faster than they can at the moment—[*Interruption.*] Yes, from Hull to Manchester, it will be 30 minutes faster than it is at the moment. If it did not matter to them to be able to travel quickly and efficiently down the east coast main line, I suppose she would be right, but the reality is that this plan actually delivers all those things. It would be a lot less disingenuous for her to come to the House and welcome these huge improvements, with journey times 30 minutes faster to Manchester and much faster to London, and potentially with more trains per hour because of the increased capacity. I would have thought that she would welcome those things.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the Government for this positive announcement on rail infrastructure in the east midlands, but will my right hon. Friend outline his plan for Toton in my constituency?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend has been an incredible advocate for Toton and the surrounding area. Today is really a triumph for him, because not only will we ensure that we connect up the major cities—so, Birmingham to Nottingham—but we have committed to Toton to ensure that the brand-new development also gets development funding, which will be matched by the private sector, in order to develop a station that allows Toton to fulfil the role for which he has campaigned so assiduously. Toton is very much in the plan today and I think that he will be delighted with what he reads.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Secretary of State has done an extraordinarily good job of presenting what No. 10 is briefing to the press is an £18 billion reduction in the rail investment programme. That is the truth. He has also not told the House that the plan involves getting rid of the tunnels that take HS2 through Manchester to a low-level station at Manchester Piccadilly. Will he do an assessment of the impact that putting HS2 on stilts through Manchester will have on potential regeneration? HS2 will bring regeneration, but if we put it in the air like that, it is most likely to sterilise the areas on either side. He would not have put Crossrail on stilts in Greater London.

Grant Shapps: It is worth explaining to the House that the tunnels will bring HS2 into Manchester; it will not be on stilts coming in. I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring specifically to the station element, which has been studied and re-studied many different times. Of course, we can only spend the same money once and we need to spend it as wisely as possible. If we spend £6 billion or £7 billion building the station underground at Manchester, we will take away from Liverpool, Leeds, Hull or some of the other places that are calling for money. He rightly points out that for the difference of four minutes in the journey from Manchester to Leeds, for example, the cost will be £18 billion less, but that does not take away from the fact that in today's announcement there is £23 billion for Northern Powerhouse Rail, including new high-speed lines from Warrington to West Yorkshire and all the huge upgrades that we have been describing. Manchester is a principal beneficiary of this entire programme, and we wish his constituents well in their new journey times.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I welcome the announcement and particularly the improved speed of delivery. Once in a generation would be good; I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) will be here in 2043, but I will be 83 years old, so I do not want it to take that long.

I really encourage as much UK provision into the supply line as possible. I will be leaving the House later today to zoom back up to Sedgefield on a train built in Newton Aycliffe; I hope we see many more of those. On supply, there is a bit of uncertainty among residents about the impact on things like the Restoring Your Railway programme at places such as Ferryhill. We need to make sure that that proceeds, but it is also important that we head north. What opportunities will come for the Leamside line to deliver north for Sedgefield?

Grant Shapps: It is worth saying that 97% of HS2 companies are UK-registered. More than 2,000 businesses are involved in the delivery; as my hon. Friend knows,

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many are bidding for things like the train delivery. There will be further announcements on that side of things soon.

On improvements, I know that Darlington has had capacity constraints—I have been to see them for myself—that will be massively improved as a result of our plans. All in all, it is very good news for my hon. Friend's constituents in Sedgefield.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I have to say that the Secretary of State's upbeat statement does not really chime with reality. It represents missed opportunities for the people and businesses of Bradford. The short-sighted decision puts at risk the more than £30 billion in economic benefits that would have flowed from a full NPR with a city centre train stop for Bradford. The disparity in the statement is huge: it is big on rhetoric and short on delivery. Just how long has it been known that the promises on HS2 and NPR would be broken, letting down the people of Bradford and the people of the north?

Grant Shapps: For the hon. Lady's constituents who want to travel to Leeds, I think the journey at the moment is 20 to 22 minutes. The good news is that after today's announcement, it will take 12 minutes. That will bring real connectivity between two great northern cities, which is incredibly important.

It is also important to say that the Government have always said that we will look at the best ways to improve efficiency and reliability. Should the hon. Lady's constituents need to travel down to London, as she does, I am pleased to say that once work has been completed, they will be able to get here 30 minutes faster. Again, that is a very significant delivery. As we have been saying, these things will not happen in decades' time, in the 2040s; they will be happening this decade. That is incredibly important as well.

I believe that this is a plan that will deliver for the hon. Lady's constituents in Bradford. Of course, there are always more things and there is always the future. It is important that people know the current plans so that they can plan for those things. Right now, the connectivity between Bradford and Leeds is improving so much that I am sure it will make many people think about how fortunate they are to be able to get to another major city so fast after these plans are in place.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): HS2 was always a white elephant, but as far as the east coast is concerned, it is now a white elephant missing a leg. We were promised that it would relieve congestion on the east coast main line because it would go to Leeds. Where is that promise?

There is one promise that the Secretary of State can keep. For years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said, we have been promised a through train that would serve a quarter of a million people and go from Grimsby and Cleethorpes, through Market Rasen in my constituency and Lincoln, down to London. We are still waiting. Just saying, "We are working on it," is not enough. We have had these promises again and again. Will I be standing here in 2043, when I am 93, still asking for my train?

Grant Shapps: I suspect that my right hon. Friend will be making a very passionate case! I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry the Rail Minister, is working on the business case.

Let me say something about the east coast main line. What is often misunderstood is that a huge number of upgrades were carried out on the west coast main line in the 1990s to increase capacity, and it was maxed out. On the east coast, those upgrades, which now include digital signalling and other technologies that were not available then, mean that there is still a fair amount of capacity to be exploited. I do not understand the argument of those who say, "Never mind about maxing out the capacity, the electrification, the digitalisation of signalling; let us just rip through and build yet another line." We should do the things that work and deliver the fastest, in our lifetimes, and that is what this plan will achieve.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There has been a great deal of commitment to HS2 in Sheffield, across the political parties and in the business community, so today there will be a lot of anger. People will feel that Sheffield has once again been snubbed and left behind. I believe that as a consolation we are to see the electrification of the midland main line. Is that the third time it has been promised? It has already been scrapped twice, so are we going to be third time lucky? What is the guarantee?

There are a great many questions to be asked about, for instance, the links between Sheffield and the other major cities, and whether there will be investment in our tram network, including badly needed links to our hospitals. Will the Secretary of State therefore agree to meet Sheffield Members of Parliament, representatives of the city council and the mayor to discuss the details of these proposals and what they actually mean for our city?

Grant Shapps: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, the HS2 Minister, is champing at the bit to have exactly that discussion.

I would not want the hon. Gentleman to have inadvertently misled the House or his constituents about today's announcement, because the good news for him and his constituents is that exactly the same journey times that were promised to him through HS2 now apply to Sheffield, and that rather than having to wait until 2043—as I have said several times—for, in particular, the midland main line upgrades, we will be starting that work this Christmas.

Mr Betts: Will we have the meeting?

Grant Shapps: Yes.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Levelling up across the north means improving our transport and connectivity links for communities such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. As the Secretary of State will know, I have been lobbying about the reopening of the Skipton-to-Colne railway line and the freight terminal, but it is still the case that a 25-mile journey by rail and road can take up to an hour by rail and easily two and a half hours by road at the peak of the rush hour. Can the Secretary of State explain how what has been announced will achieve levelling up in communities like mine, and assure me that there is still a focus on smaller projects?

Grant Shapps: One of the big announcements today was about smart ticketing, which will make journeys much easier and more convenient for people, and will also enable fares to be capped. If someone—perhaps one of my hon. Friend's constituents—uses the train several times a week, on more days than they originally budgeted for, and has no season ticket, this version of smart ticketing will enable a contactless system to repay the person's credit card at the end of the week.

It is true—I want to be completely up front—that not every single town, city and village in the country will benefit from the plan, but this is not the end of it. We still have the rail network enhancements pipeline—the RNEP—which my hon. Friend the Rail Minister is working on, and, of course, many other programmes, including Restoring Your Railway, which will bring further opportunities.

I should be happy to organise a meeting between my hon. Friend and the Rail Minister—and let me, for the sake of clarification, repeat to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that his request for a meeting was accepted.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My priority for so many years has been the connectivity of the towns and cities across the north-west of England, and Yorkshire in particular. It would be wrong of me not to say that there was some good news in this morning's statement—I believe that there are some advantages for Huddersfield—but the problem is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has said, there is a hole in the middle of this plan. It is not strategic enough, it is not integrated enough, and it is not ambitious enough. There is some good stuff in it, but will the Secretary of State go back and have a rethink about the boldness and the timescale?

Grant Shapps: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's tone. I know that he was never a fan of HS2 originally. He is right to say that there are many benefits for Huddersfield in this plan—for example, journey times to Birmingham Curzon Street will be cut, there will be more trains to Leeds, and services will improve. However, he is right about the importance of ensuring that this can be stitched into the wider rail network. I think that once he has had an opportunity to read the integrated rail plan, he will find answers to many of his queries, and I welcome his at least tacit support for some of these measures.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful that the excellent Secretary of State has come to the House and made, as Sir Humphrey would say, such a "courageous" decision. It would be much easier politically to carry on with HS2, but today's announcement will give better service to more people. In my constituency in the east midlands, electrification going north from Wellingborough is overdue and will be welcomed. We would not have benefited in any way from HS2. Will he say that, because of his courageous decision, he will still be in place next week?

Grant Shapps: You never know in politics. My hon. Friend makes the good point that electrification can be a real game changer on our railways. I think I am right in saying that he has already experienced it up to his constituency but not further north. This plan completes

it and brings electrification of the midland main line up to Sheffield, which will make a dramatic difference to him and his constituents. I thank him for welcoming it.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The announcement scraps much-needed plans to improve rail capacity and connections in communities in the midlands and the north, where economic prosperity should have been boosted. Just a few weeks ago, the Chancellor announced plans to make it cheaper to take domestic flights. Can the Secretary of State explain how those plans together deliver against either of the Government's stated objectives of levelling up and tackling climate change?

Grant Shapps: I thought that the hon. Lady was going to ask about how the plan benefits Richmond specifically—I suppose it does for those who want to travel to anywhere in the midlands or north. She is right that it is important that people can travel affordably by rail. It is also right to remind the House that, in all these decisions, we have to consider the wider purse and taxpayers' money. We have spent £15 billion keeping our rail service going during coronavirus outside of all the other expenditure and we come to the House today with a £96 billion investment package. Of course, we will always try to balance the direct costs to the individual passenger making a journey with those to the wider taxpayer who is supporting the infrastructure. It is always my goal to get more people travelling on the trains and public transport—that is, I think, a worthy goal—and I think these plans will help that in the future.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): One feature of Northern Powerhouse Rail as I understood it was a completely new line from Leeds to Bradford and Manchester, and the journey from Bradford to Manchester was to take 20 minutes. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that now it will be more like 45 minutes? Additionally, the new station in Bradford that would have given a King's Cross-style regeneration opportunity to Bradford, which is in severe need of it, will be missed. Will he confirm that, by not doing that, an economic price will be paid for generations?

Grant Shapps: No. With the greatest respect, I do not accept that narrative for several reasons. First, that was Transport for the North's suggestion—and actually it was to be a 29-minute journey. That was one of the options, and another of those options is what we are doing. Secondly, as I have said to the House, there are many benefits to Bradford—including that 12-minute journey to Leeds and a journey at least half an hour shorter to London—which all come about because of the integrated rail plan. Governments have to make decisions, and I accept that we cannot do everything all of the time everywhere, but, when my hon. Friend speaks to his constituents, he will be able to tell them about dramatically improved journey times as a result of the plan.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): A few moments ago, in response to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), the Secretary of State extolled the virtues of electrification. Any real plan for the north of England would have: electrification from the seats of my hon. Friends in Hull all the way through to Liverpool; access to Sheffield from Manchester; and access to Newcastle and the north-east. That scale of imagination is lacking

[Tony Lloyd]

in the announcement. Will he guarantee that no damage will be done that would prevent a more ambitious programme in the future?

Grant Shapps: It might have been lost in translation, but Liverpool to York is a core part of the NPR programme. As I have said before, it will be electrified and have some high-speed lines, too. None of this prevents further electrification. There are new plans to stretch beyond Hull to Newcastle and more. Obviously, no Government can do this in a single go. The plans I have announced today accelerate dramatically the advantages that constituents will get across the north, because it will now happen in this decade—starting from Christmas. This speeds up a lot of that, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say it does not prejudice anything else happening in the future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to say that not every city, town and village will benefit from this plan, but one thing is for sure, which is that they will all be paying for it and there are opportunity costs. Does he understand the disquiet of my constituents about HS2 and now this plan, given that he has limited bandwidth and what he is spending on one project is not being spent on upgrading services elsewhere? Will he throw my constituents a small crumb by delaying the planned closure of services from Bristol Temple Meads to Waterloo via Trowbridge and Salisbury, pending a proper consultation that will show very clearly that the Great Western Railway service he thinks duplicates services run by South Western Railway is over capacity now and certainly will be once he closes the GWR service?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is right that every decision has a trade-off, which is why it is important that we think about the country as a whole. He will be pleased to hear that I was down in the south-west yesterday using South Western Railway, and I appreciate the importance of that service. I will ensure that he meets the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, to discuss his specific concerns.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today's announcement will be a bitter blow to my constituents and the local economy in York, not least because we all know, and the Secretary of State knows, that the trans-Pennine route upgrade will not have the necessary capacity to deliver the rail speeds and connectivity that we need. Will he publish the capacity of that route so that we can understand how my constituents can move west in a timely way?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I will. The capacity figures are in the document itself. I do not want the hon. Lady to go away from this Chamber and inadvertently mislead her constituents. Journey times from York to Manchester, which are 55 minutes today, will be 28 minutes. There will be a dramatic improvement, and it would be extraordinary if she described that as bad news.¹

The hon. Lady will see that the capacity figures are in the integrated rail plan and, yes, the capacity is there to do it.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I broadly welcome this package of measures, which starts to boost some of the regional economies in the north. Will the Secretary of State make sure that he keeps a keen eye on some of the small local projects, such as the South Fylde line? We currently have one train an hour running from Blackpool South through Fylde and into Preston. We need to make sure that we are investing in such small projects to bring meaningful change.

Grant Shapps: There is an awful lot coming alongside the IRP, which is just one part of our rail infrastructure. The rail network enhancements pipeline has tens of billions of pounds, and there are also programmes such as the Beeching reversals—I have been to my hon. Friend's patch in the past to talk about some of those reversals. There are many other opportunities for Members on both sides of the House to look to improve their rail services. The Government are building new lines and just yesterday, as I mentioned earlier, I opened one that had stopped running in the 1970s.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was personally invested in HS2 as a member of the hybrid Bill Committee for the section from London to Birmingham. I sat on that Committee for 15 months, so I have some understanding of what is happening. Only nine months, one week and one day ago, the Prime Minister answered my question:

"I can certainly confirm that we are going to develop the eastern leg as well as the whole of the HS2."—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 324.]

To people in the north of England who live well north of Leeds, this now looks as though HS2 was affordable for the south but it was not affordable for the north. If we are going to put this right, we need to get local schemes such as the Leamside line, the Bensham curve and the new Gateshead station put into the programme, so that people can see some real benefit. It is not just about getting to Leeds, to York, to London; it is about getting from Newcastle to Carlisle, and from Newcastle to Sunderland, to Hartlepool, to Middlesbrough, and those lines take an age. So, Secretary of State, let us make sure that what the Prime Minister said to me nine months ago is not just more empty rhetoric from the bank of broken promises.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about new lines. The Ashington to Newcastle line, which is likely to be the second or third Beeching reversal, will do exactly what he has asked for: it will bring services from Ashington, through Blyth, to Newcastle. These are brand new lines. This integrated rail plan is not the whole picture; it is the part of the picture that was to do with NPR and midlands rail. I know that he dismisses it, but a 21-minute improvement on journeys from Newcastle to London because of this plan will be appreciated by his constituents—I cannot think why it would not be. It is exactly the sort of capacity improvement that we want to see. I remind him and the whole House: this is not the end state of our railway. It is just the next stage, which will immediately provide a 21-minute improvement for his constituents.

Several hon. Members rose—

1.[*Official Report*, 19 November 2021, Vol. 703, c. 6MC.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I want to try to get everybody in, so let us have brief questions and briefer answers.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for this statement, as there is a lot in the plan to welcome in Nottinghamshire, not least the opportunity to build a new station at Toton, where we can create thousands of jobs. Will he confirm for my Mansfield constituents that there is good news in the plan on the Maid Marian line and Robin Hood line, which can help them to access those jobs at Toton?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend has been an extraordinary advocate, and Nottinghamshire and his Mansfield constituents are big winners today. Toton is coming, along the lines already discussed, and we have that very important tie-up between Birmingham and Nottingham—it just did not exist under previous plans—together with Derby. He is right to say that those two lines get a mention in today's programme. There is much more work to do, of course, to bring them to life.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Twice in this Chamber I have asked the Prime Minister to commit to the HS2 eastern leg, and twice he has done so from that Dispatch Box. Today, that promise goes up in smoke, as will thousands of jobs associated with the project in the east midlands—more skilled jobs lost in our community. This is economic vandalism. My constituents will ask me why yet another promise to our community has been broken. Will the Secretary of State tell me what I should say to them?

Grant Shapps: Yes, the hon. Gentleman should tell them that under this plan trains will come straight into the city centre of Nottingham, which would not have happened under the original HS2 plan.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In addition to the recently announced improvements to the train service from Kettering, including a 46-minute, non-stop London to Kettering service and the reintroduction of the half-hourly service northwards, which was taken out by Labour in 2010, I welcome the better connectivity that will be experienced by rail passengers from Kettering as a result of the integrated rail plan. Will the Secretary of State confirm the timetable for the electrification of the midland main line and, in particular, the section between Kettering and Market Harborough?

Grant Shapps: The good news is that that is starting very soon. I made reference to work starting by Christmas and I think—this is subject to my checking—that it is actually the Kettering section that will be starting. I know that my hon. Friend's area has already benefited from rail electrification to the south, and this brings it to the north as well.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): So in this downgraded plan, the Secretary of State has announced a high-speed line between Liverpool, Warrington, Manchester and the western boundary of Yorkshire. Just what we needed: a Mancunian express to Saddleworth moor. We do not need a study in how to get trains to Leeds. Just build what was promised: the full Northern Powerhouse Rail. That is all we need.

Grant Shapps: Yes, of course, every Government could simply say, "Why don't we just do this? Why don't we do that? Why don't we do the other?" However, eventually, it has to be paid for. More importantly, we want to see it in the lifetime of our constituents now, not in some never-never land in the 2040s. We want to see these advantages delivered. The hon. Gentleman makes the important point about why, as he rightly says, we are doing high-speed rail to Marsden, in the west of Yorkshire. The answer is, as I am sure he knows, because that is where the congestion is, coming out of Manchester; that is where the trains are getting stuck because there are not sufficient paths. This will resolve that problem and give us a 33-minute Manchester to Leeds journey, which I would have thought he would welcome for his constituents.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Residents just north of Crewe in my Eddisbury constituency, and particularly those in and around Wimboldsley, have consistently raised a number of specific concerns about the proposed route through their area—namely in respect of salt and brine subsidence, the location of the HS2 railyard, and the impact on and possible viability of the excellent local primary school. My hon. Friend the HS2 Minister has kindly agreed to meet those residents, but will my right hon. Friend look again at the substantial evidence they have accumulated, so that it can be taken into consideration for any future proposals and he can perhaps come up with a better alternative plan?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The design refinement consultation is under way and will address many of his ongoing concerns, and he is meeting my hon. Friend the HS2 Minister.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is not rocket science: the road to levelling up, however we define it, goes by rail. That is the only way the north can achieve the level of economic integration necessary to deliver the high-pay, high-productivity jobs that my constituents deserve. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this watered-down, broken-promise plan, made in Whitehall, not the north, means that every single Tory MP with a seat in the north-east will go into the next election on a platform of "We did you over last time; please let us do you over again"?

Grant Shapps: No, they will go in on the platform of saying that we have reduced journey times, provided more seats and increased capacity and reliability. For example, Newcastle to Peterborough is a big winner, with 21 minutes cut off the train journey to London. I do not know about my hon. Friends, but I think they will have plenty to say.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): On behalf of the people of Rother Valley, I thank the Government for getting rid of the eastern leg of the 2b arm. It was a damaging and destructive thing for South Yorkshire that would have given us no benefits. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, now that we have scrapped that ridiculously expensive project, we are going to invest the money into the projects we actually need, such as better regional buses, better regional transport and better trans-Pennine links?

Grant Shapps: We are absolutely cognisant of the fact that we can spend the money only once and want to make sure that it benefits as many people as possible, and we are doing exactly that. I have said to the House, we are still going to spend time, energy and money on the best way to get HS2 trains to Leeds, but without some of the disruption that my hon. Friend described.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I invite the Secretary of State to travel with me the 46 miles from Otley in my constituency to Manchester Piccadilly at peak time. He will then see the twin challenges of connectivity and capacity. First, if the bus turns up in Otley it then takes more than an hour to get to Leeds train station, and there is then the challenge of actually getting on the train to Manchester, because it is full. That is why we need, first, Northern Powerhouse Rail in full, because we need additional capacity, and secondly, £3 billion for a full mass transit system for West Yorkshire to be not just promised but delivered into the coffers of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

Grant Shapps: The good news is that there will be much-improved frequency of trains from Leeds to Manchester—it looks like around three trains an hour will become seven or eight trains an hour under the plan. The hon. Gentleman will thereby get a lot of good things, including a reduction in the capacity restrictions that are the major cause of problems. That also answers the question asked by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) a few moments ago about why we need that link from Manchester out to West Yorkshire.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I very much welcome what has been announced today. If we are truly to level up opportunities in Stoke-on-Trent, we must address the issues of capacity on the local network, and particularly release the full benefits of HS2 and the fantastic Restoring Your Railway Fund projects we have been working on. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look at the capacity enhancements that we want to see on the local network in and around Stoke-on-Trent?

Grant Shapps: Stoke-on-Trent is, as ever, brilliantly represented by my hon. Friend. He will get HS2 trains into the centre of Stoke, and we will work closely with him to ensure that that benefits his constituents in every possible way.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The strengthening of regional rail is the right thing to do and my right hon. Friend has my support in that respect; however, given that the original HS2 business case was ropery at best, will my right hon. Friend set out what the loss of a leg does to the overall business case? Surely, the right thing to do is to scrap it altogether, save more than £100 billion and put that into more of the regional schemes.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend should tell that to the 2 miles of tunnel that has already been dug for HS2. I know he has not been the HS2 plan's firmest supporter, but at this stage, with 20,000 people and hundreds of apprenticeships working with HS2, I think that train has probably left the station.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): I welcome the £96 billion, which represents the largest investment in northern railways since Victoria sat on the throne.

High Peak sits between the two great cities of Manchester and Sheffield, which are just 30 miles apart but have some of the worst transport links anywhere in the country. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to tackle the issue with, first, the Mottram bypass and Glossop spur road, and secondly, the upgrade to the Hope Valley line, which I am pleased to see is included in the integrated rail plan. Will the Secretary of State agree to work with me and meet me so that we can ensure that not only Manchester and Sheffield but passengers from places such as New Mills, Chinley, Edale, Hope and Bamford benefit from that upgrade?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner for his constituents and, as he says, work on the Hope Valley line is under way, as confirmed in the programme announced today. I am sure that it will bring the wider benefits that my hon. Friend's constituents so desperately want.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): By anyone's standards, £96 billion is a major investment. Will the Secretary of State outline the improvements and timetable for services from Durham and Darlington to London and to the great cities of the north? The key thing for communities such as North West Durham, where we currently have no train lines at all, is connectivity, so will the Secretary of State assure me and the other north-east MPs who have already spoken that he and the DfT will continue to look at and work with us on connectivity for our constituencies?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that Darlington is a big winner out of this package. The improved journey times and reliability from places such as Durham because of the east coast main line upgrades will make a big difference. I know that my hon. Friend is already making significant progress on his Restoring Your Railway bids, because he has recently had success on that front.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): HS2 is going to be transformative for my Crewe and Nantwich seat, bringing jobs and investment, so I am delighted that the Government have today committed to the Crewe-Manchester leg, which will bring journey times to the airport down to 15 minutes and journey times into Manchester itself down to less than half an hour, as well as, of course, freeing up the existing route. In respect of the leg from Birmingham to Crewe, I saw how important the passing of legislation was to unlock business confidence and investment, so will the Secretary of State outline when we can expect legislation on the Crewe to Manchester leg to pass into law?

Grant Shapps: The House will be considering a hybrid Bill for the Crewe to Manchester section, which is reconfirmed by the integrated rail plan announced today. The legislation will be introduced early next year, so it is all systems go.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is really difficult for me to share the optimism about today's announcement, because it is very disappointing to hear

that HS2 phase 2b will not be scrapped in full. I know that my constituents will share that disappointment. We are the most affected constituency, with phase 1 and now phase 2b, yet we are not seeing any of the perceived benefits and are already seeing families, communities and businesses in areas such as Coleshill and Water Orton devastated. Now that is going to carry on for many years to come. Will the Secretary of State confirm what reassessment is being made of the already fragile HS2 business case, particularly now that it will not extend fully to the north in the foreseeable future? What benefits does he think today's wider announcement will bring for my constituents?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend quite rightly and properly highlights the challenges; any major building project can have big impacts on his constituents and others, and that can be too easily forgotten in debates in the House. I know that the individual business cases on the different phases of HS2 are being taken forward. The HS2 Minister has already visited my hon. Friend, and I recommit today to making sure that we do everything possible with him to best represent his constituents, because I appreciate that HS2 does not benefit an area just because it cuts through it.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I welcome the integrated rail plan and the wider electrification project that the Government are pursuing—including the link between Bolton and Wigan—but my constituents, whether going from Horwich Parkway or Hag Fold into Manchester, have concerns about reliability because of a bottleneck in Manchester. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that Manchester improves its reliability, capacity and connectivity?

Grant Shapps: The Manchester recovery taskforce, mentioned on page 104 of the integrated rail plan, is working on that very knotty problem of what happens

in the corridor as we come through and out of Manchester. It is one thing that this plan seeks to resolve, and it will help my hon. Friend's constituents in Bolton to get that electrification, particularly between Wigan and Bolton, sorted out as well. There is a lot in here for him to digest and I look forward to my next visit.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and his excellent team on this far more sensible approach. However, may I respectfully suggest that the lesson from the HS2 debacle—it is not so much a turkey as a turkey mixed with a white elephant—is that never again must a politician's vanity project, and a New Labour one at that, be allowed to gather a head of steam? Secondly, is he sure that the £40 billion on the Birmingham to Crewe route is the best use of public money, when there would be far more support in this House for properly funding all the northern powerhouse? Thirdly, may I gently remind him that the Wessex routes are the most underfunded and overused in Britain?

Grant Shapps: I was wondering how the Isle of Wight might benefit from HS2. Of course it will when my hon. Friend's constituents cross to the mainland and want to travel north. With regard to Birmingham to Crewe, it has already been legislated for, and it received support from across the House. I do not think that we want to spend too much time going back into an argument about that on a day when we are looking at joining-up plans for the north and the midlands, much as I could be enticed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I have a quick reminder: by and large, the idea is to ask one question as opposed to three in one.

Business of the House

12.21 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 22 November will include:

MONDAY 22 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Health and Care Bill (Day 1).

TUESDAY 23 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Health and Care Bill (Day 2).

WEDNESDAY 24 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism.

THURSDAY 25 NOVEMBER—General debate on freedom of religion or belief: 40th anniversary of the declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance, followed by a debate on a motion on alcohol harm. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 26 NOVEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Splendid!

Mr Rees-Mogg: The provisional business for the week commencing 29 November will include:

MONDAY 29 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [HL], followed by a motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the Animals (Penalty Notices) Bill, followed by a motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Approved Premises (Substance Testing) Bill.

TUESDAY 30 NOVEMBER—Opposition day (9th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 1 DECEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No.2) Bill.

THURSDAY 2 DECEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3RD DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business and also his colleague, the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), for his various cries. I look forward to seeing him on a Friday.

Today is Equal Pay Day, but it is not a day for celebration. Today, 10 million women in the UK now face working their entire careers without seeing equal pay. This is up from 8.5 million just a year ago. Can the Secretary of State for Women and Equalities or the Work and Pensions Secretary, or both, come to this House and explain why, under this Government, we are going so far backwards and what they will do about it?

What a week! The Leader of the House and I have seen rather a lot of each other across the Dispatch Boxes, and we have also seen the true extent of the Government's blasé attitude towards corruption. The Prime Minister's letter, which I believe was sent to Mr Speaker on Tuesday, said that banning MPs from taking roles as paid political consultants or lobbyists would stop them from, "exploiting their positions". But this Government seem to be saying one thing one day,

and then doing entirely another the next—making rules to break them, and facing no consequences for their egregious actions. They could have voted yesterday for our motion, which would have guaranteed—guaranteed—this House a vote on strengthening standards and in a timetable, but instead they chose to support a wrecking amendment, with no clear timetable and no guaranteed vote, and that could see as few as just 10 Conservative MPs affected. Does the Leader of the House agree that such partisanship and what appears to be naked self-interest should never override upholding the principles of public life?

While we are on the Prime Minister and the subject of standards, news outlets are reporting—I do not know whether this has been confirmed—that he said that he had "crashed" the Government car into a "ditch" as a result of the advice that the right hon. Gentleman said, I think, that he gave to the Prime Minister over the affair of the former MP for North Shropshire. Can we have a debate in Government time on dangerous driving and whether that should take place on the Estate?

It is not just on the subject of standards where the Government show nothing but contempt for this House. I am afraid to say that I have raised numerous times with the right hon. Gentleman the fact that Members are still not receiving timely, or in some cases any, replies to letters, written questions or calls to MP hotlines. I know that the Leader of the House shares my concern, so could he take it up again, please?

I am afraid that, at the last business questions, the Leader of the House stated that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) had received a response to his letter to the Prime Minister sent more than a year ago on Islamophobia. I am sure that the Leader of the House did not intend to make this mistake, but, unfortunately, it seems from what I am told that the response that he referred to was from the Conservative party chair, not the Prime Minister, and related to a completely different letter. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could correct this and clarify. My hon. Friend has now written to the Prime Minister again, so can he also ensure that the Prime Minister finally replies to this letter before the end of this year's Islamophobia Month?

The shadow Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), asked a named day question all the way back in September on the amount of covid-19 vaccines that had reached their expiry date. This week, it was publicly announced that around 600,000 doses were thrown away in August, but my hon. Friend has still not received a substantive response to her question, which is so critical for our global response to covid. Will the Leader of the House take this back to his Cabinet colleagues and impress on them once again their responsibilities to this House?

This is not my specialist subject, but the annual fisheries negotiations are due to conclude shortly, which is important in ensuring that we reach a good deal for British fishing. I ask the Leader of the House to allocate Government time to debate this, before the December fisheries council?

On behalf of the very many staff who have asked to be able to plan for next year, especially after this past year, will the Leader of the House please give us the recess dates for 2022 next week? They have a right to

know those dates, as they have to plan around us and they need to be able to book that holiday to be with their families.

Finally, this week, Azeem Rafiq has given us distressing, but, unfortunately for many of us, not surprising evidence to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee about his experience of racism—in this case in cricket. It is abundantly clear that there has been an acute failure of leadership—in his case, at club and national level—and that, sadly, this is part of a more widespread problem. There should be no place for racism in sport, in this House, or anywhere in our society. Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to make sure that the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket's inquiry into racism in cricket is taken seriously, and that it cannot be swept under the rug, as it has been so many times before?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. May I begin with the issue of cricket? As somebody who has followed cricket since his childhood, I think I can say that this is a matter of shame to all cricket lovers. I look back to when I followed Somerset county cricket in the late '70s and early '80s when we had the most wonderful players from the West Indies—Joel Garner and Viv Richards particularly, but there were others, too. They were so inspirational, and encouraged excitement in cricket and made everyone in Somerset feel that they were part of our county and huge contributors to it. I am afraid that what has been going on in Yorkshire fills many cricket lovers with sadness. The England and Wales Cricket Board has a strong responsibility to ensure that this is stamped out and dealt with much more thoroughly than it has been so far.

The hon. Lady started by asking about equality. It is worth pointing out that the Government have pushed very hard to ensure that women get the opportunities that they deserve: there is a higher percentage of women on FTSE 350 company boards than ever before, and we have introduced shared parental leave and pay, and doubled free childcare for eligible parents, to help to ensure that women in the workplace have as strong a position as possible. Those policy principles and precepts will be kept to.

The hon. Lady then came to some more controversial matters and talked about partisanship. Well, I have a word or two to say about partisanship, because yesterday the Leader of the Opposition had to apologise to the House and withdraw a word that he had used, which today the same man has tweeted about the Prime Minister. That is not only extraordinarily partisan, but it is enormously disrespectful to this House and to Mr Speaker. To have to withdraw a word in this House, and then scuttle out like a beetle and tweet it, is utterly disrespectful to the House and is not the sort of cross-party leadership that one might expect.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition then went further and tweeted inaccurately about his own motion yesterday, so perhaps he did not even know what he had put his name to. That is partisanship, whereas the Conservative Government have been trying to put things right by ensuring that by 31 January—a clear deadline, in spite of what the hon. Lady said—the Committee on Standards can report, and can do so in a way that makes it clear how the rules

can be improved following the 2018 report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, led by the noble Lord Bew. We are the ones who are trying our best to be cross-party against a barrage of partisanship, and we are trying to ensure the highest possible standards.

As regards the letter mentioned by the hon. Lady, my understanding is that the party chairman was replying on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I will obviously look into that, check and respond.

Fishing negotiations are an important matter for the House, but I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee can look into finding time for that important debate.

Finally, the shadow Leader of the House wants to go on her holidays. I quite understand that it is a very important matter, although I think that some Labour MPs may have been on their holidays already this week because the Finance Bill, which can go until any hour and sets out the major principles of legislation from the Budget—one of the most important things that the Government do—fell short. It finished early! Where were all the socialists keen to make their arguments about how the finances of the nation should be guided? It does not surprise me that the hon. Lady, and her hon. and right hon. Friends, are keen to book their holidays, but to facilitate them I will bring forward recess dates in the normal way.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last Sunday, this country quite rightly paused to reflect, and to honour those men and women who risked or gave their lives in world wars and other conflicts. It is less well known that this Sunday we come together at the Cenotaph to honour the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, with a parade where veterans and children of veterans honour those who risked or gave their lives. Could we have a debate in Government time on all the other people who gave or risked their lives so that this country and Parliament could be free?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to my attention, because I did not know that the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women had a parade on the week after Armistice Sunday. I congratulate him on bringing that to the attention of the House. I also congratulate the association on its work and on the commemoration to recognise one's gratitude to the veterans from the Jewish community who served in Her Majesty's forces—or His Majesty's forces, as they then often were—and to ensure that their contribution, along with the contribution of others, is not forgotten. It may be difficult to facilitate a debate immediately, but remembrance should be discussed in this House.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I start by congratulating the Leader of the House? I congratulate him on actually still being here. I mean, he has defied every single rule and principle of political gravity by ensuring that this disastrous period of sleaze now goes into its third week. But at least he has had the good grace to concede that it was all his fault and that it was he who encouraged the Prime Minister to pursue this disastrous action. It might have been the Prime Minister who crashed the car into the ditch, but it was the Leader of the House who provided the directions.

[Pete Wishart]

When the history books are written on this sorry saga and detail how this rotten Government lost their momentum, their lead and their authority, there will be a chapter that starts, “And Jacob Rees-Mogg rose to his feet to oppose the report from the Committee on Standards.” To still be here after all this, the Leader of the House must know where the top hats are buried. We need at least two days of debate on all the issues around Government sleaze and corruption, and we need to see the Prime Minister leading those debates. The Leader of the House has ensured that this is the issue that is consuming the public, so I am almost certain that he agrees that we must now satisfy that public demand.

We definitely need a debate about the House of Lords, because there are huge public concerns about how people get a place in it. The Prime Minister yesterday all but conceded that donors are given a place in the House of Lords for their contributions when he said to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil):

“Until you get rid of the system by which the trades union barons fund other parties”,

we have to go ahead—conceding that money buys people a place in the legislature that allows them to define, determine and amend the laws of this country.

Lastly, may I thank the Leader of the House for advancing the cause of Scottish independence in the most dramatic, compelling and convincing way possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One could never accuse the hon. Gentleman of being knowingly understated. We have had “disaster”, “sorry saga”, “rotten”, “sleaze”, “corruption”, “huge public concern” and “dramatic” all in about a minute. I do wonder whether he is capable of lowering the tone even further than he normally does, or of lowering the temperature and raising the tone at the same point.

It is so absurdly overstated; we have spent quite enough time discussing ourselves in this House in the last 10 days or so. For example, I return to the Finance Bill. It is a bit of a concern that when we have a debate that could go to any hour on something that affects the livelihoods of every single one of our constituents, the Opposition are too idle to turn up, but when we are talking about ourselves, they want even more time to focus a little bit more on our own concerns. On the idea that there is this huge public concern about the House of Lords, well, the hon. Gentleman must move in very different circles from those in North East Somerset, because the number of letters that I receive on House of Lords reform can be counted in single digits most years.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I are great advocates of the power of the people, because the voice of the people is the voice of God. I say to him—because we both come from the heart of what made Britain as we now know it—that we need elections in Somerset. There is discussion that the local authority now wants all elections put back to 2023, which would be six years since we have had an election in the county that we both love. That is not acceptable. There are severe concerns from all political parties, including my own, that this should not happen again. It is not good for democracy.

Gag the people, and they will come back at us. Therefore, I ask for time in this place to debate the ability to have elections when we should be having them, because, as I said before, the voice of the people is the voice of God.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Vox populi, vox Dei, as my hon. Friend says. It is obviously important that there should be local accountability and elections, but sometimes when there is significant upheaval in local government, elections are postponed until the new body has settled down. It is all a question of getting the balance right.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I apologise to Members for missing these proceedings for the two weeks prior to the recess, but I am afraid to say that three weeks ago today I tested positive for covid. I can honestly say to Members across the House that it is still worth taking precautions because, despite being double-vaccinated, I had some rather unpleasant symptoms and it is best avoided.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, notifying Members of Backbench business on 25 November and notifying us of an allocation of time on 2 December. I hope that we will be able to bring forward two important debates on that date. What we have provisionally pencilled in at the moment are debates on the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Dayton peace accord, and economic crime. I hope we can bring those forward. I hope that before Christmas I could have a meeting with the Leader of the House to make sure that we are up to date with our time allocation from the Backbench Business Committee’s perspective.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I say how glad I am to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place? I thank him for his courtesy in letting my office know that he was not going to be here in previous weeks, and I hope he is fully restored to good health. I am grateful to him for announcing the Backbench business that will be forthcoming, and of course I look forward to having a meeting with him at a time of his convenience.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the provision of increased general practice capacity when thousands of new homes are built? This should happen with as much certainty as the sun rising in the east every morning. We really can do better and we need to do so urgently.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point, because I think all of us as constituency MPs have come across it when there have been developments in our area. Trying to bring various bodies together to make sure that that is considered is important and something that MPs rightly get involved with. We obviously need more home ownership and we need to build the houses for it, but we need to make sure that the infrastructure is put in place as well. This often, in many ways, becomes a matter of local politics, when it is important to address it at the local level, but I will pass on my hon. Friend’s concerns to the Secretary of State.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) raised this with the Leader of the House two weeks ago. I have many constituents appealing to me for help about access to their state pensions. They were

advised as early as July of this year, with impending retirements in November, to apply for their pensions. They still have not received confirmation of what state pension they are receiving or indeed when they will receive it. I now have three constituents who tell me that they cannot retire at the end of the month because they have no idea what their incomes will be. I know that the Leader of the House has raised this previously, but I would be exceptionally grateful if he could arrange for a Department for Work and Pensions Minister to come to the Floor of the House to make a statement, or for a written statement from the Secretary of State, to resolve the issue. We cannot have pensioners not having access to what is rightfully theirs.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue again. It has been a problem for some of my own constituents too, and I have therefore raised it at a constituency level as well as on behalf of the House. As I have said before, one of the very useful purposes of this session is that, if there is a general problem that gets raised by several hon. and right hon. Members, that gives me the opportunity to take it up. The DWP had hoped that the problem would be sorted by now, but I am hearing that it is not. I will therefore take it up with the DWP again and try to provide more information for the House on what progress is being made.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prescribed drug dependence, I pay tribute to Dr Anne Guy, Dr James Davies and Luke Montague for their support for this really important work. Dr Davies recently published research showing that the NHS spends £500 million a year on unnecessary and habit-forming drugs, mostly antidepressants, that people should not be on any more. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this really needs attention, and will he find time for a debate on the over-prescription of habit-forming drugs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a matter of considerable concern and my hon. Friend is right to raise it in this House. On 22 September the Government published “Good for you, good for us, good for everybody”, a review of over-prescribing commissioned by the Secretary of State and conducted by the chief pharmaceutical officer for England, Dr Keith Ridge, that sets out action to reduce patient harm by reducing unnecessary prescribing. A three-year national over-prescribing programme is being established to lead on implementation of the 20 recommendations in the review. A new national clinical director for prescribing, one of the review’s key recommendations, is currently being recruited to drive cross-system implementation and provide the clinical leadership for the programme. So I can reassure my hon. Friend that things are happening. As regards a debate, the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee is paying close attention to our proceedings, and I direct my hon. Friend in that direction in the first instance.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I associate myself with the words of the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House relating to racism in cricket? Particularly with the Ashes almost upon us, we will be mindful of that debate as we go into watching much more cricket in the coming weeks.

I also want to ask about GP provision. Our GPs locally have an 81% approval rate. Many people say that they love their GP but they simply cannot reach the surgery. Could we have a debate, perhaps in Government time, that looks at the capital spend that is needed for telephony so that people can get through more quickly with their inquiries?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises an important point that I think all of us are coming across as constituency MPs—access to GPs, face to face, on the telephone, or on Zoom or similar services. This has been difficult for GPs, who have a huge burden to carry at the moment with the extra demand that has come up post covid. The Government have provided £250 million of taxpayers’ money in the winter access fund to improve the capacity of GP practices, but the hon. Lady’s specific point on telephony is important and I will pass it on to the Secretary of State.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Each week thousands of economic migrants come to this country illegally by crossing the channel from France. Now we know that migrants landing on the Kent coast will be taken to Wellingborough, put in a four-star hotel and given free board, free food and free medical care. There might be many reasons why people want to flee France, but adding the pull factor of coming to Wellingborough—one of the finest and friendliest towns in the country—is absurd. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time where the Government can lay out their position that in future economic migrants will be arriving not in the town of Wellingborough but in a town in Albania?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the reason everyone wants to go to Wellingborough is that they will be so well represented by the Member of Parliament for that distinguished constituency, who will take up their cases for them regardless of their immigration status. However, I can give my hon. Friend some comfort because the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament, will give us much greater power to ensure that illegal asylum claims are dealt with efficiently and effectively, but also that people who have valid asylum claims that they declare legally early on will be treated in the properly sympathetic way that this country has a proud record of doing.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituent downsized in preparation for retirement and was left with a £76,000 surplus that he added to his personal pension, which is what this Government would advise him to do. In doing so, he wrote to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs stating that he wanted to claim tax relief for this one-off contribution. The letter was received, yet ignored. Despite HMRC admitting that it incorrectly changed his tax code, and a call handler admitting that HMRC had made a big mistake, it continued to harass my constituent, adding interest on a monthly basis and causing great anxiety. Can we have a debate on why HMRC continues to hold the public accountable for its own mistakes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman previously, I am more than happy to take up individual constituent cases where proper answers have not already come through. My experience from my constituents has

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

always been that HMRC has been one of the more efficient Government bodies in answering correspondence that I have had. I am therefore sorry that he has not had a good reply and very sorry to hear about his constituent's contribution of £76,000 to his pension not being handled correctly. If the hon. Gentleman will send my office more details, I will take it up with HMRC very shortly.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Good dental health is so important, but residents in Winsford in my constituency are finding it extremely difficult to access dentist services, leading, unfortunately, to some serious misdiagnoses, despite my having written to Ministers, to NHS England and to the Care Quality Commission. Will my right hon. Friend find Government time to sink the Health Department's teeth into a debate on NHS dentistry so that we can better understand what is stopping my constituents from being able to access dentistry services when they need them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is making me think of Jaws from the James Bond films and what might happen if teeth are stuck in, or those children who have railway tracks put on their teeth to straighten them up. His question is very important. The pandemic has had a significant effect on dentistry, and we continue to work on recovering NHS dental services. We are addressing regional shortages of dentists by working with the NHS to try to ensure that training place numbers are better aligned with the needs of local populations. NHS England and NHS Improvement are developing proposals for dental system reform, working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and other interested parties. I think this is being chewed over. There is some mastication going on, and I hope that we will not all become indentured servants.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Dreadful!

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): We have made a degree of progress this week on taking unfortunate money out of politics. Now we need to take the next step and clean up the laundromat of British political party funding. In the wake of the Intelligence and Security Committee report on Russia last year, will the Lord President confirm that no British political party should be taking cash from suspicious fortunes made in Russia and Uzbekistan? Can we have a debate in Government time as soon as possible to crystallise a cross-party consensus on this critical topic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are very clear rules on how money may be taken by political parties, and all the political parties have a strong obligation to abide by them and to ensure that money is declared properly to the Electoral Commission. Ultimately, there will be a choice: whether we wish to have parties funded privately or to put a greater burden on the taxpayer. I would be very reluctant to put any further burdens on taxpayers; they have to bear enough already. I might even remind the right hon. Gentleman of a comment he made some years ago about the shortage of funds.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): Can we have a debate on insurance premiums for emergency vehicle drivers? At present, if the driver of a fire engine, ambulance

or police car is involved in a collision in a blue-light situation, they are hit by increased insurance premiums. It would seem unfair that some of the most skilled drivers in the country, who are very safe in their normal private driving life, are being hit with extra costs for their personal car for putting themselves at risk for public safety.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a point of which many of us in this House were unaware. I see the difficulty that there is for blue-light drivers, who are likely to be trained to a very high standard. Insurers are responsible for setting the terms and conditions of the policies they offer, and it is for them to decide the level of risk they take in issuing any policy to a given applicant. The insurance companies have very large volumes of data from which to estimate their premiums. That makes the setting of premiums a commercial decision for individual insurers based on their underwriting experience, and it is not one where the Government seek to intervene, but my hon. Friend has done a service in bringing this matter to the House's attention.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Like the Leader of the House, I was not aware that the Sunday after Remembrance Sunday—this Sunday—there is a planned march by the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, until it was raised by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I feel it was a bit remiss of me not knowing that. Considering what seems to be a sharp rise in antisemitism, not just in Britain, but across Europe and elsewhere, should we not look at having a full debate in Government time on the contribution of AJEX to British history, where we could also pay tribute to associated organisations, such as the 43 Group, which crushed the Blackshirts in the late 1940s?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We have in some years had a debate around Armistice Day, where it has been possible to record the contribution of a range of people who have been involved in keeping the country safe and free. I am afraid that in normal circumstances, this is more a matter for the Backbench Business Committee than the Government, but his appeal is very wise.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): The rot in the Labour administration in Sandwell is continuing to pervade. Last month, we saw the botched attempt by the council to close a care home in Tipton. Then we saw the moonlight flit on Tuesday of the leader of the Labour party in Sandwell, and now we have the disgraceful edict from the politburo—sorry, I mean the cabinet of Sandwell Council—that if council tenants disagree with the council, they risk eviction from their home. I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that this is a disgraceful situation. Can we have a debate in Government time about the shambles that is the Labour administration in Sandwell Council? The Opposition promised to deal with it. They have failed. Perhaps it is time for us to do something about it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am appalled by what my hon. Friend tells me. It is a very important point, and it is not the first time that the failings of Labour in Sandwell have been raised in this House. There is something rotten at the heart of many socialist councils. I noticed his slip in referring to the politburo, because there is

sometimes a feeling of absolute control. The issue he raises today about limiting freedom of speech is particularly troubling. Politicians must expect challenge and for people to disagree with them and to push hard and argue their points. To try to put in a council contract that someone has to be polite or not say rude things about the council sounds like the sort of thing that happens in totalitarian communist states and not in the United Kingdom. I will pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Talking about local councils, the Leader of the House is my constituency neighbour and we share the same local authority, Bath and North East Somerset Council. There have been some worrying trends of deliberate misinformation about some decisions in our local area. When politicians' reputations are at all-time low, it is important that we make sure we improve that. Indeed, earlier he deplored some misleading tweets. Will he therefore confirm that the spreading of misinformation has no place in today's politics?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What the hon. Lady says is obviously right—information should be accurate—but there is sometimes not a clear dividing line between what is information and what is opinion. One should never use the ploy of saying, “That is misinformation”, when one merely disagrees with an opinion.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Can I raise another general problem with the Leader of the House, which is that of constituents who have switched from energy suppliers that have collapsed, of which there are 21, as of today? They are facing long delays being set up with suppliers of last resort. They do not know how much their Bills will be, and they risk facing accumulating debt and missing out perhaps on the warm home discount, all through no fault of their own. Please can we have an opportunity to raise this problem with Ministers, as it is not going away?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises something that has been of concern. Steps have been taken to help people with energy bills, including contributing £140 to the energy bills of 2.2 million low-income households. I accept that there is uncertainty when energy suppliers go out of business and how that is handled. If she has any specific requests for information for constituents, I would be happy to help her to meet that.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I advise the Leader of the House that I was here on Tuesday for the Finance Bill. The debate was well subscribed on the SNP Benches. There was precisely one Back-Bench contribution from the Conservative party. I counted the contributions three times just to make sure I had not got it wrong. I will be speaking later this afternoon on the Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators' Liability) Bill. Can the Leader of the House explain why it is necessary to complete its entire passage through this House in a single day? Unusually, I do not think the total debate time of six hours is an issue, but the lack of a Public Bill Committee and of an opportunity to call expert witnesses are serious problems. At the moment, the House has not been told why the Bill has been timetabled in this way. Will the Leader of the House

explain why, and say why the Government did not follow their usual practice of explaining their actions in the explanatory notes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There has been a great deal of pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill to ensure that it is widely understood and accepted. The Bill is technical in nature. Not a single amendment has been tabled to the Bill today, which indicates that there is widespread consent across the House. The most open form of debate and scrutiny is a Committee of the whole House, where every Member is able to be involved. I am afraid I disagree with the hon. Gentleman; I think it is a sensible way to proceed with a piece of legislation that has been very thoroughly considered and that ensures that the technical operations of the City of London in relation to interest rates and critical benchmarks can go ahead properly.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It has been reported that the Transport Secretary used public money to create a departmental team that lobbied against plans to build on airfield sites, including a gigafactory at Coventry airport. Disgracefully, that would mean he used public funds to lobby against green investment and jobs coming to Coventry. Why? Well, we know he is an aviation enthusiast. From a dodgy Transport Secretary to a dodgy Leader of the House, who last week tried to rewrite the rules to let his mate off the hook, this Conservative Government are rotten to the core. Is the Leader of the House proud of this shameful record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I think perhaps the hon. Lady could think of a different form of words. I do not like “dodgy”. She can make clear that she disagrees with what has happened, but perhaps she could put it in different words.

Zarah Sultana: I do not think another word suffices for the levels of corruption that we are seeing from this Government, so I think that term suffices.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It does not quite suffice. I am asking the hon. Lady to moderate her language. It is absolutely in order to have disagreement here—that is why we are here—but we must moderate our language and be careful of the adjectives that are used about one Member by another. Perhaps the hon. Lady could just put it in slightly different words and just ask a straight question of the Lord President?

Zarah Sultana: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am confused, because I do not have any other words to put it in.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It would suffice for the moment if the hon. Lady would withdraw the word she used, namely “dodgy”.

Zarah Sultana: I think, when I talk to my constituents—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady misunderstands me. I am asking her to withdraw the word “dodgy”. I am giving her the opportunity to put her question in other words. If she does not want to take that opportunity, she does not have to do so. I am not stopping the hon. Lady making the point she wants to make or asking the Leader of the House the question she wants to ask, and indeed drawing to general attention

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

the points she wishes to draw to general attention. I am asking her to use moderate language in doing so. Would she like to put her question in moderate language?

Zarah Sultana: I won't withdraw those remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*The hon. Member having been understood to have withdrawn her remarks—*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady. I do not want to stop her asking the question. If she would like to ask a simple question of the Lord President of the Council, I am giving her the opportunity to do so. I do not ever wish to stop questions being asked or Government being held to account; I just want to make sure that language is moderated. Would she care to put her question?

Zarah Sultana *indicated dissent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Then I have given her the opportunity to do so. We will find another way of doing it.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): With soaring energy prices and the abandonment of the triple lock, Age UK has warned of older people's not being able to afford to keep their homes adequately heated this winter. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the winter fuel payment, which has been frozen since 2011, and whether he agrees that that support should be linked to the actual cost of energy in order to tackle preventable deaths, which are expected to rise this winter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It may be helpful if I set out what the Government have done in this area. There is a £500 million household support fund so that local authorities can help those on the lowest incomes with their food and utility costs. The energy price cap is being maintained; £140 is being contributed to the energy bills of 2.2 million low-income households through the warm house discount; seasonal cold-weather payments of an extra £25 a week for up to 4 million people will be available during colder periods; the £300 winter fuel payment will go to recipients of the state pension; the increase in the local housing allowance in cash terms this year is worth an extra £600 on average to 1.5 million households and there is a £65 million package for vulnerable renters so that councils can support low-income earners in rent arrears, prevent homelessness and support families. There is a wide package of support to help people to heat their homes during the winter.

The triple lock, which the hon. Lady mentioned, was obviously distorted because of covid and the decline of earnings last year, followed by a significant bounce back this year, and it was entirely suitable and right to suspend it under those extraordinary circumstances. Last year, pensioners benefited; this year, obviously, it was the other way around.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Members on both sides of the House will be aware of the paltry amounts paid in royalties to musicians from streaming platforms. In contrast, the head of Universal Music is set to earn more than £150 million in 2021—more than songwriters and composers made from all UK music streaming, downloads and sales put together in 2019.

The Leader of the House will know that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) has a private Member's Bill ready that would address the situation. Can he assure me that sufficient time will be found to allow for the passage of my hon. Friend's Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an issue that the Government take seriously, and it has been considered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which the hon. Gentleman sponsoring the Bill, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), is a member, launched an inquiry into the economics of music streaming, which heard from key actors in the music industry, including artists, record labels and streaming platforms.

The Committee's report was published on 15 July and made several recommendations to the Government for a broad set of regulatory interventions, intended to address issues with artists' streaming royalties, and including a performer's right to equitable remuneration similar to that proposed in the Bill. However, the Committee's report did not provide sufficient evidence to support legislative action. The impact of introducing a new equitable remuneration right would be significant, so, while the Government are not unsympathetic, more evidence is needed before any action can be taken.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and while the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, is still in the Chamber, I draw the attention of the House to the fact that, in my capacity as Chairman of Ways and Means, overseeing matters in Westminster Hall, I have just been informed that the Backbench Business Committee has been unable to fill the slot available for Backbench Business debates on Tuesday 30 November. Yet I have sat here listening to people asking for debates and the Lord President rightly referring them to the hon. Member for Gateshead.

I feel it necessary to make this point—I hope it is heard more widely—that it would appear that Members are coming to the Chamber to ask the Leader of the House for a slot for a debate, but they are not at the same time applying to the hon. Member for Gateshead for a debate through the Backbench Business Committee. The Lord President has acknowledged the need for debates over the past 40 minutes; the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee is sitting here noting all these requests for debates, and yet those Members have not applied to his Committee for slots. Something is wrong here. I feel it necessary to make that point; it would be a pity to lose the opportunity to do so, since I have just been informed of this slot on 30 November. The hon. Gentleman tells me, "Applications by tomorrow," so if you want your debate, do not ask the Leader of the House—apply to the hon. Member for Gateshead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have already had discussions with the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and asked him about a debate, and I hope to submit that tomorrow.

Will the Leader of the House agree to arrange a statement on a total boycott of the winter Olympics in China in protest over human rights abuses against the

Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic and religious belief minorities? This follows a call to the International Olympic Committee to move the 2022 winter Olympic games out of China. Such a statement would show a united front following a similar announcement from the United States of America on Tuesday stating that it will not send a diplomatic delegation to the 2022 winter Olympic games. A statement would be very helpful.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am tempted to say that applications for debates do not go flooding in to the Backbench Business Committee because Members receive such full answers in these brief sessions, and therefore time is saved, although I see some shaking of heads among Opposition Members.

I am always grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising these points. He is such a strong campaigner for freedom of religion, and there is of course the debate next week on freedom of religion, following the 40th anniversary of the declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance. No decisions have been made about the UK Government's attendance at the Peking winter Olympics in 2022. The attendance of athletes is a matter for the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association.

Freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental human right, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it with me regularly at business questions. Her Majesty's Government remain deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world, but particularly in communist China and against the Uyghur Muslims, as well as against the Tibetans—and the Catholics in China also do not have freedom, with Catholic priests being locked up on many occasions over the years. We have consistently led international efforts to hold China to account for its human rights violations, and we remain committed to the global effort to support the most vulnerable members of society irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity, but I am very glad that this is raised so forcefully in the House not just, but particularly, by the hon. Gentleman.

Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators' Liability) Bill [Lords] (Allocation of Time)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators' Liability) Bill [Lords]:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (13)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Subsequent stages

(8) (a) Any Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(11) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(12) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(13) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(14) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(15) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

1.12 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I do not intend to oppose the motion. As I mentioned earlier, for once the time allocation of six hours is likely to be enough. However, I think the House deserves a better explanation than we got from the Leader of the House about why the Bill has been timetabled in this way. This will only be the fifth time this century that a Thursday has been used to ask the House to approve every single stage of a Bill in its passage through the Commons. The expedited procedure has its uses and there are times when it is entirely appropriate, but it does restrict the ability of MPs to give the Bill proper scrutiny. It should only be used in exceptional circumstances, and this House has the right to be told what those exceptional circumstances are without having to ask.

The Bill itself is not contentious, but the Minister will be aware—this will no doubt come out in the debate in a few minutes—that, on one specific matter relating to clause 2, there is a difference of opinion as to how best to achieve the objectives of the Bill. I do not know which of the two methods is best, which is why I have not submitted an amendment, but this would be tailor-made for a Public Bill Committee that gave Members a chance to hear from expert witnesses the arguments in favour and against both available methods. We could therefore take an informed decision about what is in the best interests of the financial services industry in these cases and, ultimately, of our constituents.

We have not been told why we have been asked to forgo the opportunity of a Public Bill Committee. It cannot be because the Bill addresses an urgent and previously unforeseen problem because it has been 10 weeks since the Bill had its First Reading in the House of Lords. It is four years since we first became aware that LIBOR would be phased out and we would have to find a replacement. Can I ask the Minister to explain why there is the urgency now? Why is there not time to timetable a Public Bill Committee and why did the Government not have the courtesy to follow their usual practice of putting an explanation about the urgency of the Bill into the explanatory notes, as they always have done in the past?

1.13 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for the points he has made, and I recognise the relatively unusual procedure being adopted here. He was present during the passage of the Financial Services Act 2021. Indeed, he contacted my office last week for a briefing prior to this Bill, which I made available to him and Opposition Front Benchers earlier this week. I hope that, in the course of the Second Reading debate and the Committee of the whole House this afternoon, we will indeed give full scrutiny to these matters. They relate to some concerns that arose following the passage of the Financial Services Act earlier this year. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House mentioned in response to a question on the business statement a few moments ago, the lack of amendments suggests that this is an uncontroversial matter. However, I am confident that there will be an

opportunity to fully scrutinise the provisions of this small and technical Bill through a Committee of the whole House. I do not believe that we are in any way forestalling the appropriate and necessary level of scrutiny for a very technical matter consequential on an Act of a few months ago.

Question put and agreed to.

Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators' Liability) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

1.16 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Many Members will have heard of LIBOR in the context of the manipulation scandals almost 10 years ago. The London interbank offered rate is the rate at which banks lend to each other in wholesale markets. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) knows too well, from his experience on the Parliamentary Committee on Banking Standards, a number of changes were made to the administration and governance of LIBOR as a result of that scandal.

Stringent and effective regulation means that LIBOR is now effectively supervised. However, it is no longer robust, as I will explain, and is due to be wound down. The Financial Conduct Authority has confirmed the process to wind down the LIBOR benchmark by the end of this year. Most contracts that reference LIBOR will have transitioned to a different rate before the end of 2021, in line with the guidance of the regulators, but there remain a proportion of contracts that will not have done so.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is comforting to hear that most of these contracts will have transitioned over. In the Lords, the Government estimated that the total value of those contracts was about £300 trillion, so even if a tiny percentage of them do not transition over, they could still represent a significant amount of money. Does the Minister have any indication of the number and value of contracts that he thinks will still need to be covered by this Bill—not as a percentage, but in actual pounds value?

John Glen: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a precise figure. However, in my remarks now and further on, I will give an explanation of those that are excluded and therefore necessitate the creation of this synthetic rate. If he would just bear with me, I will get to the point, and he should feel free to intervene subsequently if he is not satisfied.

The Bill builds on the provisions of the Financial Services Act 2021, as I mentioned a moment ago. This provided the FCA with the powers to effectively oversee the cessation of a critical benchmark in a manner that protects consumers and minimises disruption to financial markets. If I may, I would like to take a few minutes to put the Bill into context.

LIBOR seeks to measure the cost that banks pay to borrow from each other in different currencies and over various time periods. It is calculated using data submitted by a panel of large banks to LIBOR's administrator, which is the ICE Benchmark Administration. It is referenced in approximately \$300 trillion of contracts globally. It is used in a huge volume and variety of contracts, including in derivatives markets, mortgages, consumer loans, structured products, money market instruments and fixed income products. For example, a simple loan contract may say that the interest payable is LIBOR plus 2%. In this example, LIBOR represents the cost to the lender of getting access to the money to lend it out, and the 2% represents the additional risk to the lender associated with making the loan.

[John Glen]

Back in 2012, it emerged that LIBOR was being manipulated for financial gain. Following the subsequent Wheatley review, LIBOR came under the regulatory jurisdiction of the FCA in 2013. That led to significant improvements to the regulation and governance of LIBOR. However, in 2014 the G20's Financial Stability Board, known as the FSB—not to be confused with the Federation of Small Businesses—declared that the continued use of such rates, including LIBOR, represented a potentially serious source of systemic risk. The FSB said that financial markets should voluntarily transition towards the use of more robust and sustainable alternatives. It reached that conclusion due to the structural decline in banks borrowing from each other through the unsecured wholesale lending market. That has meant in turn that LIBOR has become more and more reliant on expert judgments, rather than based on real transaction data. In other words, the market that this systemically important benchmark seeks to measure increasingly no longer exists, which underscores the fundamental need to transition away from LIBOR.

Since the FSB's recommendation, the Government, the FCA and the Bank of England have worked together to support a market-led transition away from use of the LIBOR benchmark. Primarily, they have encouraged contract holders voluntarily to move to robust alternatives, in accordance with guidance from the FCA and the Bank of England, before the end of the year. At the end of the year, LIBOR's panel banks will stop making the submissions to the administrator on which LIBOR is based. At that point it will therefore become unrepresentative, and the administrator will cease publishing in any setting where the FCA has not required continued publication using the synthetic methodology. The vast majority of contracts are expected to have transitioned away from LIBOR before that happens. For example, it is estimated that 97% of all sterling LIBOR referencing derivatives will have transitioned by the end of the year.

Despite extensive work and progress, there remains a category of contracts that face significant contractual barriers to moving away from LIBOR by the end of the year, and measures in the Financial Services Act 2021 sought to provide a safety net for those so-called tough legacy contracts. Through the Act, the Government granted the FCA powers to designate a critical benchmark as unrepresentative, if it determines that the benchmark is, or is at risk of becoming, unrepresentative—in other words, that it no longer accurately represents what it seeks to measure—and that it is not possible or desirable to restore its representativeness. The Act also provided the FCA with powers to compel the administrator of such a designated benchmark to continue to publish it for a temporary period of up to 10 years, to prohibit new use of the benchmark, and to require the administrator to change how the benchmark is calculated.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend the Minister for allowing me to intervene. He understands all this, and I understand some of it, but not much. I speak, however, as someone who is concerned. If we are moving away from LIBOR, is such a move likely to result in a greater cost to those who wish to borrow money?

John Glen: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes a reasonable point, and I will come on to address the potential divergence, and the implications of the synthetic methodology for the existing rate that we are about to institute and protect in the Bill. In short, there is a lot of volatility in the market, and it is difficult to be fully confident in determining the exact quantum of any difference between where the synthetic rate would get to and the existing outgoing LIBOR rate based on the panel banks. I will address that point more substantively in further stages of the Bill.

In the case of LIBOR, the FCA has indicated that it will designate it using that provision in the Financial Services Act at the end of 2021, when the panel banks will cease making submissions to the administrator. The FCA has announced that it will use its powers to compel the continued publication of certain LIBOR settings, using a revised methodology referred to as “synthetic LIBOR”. The FCA has done that so that tough legacy contracts can continue to function, protecting against the market disruption that would arise were the benchmark to cease permanently at the end of this year with nothing in its place. It is important to emphasise that the synthetic rate is a temporary safety net that will be available for at most 10 years, and only for legacy contracts that have not been able to move away from LIBOR in time for the year end. It is not intended to replace LIBOR in the long-term, and new financial contracts will not be allowed to reference the synthetic rate.

The Bill provides important legal clarity for users of the synthetic LIBOR rate. Clause 1 provides explicitly that LIBOR referencing contracts can rely on synthetic LIBOR. That is covered in proposed new articles 23FA and 23FB which the Bill would insert into the benchmarks regulation. Specifically, where the FCA imposes a change in how the benchmark is calculated, such as a synthetic methodology, the Bill makes clear that references to the benchmark in contracts also include the benchmark in its synthetic form. In the case of LIBOR wind-down, where a contract says “LIBOR”, that should be read as referring to synthetic LIBOR, so that there is effective continuity. That will provide legal certainty for contracts that will continue to refer to LIBOR after the end of 2021.

The Bill also provides a narrow immunity for the administrator of a critical benchmark for action it is required to take by the FCA. That includes where it is required to change how a critical benchmark is calculated, such as a change in the benchmark's methodology. That will protect the administrator from unmerited and vexatious legal claims. The Government have introduced this in the narrowest way possible. It does not protect the administrator to the extent that it can act with discretion; it protects it only to the extent that it is acting purely on a direction from the FCA. The Bill does not in any way change the ability to challenge the FCA, and its decisions on setting a synthetic methodology are subject to challenge on the usual public law grounds. That means that provision is enabled for legal challenge, but the existence of the synthetic rate as a continuity to LIBOR on the panel bank basis is not grounds for legal challenge.

The UK has one of the most open, innovative and dynamic financial services sectors in the world. The Bill reaffirms the Government's commitment to protecting and promoting the UK's financial services sector. As

the home of LIBOR, the United Kingdom has a unique and crucial role to play in minimising global financial stability risks and disruption to financial systems from the wind-down of LIBOR. The Bill forms part of a significant programme of work by the Government and regulators to support the global market-led transition away from LIBOR, as indicated by the FSB decision in 2014. It supports the integrity of financial markets, and in doing so underlines our reputation as a custodian of a global financial centre.

The LIBOR transition is the responsibility of the FCA. It is important to remember that LIBOR is primarily the preserve of sophisticated financial operators, not retail investors. The vast majority of LIBOR contracts are derivatives. Those are sophisticated financial products, the vast majority of which will transition away from LIBOR voluntarily. Synthetic LIBOR will be used only by a limited set of contracts and as a last resort. The market-led, voluntary transition of contracts away from LIBOR to robust alternative rates has been ongoing for years, and the success of that transition means that the vast majority of contracts will not need to use the synthetic rate at all. Where synthetic LIBOR is used in contracts, it is appropriate that the FCA takes technical decisions on the methodology. Indeed, our regulatory system often sees independent bodies empowered to produce calculations that reflect and influence economic reality, such as the Bank of England setting base rates.

A question raised on Second Reading from the Opposition Benches in the other place concerned whether the Government would consider giving compensation to consumers who lose out from synthetic LIBOR—that echoes the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). We do not know at this stage what the difference will be between panel bank LIBOR and synthetic LIBOR on the day synthetic comes in, but it is clear that any change will be well within the range of change in the rate that could reasonably be expected, based on what LIBOR has been historically.

The replacement rate is based on a five-year average, so in the medium term consumers should enjoy similar returns, but with less risk of day-to-day changes in how their rate is calculated. It is therefore not at all clear that consumers will lose out from this change, or that there is a case for compensating the subset of consumers affected. The Government would not compensate mortgage holders for a change in the Bank rate, for example.

There are two issues here. There is the difficulty in determining what that quantum of difference could mean, because there is an evolving move off the LIBOR rate even at this stage. We also have the situation where, in essence, such rates and benchmarks are used in different ways. Mortgage holders would have the opportunity to go their provider and ask to move another rate, for example the Bank rate.

I reassure the House that consumer interests have been factored into all decisions relating to LIBOR wind-down. In particular, the FCA has considered how to address concerns that the synthetic methodology may result in a rate which is higher than the current LIBOR rate. The FCA has taken a rigorous and careful approach to making the decision on the synthetic methodology, resulting in a decision that is entirely in line with the global consensus, among both industry and regulators internationally. This has been a careful

and deliberate process, and I commend both my officials and the professionals at the FCA for the work they have undertaken.

The FCA's synthetic rate will seek to provide a reasonable and fair approximation of what LIBOR would have been had it continued to be based on panel bank contributions, while removing a major factor in the volatility of the rate. That is to the benefit of parties to contracts referencing LIBOR, who will no longer be exposed to perceived changes in bank creditworthiness or liquidity conditions in wholesale funding markets. The alternative is having no rate at all, or being put on an unsuitable fall-back rate that may well be designed for a different situation, such as a short-term problem with publishing LIBOR. The Bill supports the wind-down process by ensuring that contracts will remain able to function if they are not able to transition to an alternative rate in time.

The Government have worked at pace to develop this legislation, carefully considering responses to the consultation and the complex range of contracts that reference critical benchmarks. As I have said, the FCA has confirmed the process to put in place a synthetic methodology by the end of this year. The Government will continue to engage with regulators to ensure a smooth transition.

I want to respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) in his intervention on the number of mortgage holders. There is some speculation over how many mortgage holders will be affected. Some estimates say it could be 200,000, or 1.8% of the mortgages held in the UK, about half of which would be buy-to-let mortgages and the other half residential mortgages. However, the estimates I have received from industry suggest it would be significantly less than that, and a diminishing number. I think that that is the best I can give the hon. Gentleman.

I hope that I have provided the House with the background to the Bill, an explanation of its provisions and an update on the broader work being undertaken by regulators on the LIBOR transition, and that we can debate the provisions in the Bill in a constructive manner and deliver this vital legislation.

I will conclude by recognising that this is an unusually complex and technical Bill. I would not want to be in any way patronising to the House, but I want to be open to questions on it at the next stage. However, I hope I have satisfied the House in explaining the principles and narrative the Government have around this Bill.

1.34 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The programme motion we approved a short time ago allocated up to six hours for this process. As I look around the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker, I feel that span of time may prove adequate for our purposes today, but one cannot be sure.

I am grateful to the Minister for his explanation of the Bill and for the briefing he arranged prior to today's debate. I am also grateful to the FCA for the briefing on the Bill that I requested a week or so ago.

As the Minister said, we all know the background to the desire to move away from LIBOR as a benchmark for financial contracts. A decade or so ago, a scandal of LIBOR manipulation was uncovered, whereby traders

[Mr Pat McFadden]

who submitted estimates of borrowing rates were manipulating the submissions for the benefit of the institutions they worked for, and indeed for themselves and the accounts they managed. That left financial markets subject to corruption for private gain.

Not surprisingly, in the wake of that there were inquiries, including a major cross-party one in this House on which I served. It opened the door to wider cultural issues in banking about risk and reward, and asked the question: for whose benefit exactly were those institutions being run? It also provided the spectacle of the chief executives of some of the banks, some of the highest paid people in the world, claiming, one after another, that they did not know what was going on in their organisations until they first learned about it through the newspapers.

In the wake of all that, regulators around the world agreed to move away from a benchmark based on supposed expert judgments, to benchmarks based on actual trades. However, that move away from LIBOR has been more difficult than first thought, because of the volume and the endurance of the contracts involved. As the Minister mentioned, it is thought that there are some \$300 trillion-worth of contracts based on that benchmark. Some of those will not be transferred to new benchmarks by the deadline set at the end of this year, and that is where the Bill comes in.

Clause 1 seeks to ensure continuity between LIBOR and its successor for contracts which have not managed to move to a new benchmark by the end of the year. There was an exchange during the Minister's speech, between him and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), where the question was asked: how much are we talking about here? In the debates in the other place on the Bill, the figure of about £450 billion was, I believe, mentioned as the worth of such outstanding contracts. If that estimate is correct, then there are still very substantial contracts that could be affected by the switch.

The Bill empowers the FCA to produce a new benchmark, to be called synthetic LIBOR, which, as the Minister said, will be regarded as LIBOR for the purposes of the contracts involved. That will run alongside the Bank of England's new benchmark, called SONIA—sterling overnight index average. If SONIA is the daughter of LIBOR, then synthetic LIBOR can be regarded as the ghost of LIBOR. The Bill sees the two walking together, travelling side by side.

In both the public debates on the Bill and at briefings from the FCA, it has been estimated that, in terms of what it would mean as an actual interest rate, synthetic LIBOR will be about 12 basis points higher than actual LIBOR now. My first question for the Minister, therefore, is why should synthetic LIBOR be set at 12 basis points higher than actual LIBOR and what will that mean for the contracts involved?

Bob Stewart: Forgive me for intervening yet again, but, for the normal person, does synthetic LIBOR and 12 basis points mean a 12% increase on what he or she might pay?

Mr McFadden: No, it does not mean that. It means just over one-tenth of 1%, as there are 100 basis points in 1%.

Twelve basis points, or just over a tenth of 1%, might not sound like a huge margin, but when we are talking about contracts worth up to £450 billion, small differences in rates can add up to a lot of money. To illustrate that, let us consider the position of mortgage holders. There are an estimated 200,000 mortgages based on LIBOR. My next question to the Minister is why have those mortgages not moved away from LIBOR in the years since the regulator encouraged contracts to do so? What has left them stuck on LIBOR before the approaching deadline of the end of the year? Will the move to synthetic LIBOR mean that these mortgages will pay rates of 12 basis points higher than if the move had not taken place?

The FCA published a Q&A on these matters earlier this week, which stated that

“there may be a small increase in your mortgage payment in January 2022 compared with your mortgage payment in December 2021.”

It looks as though a payment rise is on the way for those 200,000 mortgages. That, of course, comes alongside a very live debate in the Monetary Policy Committee about changes to the Bank rate. Does the Minister think that those who hold mortgages based on LIBOR, which, in the buy-to-let sector, means about one in 20 mortgages—that is not an insignificant proportion—realise that that change, which was flagged by the FCA the other day, is coming as a result of the Bill? Have the Treasury or the FCA estimated what the total cost of that might be to UK mortgage holders?

That brings us to the potential for legal action over the changes envisaged in the Bill. That is the difference between this proposal and what the Minister referred to as changes in the Bank rate, because this change is being brought about through legislative action whereas Bank rate changes are as a result of a decision by the Monetary Policy Committee. The question of legal action arises because if contracting parties have agreed a contract on the basis of one benchmark, might they take legal action if the move to a new benchmark ends up costing them more?

As I understand it, proposed new article 23FA(6) in clause 1 attempts to close off the possibility of legal action as a result of a contract moving from LIBOR to synthetic LIBOR—the ghost of LIBOR—which, in this example, would close the door on any potential legal action from disgruntled mortgage holders. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that that is the correct interpretation of proposed new article 23FA(6). To make this matter even more complex, proposed new article 23FA(7) in clause 1 leaves open the possibility of legal action, as long as the basis for it is not action taken under clause 1 of this Bill—that is, it is not simply the move from LIBOR to another benchmark authorised by the FCA. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that my understanding of that is correct.

In the equivalent American legislation—LIBOR is used all around the world—there is what is known as a safe harbour provision: a mechanism to prevent contracting parties from engaging in legal action as a result of these changes. Will the Minister explain why the Government rejected that option for the UK? What is the difference between the restrictions in proposed new article 23FA(6) in clause 1 and the safe harbour legislation that has been put on the statute book in the United States?

Clause 2 also deals with legal action. It insulates from legal action the administrators of benchmarks, who in this case will work on behalf of the FCA, who, in turn, will work on behalf from Parliament, assuming that the Bill is passed. We can see the logic of insulating a public agency from legal action if it is carrying out a duty that stems directly from legislation, but the same clause states that it does not remove liability entirely—for example, over the exercise of discretion or timing of the publication of a benchmark. Will the Minister explain to the House, under clause 2, just how insulated from legal action are the FCA and the administrators that are authorised as a result of the Bill?

Underlying all that is the question of why we need this legislation at all. Around a year ago, the Minister and I spent many a happy hour debating the Financial Services Act, both on the Floor of the House and in Committee. That Act, as we will both fondly remember, authorised the publication of the alternative benchmarks in the first place, so why, after our spending all those happy hours putting that Act through Parliament, have the Government concluded that they have to return with further legislation? What was it about the Financial Services Act that left the picture incomplete? How do we know that this is the last piece of the jigsaw and that the Treasury will not have to come back a third time to fill in other potential gaps?

There is also the important issue of the timescale or longevity of these measures. They are being sold by the Government as a transitionalary process—a bridge from LIBOR to a world without LIBOR—but, as long as they are in place, we have SONIA, LIBOR's replacement, operating alongside the ghost of LIBOR in the form of synthetic LIBOR. Is all this just kicking the can down the road or do the Government really have an exit plan for these tough legacy contracts? If they have not been able to move these contracts away from LIBOR now, when, for years, the regulators have been flagging that they should do so, why does the Minister think that they will move away from the ghost of LIBOR?

It is now almost a decade since the original scandal of LIBOR rate manipulation was uncovered. The Financial Services Act, which gives rise to the powers that we are debating, talked about a transitional period of up to 10 years while this new alternative benchmark might run alongside others that have succeeded LIBOR, so it is conceivable that it could take the best part of 20 years to go from the uncovering of the original scandal to the final move away from LIBOR. What is the likelihood that the Minister, who has been very long-serving in his post, or his successor will have to come back to the House with more legislation on this matter because, even after all that length of time, it is not enough to wind down all the contracts that we are talking about?

We will not oppose the Bill today because we understand that continuity of contracts is in the public interest, but it is not clear to us how temporary a regime this is. I would be very grateful if the Minister could respond on exactly why this legislation was needed in the first place and how long it may last, and to the other questions that I have put to him this afternoon.

1.47 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for setting out so clearly the background to the Bill and why it is needed, and for his answers to some of

the questions that I raised. I do not think that anyone would doubt the need for this Bill or something very similar. LIBOR is clearly not fit for purpose, but we cannot just shut it down without replacing it with something, and that something has to have some kind of statutory backing.

As I mentioned, there have been concerns raised inside and outside Parliament about exactly how the Bill is worded and whether its present wording is the best possible way to achieve the objectives that we all want to be delivered. By far the biggest of those—the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), mentioned this as well—is the degree of immunity from legal action that has been offered to the administrators of critical benchmarks. Again, I do not think that anyone can reasonably oppose the argument that we need to provide some kind of immunity—otherwise, it would just become a circus and the only people who would benefit are lawyers—but there is a question about whether the Bill goes far enough in this regard. Will the Minister respond in more detail to that question when he sums up?

The same questions were raised in the Lords on Second Reading on 13 October. I have to say that although in reply Lord Agnew made a succinct and powerful argument about why some immunity was needed, I do not feel that he addressed the question that had been asked: whether the immunity that the Bill gives is at the right level and goes far enough.

It is unfortunate that we do not have the chance to call expert witnesses to the House and question them on the record about the relative merits of the approach to immunity that the Bill proposes, versus the alternative safe harbour system that the shadow Minister mentioned and that I understand is being used in the United States of America. Could the Economic Secretary give an indication of whether safe harbour has additional risks that we are not aware of? Is there a risk that it could introduce more risk and more damage to the system, rather than less?

LIBOR is referred to in about \$300 trillion-worth of financial contracts around the world. The shadow Minister mentioned that about £450 billion-worth is likely to end up being covered by the Bill; my quick guess at the arithmetic is that that will mean less than 0.2%. However, that is the danger of referring to percentages: we could say that 99.8% of contracts will successfully transition, but that still leaves £450 billion-worth that will not. We therefore need to make sure not only that the Bill passes, but that we get it right. The consequences of getting it wrong, or even not quite right enough, could be significant.

It has been mentioned that LIBOR is used to determine the interest rate of about 200,000 mortgages in the UK. The Financial Conduct Authority says that it expects the “majority” to have transitioned by the end of year. That could mean that only one contract of that sort will be left in the whole United Kingdom, but it could mean that there will be 99,999. It makes quite a difference.

About half of those 200,000 mortgages are for people in their own homes, and half are for buy to let. Let us not think that it is a harmless thing when buy to let goes wrong; the vast majority of buy-to-let properties are still somebody's home, even if that somebody happens not to be the owner. If the worst happens and any of those mortgage borrowers get into serious difficulty, it

[Peter Grant]

will be no comfort to them whatever to be told that 11 million other people are blissfully unaware of the problem. To someone with a mortgage that goes bad, the badness rate for mortgages is 100%. We should never forget that.

I understand why the Economic Secretary was reluctant to commit to any kind of compensation scheme in future, but I would certainly appreciate it if he confirmed that the Government will not completely close the door on that possibility should circumstances demand it. We do not foresee a problem just now, but nobody thought that LIBOR could be manipulated as it was, until the fraudsters discovered that it could. Nobody thought about the problems that mini-bonds could cause, until the fraudsters found a way of causing them.

A further question on legal immunity arises from the global use of LIBOR. The Bill can give administrators immunity from being sued in courts in any UK jurisdiction, but is the Economic Secretary aware whether the transition away from LIBOR might leave them with any increased risk of being sued in overseas courts? Obviously we cannot prevent people from bringing actions in overseas courts, and even if they fail it is still an expensive and disruptive process in which the administrators have to defend themselves. Although we cannot legislate against the practice, is he aware of any circumstances in which the Bill could increase the risk of legal action in an overseas court?

The Financial Conduct Authority will have regulatory responsibility in relation to the Bill. Notwithstanding my well known views about its fitness for purpose, within the current regulatory framework the FCA is where responsibility should reside. However, I share the concerns raised in the Lords about the FCA's accountability to Parliament. Effectively, the Lords Minister's response was that there is direct statutory accountability from the FCA to Parliament, but that is not enough. Accountability achieves nothing if Parliament does not have the proper procedures in place to make that accountability work. The arrangements we have in place just now do not work.

The Treasury Committee is overloaded with work. It simply does not have enough hours in the day to hold the FCA and other regulators to account to the necessary extent. I would almost argue that the FCA merits a separate Select Committee of its own, but when we add the scrutiny needed of other regulators in the financial services sector, there is a strong case—an unarguable case, I believe—for establishing a separate Select Committee, or even a Joint Committee of both Houses, dedicated to holding our financial services regulators to account. We have seen what happens when they get it wrong. I do not think that Parliament is doing its job sufficiently just now to keep them held to account.

The LIBOR rate-fixing scandal reminded us that in the financial services sector, as in many other places, there is no limit to the ingenuity of some very senior people in positions of great trust when it comes to devising frauds on a massive scale. There is no loophole in regulation too small to be exploited.

I support the Bill's passage. I have not tabled any amendments, but I will agree to the unamended Bill with my fingers crossed, because I fear that only time will tell whether it is 100% watertight. In the sometimes murky environment in which the Bill will operate, anything less than 100% will not be enough.

1.55 pm

John Glen: I want to address thoroughly all the points raised by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) about legal certainty, the temporary nature of this provision, and concerns about what will happen to the population of mortgage holders.

This is clearly a technical Bill. The Government are taking clear action to ensure that contracts that make reference to LIBOR, and that cannot transition before the end of the year, can continue to function. It is vital that the Government take the necessary steps to make the wind-down of LIBOR as smooth and orderly as possible, given the number of contracts that refer to it.

I was asked why people are on LIBOR mortgages. Customers who hold LIBOR-referencing mortgages are, and should continue to be, encouraged to speak to their lender to switch to an alternative rate. The FCA has been very clear with lenders that they must be able to demonstrate that they have fulfilled their duty to treat customers fairly where they transition them to a replacement rate. The Bill will not do anything to restrict consumers' ability to bring mis-selling claims if they arise.

Let me address synthetic methodology—a term that refers to the methodology that the FCA would impose on the administrator to provide for the continuity of a LIBOR-setting function for the benefit of these tough legacy contracts. The hon. Member for Glenrothes cited the figure of £472 billion, which was the FCA's estimate on 29 September. The synthetic methodology will seek to replicate, as far as possible, the economic outcomes that would have been achieved under LIBOR's panel bank methodology, but without the need for panel bank submissions.

The FCA has always made it clear, however, that the synthetic methodology will not be representative of the underlying economic reality that LIBOR seeks to measure. Parties to contracts and agreements that make reference to the benchmark should seek to transition to suitable alternative reference rates where possible. That process will continue. There is a lot of speculation about the numbers, but it is impossible to verify them at this stage.

Reference has been made to the differences in rate between panel bank LIBOR and synthetic LIBOR. We have given responsibility for the synthetic rate methodology to the FCA as a consequence of the Financial Services Act. Its approach will provide a fair and reasonable approximation of what LIBOR would have been if it had continued to be calculated under the previous panel bank methodology, while removing a large factor in the rate's volatility. That will be to the benefit of those who have contracts that refer to LIBOR.

It is important to note that, even in the past few weeks, the LIBOR rate has been volatile. There have been some days when the synthetic methodology would have produced a lower rate than panel bank LIBOR, and other days when it would have been slightly higher. That illustrates clearly that it is not sensible to speculate about a change in the rate on day one of the change in methodology. It is impossible, really, to create an enduring and certain difference.

Given the interest in how the rate works, let me explain that sterling synthetic LIBOR will be calculated using SONIA—the sterling overnight index average—with the addition of the International Swaps and Derivatives

Association five-year median credit spread. ISDA, the trade association, has played an important role in consulting the market to arrive at consensus on key elements of the LIBOR transition.

Let me briefly address the concern about how we got to this point. There was iterative consultation as widely as possible with the industry to develop consensus. As for the question of why the legislation was needed and whether we will need to do it again, this provision was based on legal advice and is intended to address concerns raised by industry about the robustness of the synthetic methodology. The methodology involves a five-year median for the credit spread, which was selected following that industry consultation, to avoid manipulation. It is important to remember that LIBOR is a forward-looking interest rate benchmark, and to replicate its economics the synthetic methodology will be calculated using the SONIA term rate.

The issue of the 12 base points was raised. The synthetic LIBOR will be 12 points higher than SONIA, not LIBOR. The difference between LIBOR and synthetic LIBOR will depend on the LIBOR and SONIA rates on the relevant day. Again, it is impossible to fully verify and quantify the difference, in terms of those that are not rolled off to another rate and the way in which the rates will perform in reality.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East referred to what is commonly known as the “safe harbour” provision. Some industry stakeholders have called for an express legal safe harbour like that put in place by the New York legislature. The Bill makes clear that references in contracts to a critical benchmark include the benchmark in its synthetic form. Furthermore, by providing in the Bill that contracts are to be interpreted as having always provided for the synthetic form of the benchmark to be used once the benchmark existed in that form, the Government have sought to address the risk of a party’s arguing that the use of the synthetic benchmark constitutes a material change to a contract, or even that it has frustrated the purpose of the contract.

It is the Government’s view that this Bill comprehensively addresses the risk of legal uncertainty in a proportionate way, while not interfering with other valid claims. We considered approaches taken in other jurisdictions, notably New York, but as a matter of policy the Government do not think it would be appropriate or proportionate to prevent parties’ ability to seek legal redress via the courts for other issues that may arise under affected contracts. A contract could be entered into and there could be a legal dispute over how it had come about, separate from the issue of the LIBOR dependency. We thought that this was the appropriate way to proceed, because the Bill was never about withdrawing the legal rights of individuals.

This is an important Bill. Now that the FCA has confirmed the process to wind down LIBOR by the end of this year, the Government are committed to having this legislation in place to mitigate the residual risk of litigation and disruption resulting from the LIBOR wind-down in the UK. We believe that it is vital to the protection of consumers and the integrity of UK markets.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators’ Liability) Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[DAME ELEANOR LAING *in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I should explain that I am resuming our former practice of chairing the Committee at the Table now that the House is almost back to normal after the covid restrictions. During the Committee stage Members should still, of course, address the occupant of the Chair by name, not as Madam Deputy Speaker. “Madam Chairman” or—it says here—“Chair” are also acceptable. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) says, from a sedentary position, that I am not a Chair but a Madam Chairman, and he is absolutely correct.

Clause 1

REFERENCES TO ARTICLE 23A BENCHMARKS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 2 to 4.

2.5 pm

John Glen: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I am grateful to you for being in the Chair at this point.

I realise that a number of these provisions have already been considered on Second Reading, but I am keen to explain the clauses in turn. Owing to their technical nature, I will explain them paragraph by paragraph at times. I hope that the House will bear with me.

As I said on Second Reading, the Bill provides important legal certainty for contracts that will rely on LIBOR after the end of this year. All its provisions deal with how a benchmark is treated in contracts once it has been designated an article 23A benchmark under the benchmarks regulation. The Financial Conduct Authority has power to make this designation when a critical benchmark is unrepresentative, or at risk of becoming unrepresentative, of the market that it seeks to measure. For LIBOR this will happen at the end of this year when the panel banks stop making their contributions. At that point, the FCA will ensure that LIBOR will continue to be published, using the synthetic methodology that we have already discussed.

In describing the purpose and effect of the clauses, I will use LIBOR as an example because it is currently the only benchmark to be designated under article 23A, but the provisions will also apply in future to any critical benchmark designated an article 23A benchmark by the FCA, although none is envisaged at this point.

Clause 1 means that LIBOR-referencing contracts can rely on synthetic LIBOR. The clause inserts two new articles, article 23FA and article 23FB, into the benchmarks regulation. They supplement the legislative framework introduced by the Financial Services Act 2021 to provide for the orderly wind-down of a critical benchmark. Article 23FA clarifies how references to an article 23A benchmark should be interpreted in contracts and arrangements. Specifically, it provides that when the FCA designates a benchmark under article 23A and imposes a change in how the benchmark is determined, contractual references to the benchmark should be

[John Glen]

interpreted as including the benchmark as it exists after the exercise of the FCA's powers. This is called "contractual continuity".

For example, where LIBOR settings are designated under article 23A of the benchmarks regulation, this article would provide that contractual references to LIBOR should be interpreted as including synthetic LIBOR.

Article 23FA also sets out how contractual continuity will work in practice. It provides that this interpretation applies to all references to the benchmark in contracts or other arrangements, including references that do not refer to the benchmark by name but rather describe it, for example by reference to the economic or market reality that it intends to measure. It also applies where the parties were treating a reference in a contract as a reference to that benchmark immediately before the article 23A designation. That will ensure that any legal uncertainty is minimised, even when the contract does not explicitly use the name "LIBOR", or includes a reference to LIBOR that is out of date. Finally, it is formally retrospective, in that it also provides that the contract is to be treated as having always provided for the reference to the benchmark to be interpreted in this way once the synthetic benchmark was introduced.

In the Government's view, for contracts that continue to refer to LIBOR, these provisions will comprehensively address the risk that parties might successfully dispute the use of synthetic LIBOR to calculate payments after the end of this year. They do so in a proportionate way while not interfering with other valid claims. The clause does not introduce a so-called safe harbour, as has been introduced in New York. The Government considered that approach and, as I said, concluded that it would not be appropriate. However, the clause does not prevent parties' ability to seek legal redress via the courts for other matters.

I draw the Committee's attention to paragraphs 6 and 7 of article 23FA, which provides that the Bill does not create a basis for new claims concerning actions by the parties in relation to the formation, variation or operation of the contract prior to the change to a synthetic methodology. That should ensure that if, for example, a misrepresentation claim were brought in relation to statements made before a contract was entered into, the claim is considered according to the reality at the time when the statements were made, not in the light of the Bill's impact on the contract. It would also not be reasonable or proportionate for the Bill to extinguish existing legal claims. Paragraph 7 therefore ensures that article 23FA does not extinguish existing causes of action. Any claim that could have been brought prior to the article 23A designation of the benchmark can therefore still be brought regardless of the Bill. For example, a mis-selling claim brought on the basis that a lender had misrepresented LIBOR to the customer could still be brought and judged according to the situation at the relevant time.

I turn to article 23FB, which introduces further provisions necessary to provide legal certainty to parties to contracts or arrangements that reference an article 23A benchmark. It is designed to avoid unnecessary interference in contracts where parties to a contract have already agreed what should happen in the event that a benchmark is designated

under article 23A. This new article is primarily concerned with how the contractual continuity provision will operate in contracts that already have fall-back provisions—that is, provisions that provide for the contract to operate by reference to something other than LIBOR, or to terminate in particular circumstances.

The new article provides that article 23FA does not apply if the contract expressly disappplies it or expressly provides that the reference to the benchmark is not to include the benchmark in its synthetic form. It also provides that article 23FA does not override the operation of contractual fall-back provisions, many of which are designed to cater for the wind-down of the benchmark. For example, a fall-back in a contract that is triggered by LIBOR becoming unrepresentative will not be affected by the Bill. However, article 23FB is also clear that the designation of the benchmark under article 23A, or the imposition of a synthetic methodology, will not trigger fallbacks designed for the cessation or unavailability of a benchmark. That is because the benchmark continues to exist and be available in its synthetic form, so it has not ceased.

Concern about inappropriate cessation fall-backs that were designed with only a temporary unavailability of LIBOR in mind was one of the drivers of the approach taken in the Financial Services Act 2021. It is one of the key reasons why the Government are allowing for the continuation of LIBOR under a synthetic methodology. Article 23FB also provides the Treasury with three limited powers to make regulations. The powers are intended to future-proof this legislation, allowing the Government to ensure that an appropriate legislative framework is in place to support the orderly wind-down of future critical benchmarks across the wide range of contracts and arrangements that could reference those benchmarks.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) referenced concern about timing. As I mentioned, that provision allows for wind-down over a 10-year period. We want to continue to encourage the wind-down over the coming period. We reserve the right to make further legislative interventions, but we envisage that they would be on a smaller and diminishing pool of contracts.

I turn to clause 2. On Second Reading, I spoke to the narrow and targeted immunity that the Bill provides for the administrator of a critical benchmark for action that it is required to take by the FCA. That is the clause's purpose. It inserts new article 23FC into the benchmarks regulation. The clause, as with clause 1, deals with the circumstance where the FCA has designated a benchmark as an article 23A benchmark. Article 23FC concerns the liability of the administrator of an article 23A benchmark. The administrator will be responsible for administering the change in methodology as directed by the FCA, and as I set out on Second Reading.

Importantly, the clause provides that the administrator of an article 23A benchmark is not liable in damages for action—or inaction—that it is required to take by the FCA under article 23D of the benchmarks regulation, or for publishing the benchmark as it exists as a result of the FCA's direction under article 23D. In essence, that gives protection to the administrator in terms of liability related to the FCA's direction of it.

2.15 pm

However, as I said on Second Reading, it would not be appropriate for the Government to provide protections where the administrator is acting under its own discretion. As such, this immunity does not protect the administrator where it exercises discretion over the methodology or as to the time or manner of the benchmark's publication. It is in the public interest to prevent unmeritorious litigation against the administrator where it is complying with statutory obligations to support the orderly wind-down of a critical benchmark. To be clear, it is the Government's view that claims covered by this immunity would be unmeritorious as it would not be fair for the administrator to be held liable for action that it is required to take under statute or to expend considerable time and expense defending itself against what would be vexatious claims.

I turn to clauses 3 and 4. Clause 3 ensures that the Bill's provisions apply to all references to the benchmark in question in contracts and arrangements under UK law, including those outside the scope of the benchmarks regulation. Without the clause, the Bill would not apply to all contracts and therefore would not fully meet the aims of the legislation. Finally, clause 4 provides for the Bill's territorial extent and specifies that it will come into force on the day on which it is passed, to give the market the certainty that it needs by the end of the calendar year. It is important that the Bill comes into force when it receives Royal Assent to provide that protection to the market

The Bill's provisions allow for an orderly wind-down of LIBOR and, in doing so, ensure the protection of consumers and the integrity of UK markets. I therefore recommend that clauses 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill.

Mr McFadden: I am grateful to the Minister and have a few questions for him, all of which relate to clause 1. The methodology for calculating synthetic LIBOR is the five-year average picked by the FCA. Were other possible methods considered? What impact would they have had on the interest rate?

Secondly, the Minister referred to the rate bouncing around: on one day it could be less than real LIBOR and on another day it could be more. I believe that the FCA has used the figure of 12 basis points. For clarity, is that a fixed-term difference going forward, or will synthetic LIBOR vary on a daily basis, just as real LIBOR can?

On Second Reading, we talked about mortgages. However, as the Minister rightly said, a far greater sum of money based on LIBOR is in the derivative markets. What estimate have the Government made of the Bill's impact on those markets?

Paragraph 6 of new article 23FA, which we have touched on a few times, tries to limit or define the scope of legal action taken as a result of the move from LIBOR to synthetic LIBOR. How might that influence any attempt at judicial review? How confident is the Minister that someone could not try a judicial review of this attempt to close down the option of legal actions taken as a result of a Government-mandated move in financial benchmarks?

The Minister referred to the discussion of fall-back provisions on page 3 of the Bill. For clarity, does this mean that some contracts will not transfer to synthetic

LIBOR but will transfer to something else, depending on whether there is a fall-back provision in the contract? If there is a fall-back provision and it is not synthetic LIBOR, what will it be? If there is a fall-back provision that could have a different rate from synthetic LIBOR, how will contracting parties decide which one to use? Will the fall-back rate, if such a thing is specified in a contract, automatically take precedence over synthetic LIBOR, or might there be room for argument about which alternative rate to use?

Finally, there is the question of timescale and how long this will last. The Minister talks about encouraging remaining contracts to move off what will now be synthetic LIBOR. Indeed he said that, if we have to, we could pass further legislation. Is there anything more that can be done, other than encouragement, or are contracts not moving away from LIBOR because it is a better rate and, ultimately, what people care about is the interest rate they pay? I wonder how temporary this will be. Are we kicking this can down the road with nothing other than encouragement for a group of contracts that have stubbornly stuck to LIBOR despite all the regulator's enthusiasm? Is there anything between the Minister's encouragement and future legislation that might change this situation?

Peter Grant: I will not detain the House by repeating my comments on Second Reading. I am grateful to the Minister for his answers to a number of my questions, but one question he did not pick up, and on which I hope he can give some assurance, is what happens if something goes badly wrong with people's mortgages. The small percentage of people who have mortgages covered by this legislation—although it could potentially be quite a big number of people—are now, through no fault of their own, quite literally staking their home on our getting this right. Although I appreciate that the Minister will not commit to a specific compensation scheme just now, will he at least give an assurance that the Government have not closed the door on that possibility should unforeseen circumstances lead to it being necessary?

I am also looking for clarity on the precise circumstances in which the administrator does or does not have immunity from legal action. The Minister has said the administrator is covered if it does something the law says it has to do, and it will not be covered if it does something it has chosen to do in a particular way. Does the administrator have discretion on the precise methodology it uses to calculate synthetic LIBOR, and can it exercise its judgment on the numbers it puts into the model? If the administrator has such discretion, nobody needs to sue it for using a synthetic LIBOR model; they can just sue it because of how it has carried out the calculation.

Given the nature of contracts of the value that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East mentioned, a slight change in the published rate can mean a lot of money. Every time the published rate is arguably a wee bit higher or a wee bit lower than somebody else thinks it might have been, one party will win and be quite happy, and the other party will lose and will potentially have a strong motivation to resort to legal action. Are administrators adequately covered against being sued simply because they have published a figure that says the current synthetic LIBOR rate is 1.2% rather than 1.25%? Are there grounds on which

[Peter Grant]

they might be sued because those 0.05 percentage points of difference in the published synthetic LIBOR rate either make or lose quite a lot of money?

John Glen: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) have raised a number of questions arising from what I said. The Government are clear that we support this transition away from LIBOR by providing additional legal certainty for contracts relying on LIBOR past the end of this year. The provisions of the Bill are vital to using the synthetic rate in an orderly winding down of LIBOR, and they provide protection to consumers and the integrity of UK markets, but there are four or five elements that I will address now.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes mentioned compensation, and we do not anticipate that being an issue. As with all matters, the Treasury keeps things under review. We will continue to monitor what happens as a consequence of this methodology.

Both the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East and the hon. Member for Glenrothes mentioned legal action, and it is possible that judicial review could be raised against the FCA on the synthetic methodology it is prescribing for ICE. We think that would be extremely unlikely, given that there has been an active exercise of listening to representations on designing a methodology that has broad credibility. That is fundamental to the integrity of the process. There has been no attempt to develop a methodology in isolation or separate from the consultation with the market.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East asked about both the future timetable and what will happen with contracts that have fall-back clauses overridden by the effect of this legislation. This Bill provides certainty where a fall-back provision is triggered by a benchmark ceasing to be published or made available. Neither the designation of a benchmark under article 23A of the BMR nor the imposition of a synthetic methodology would trigger the operation of the fall-back provision. Where a contractual arrangement has a fall-back provision that is triggered by other means, this Bill does not affect or override the operation of that clause. For example, it will not override a fall-back triggered by an assessment of unrepresentativeness or a prohibition on the use of the benchmark, provided that the circumstances in which the fall-back was triggered are met.

Mr McFadden: In layman's terms, does that mean that a fall-back provision trumps synthetic LIBOR? That is what I am trying to get at. If there is a fall-back provision—some alternative already written into the contract—will these synthetic LIBOR continuity provisions not kick in?

John Glen: What we are saying is that the fall-back provisions, if they are without reference to LIBOR, would still apply. Where LIBOR is the reference, we are trying to ensure this synthetic methodology would not trigger that fall-back provision on the argument that it is distinct from the LIBOR provision in the contract. Essentially, we are trying to establish that the synthetic LIBOR methodology is synonymous with and continuous

from the previous LIBOR rate, as set by the panel, but it does not intrude on the contractual issues around the fall-back on another basis. That goes back to our provisions dealing with the continuity of LIBOR rate setting through this new methodology—anything else is not the Government's intention.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East reasonably probes me about the future timetable, and whether the provision of “moral persuasion” from the Financial Conduct Authority and warnings would be sufficient. We will keep these matters under review. What we are anticipating, and what we have seen, is a rapid and increasing move away from reference to LIBOR, and we expect that that will continue right up to the end of the year. We will look at what is required on an ongoing basis, but we think that it is quite likely that there may not be need for further legislative intervention. However, we reserve the right at a future point to legislate as needed. What we would do, as the FCA is doing, is encourage people to transition away from LIBOR.

I was also asked about the rate difference. It is possible that when the methodology of LIBOR changes from relying on panel bank contributions to using this synthetic methodology, there could be a small change in the rate of interest that borrowers with contracts that reference LIBOR will pay. I mentioned on Second Reading that we expect the synthetic LIBOR to replicate the economic outcomes achieved under the panel bank rate. Obviously, that was the intention throughout. It is difficult to say exactly what the synthetic rate will be when it replaces LIBOR. In the medium term, we would expect it to be matched to the existing LIBOR rate, but smoothed to reduce day-to-day changes.

Today's LIBOR rate is at historic lows, and it is worth noting that the rate can fluctuate significantly. For example, if we look at the three-month LIBOR on GBP, we see that it has varied from 0.28% in September 2017 to 0.92% at the end of December 2019, and it is now 0.11%. We have seen a lot of volatility in the past few weeks because of speculation about what is happening with interest rates. So there have been some days during the past months when the synthetic methodology would have produced a lower rate than panel bank LIBOR and others when it would have produced a slightly higher one. Therefore, it is not possible to fully account for what would actually happen. I hope that that addresses the points that have been raised in Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

2.32 pm

John Glen: We have had a considerable debate this afternoon, both on Second Reading and in our scrutiny in Committee. I have made clear on a number of occasions the Government's intentions in this legislation. I wish to thank the Opposition spokesmen for their contribution and thank my officials, but I do not have anything further to add.

2.33 pm

Peter Grant: I wish to reciprocate in my thanks to the Minister for responding with the courtesy and in the spirit of co-operation that we always get from him in these debates. This is becoming more topical just now, but he deserves credit in setting an example that we would all do well to follow. There have probably been very few Bills to come through this House that have involved so much work beforehand to produce a Bill that, in paper terms, does not appear to be particularly significant. I think we understand that its impact can be quite significant—the impact of not doing it could have been very significant. So may I ask the Minister to take the thanks of my group back to his officials and to everybody else who has contributed to the consultation—those in the FCA and the industry representatives—as I know they have put a lot of work into this as well? As I say, it has not produced a huge number of pages or words of legislation, but I believe it has plugged a potentially catastrophic gap in the regulation of our financial services industry, and they deserve our thanks for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, without amendment.

British Council: Global Britain

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

2.34 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): First, may I thank the Speaker and indeed you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for choosing and allowing this debate to take place? I also thank the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), for fielding the debate on a Thursday afternoon. While I am in this mode, I should also like to thank the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council for its support, guidance, diligence and expertise when it comes to trying to ensure that there is no disconnect between government and the British Council, and for playing its part. Above all, I wish to thank the staff and the teams at the British Council itself, and I know that my right hon. Friend will concur with that, because they have done a tremendous amount over the past few years in flying the flag for the cause of better understanding between this country and others. They have been flying the flag in such an astounding manner, given the challenges they have faced.

My right hon. Friend will know that the British Council has huge cross-party support in both Houses. Some Members in this place have worked for the British Council prior to being elected as an MP, and others have worked closely, as I have done on occasion, with the British Council in the past in trying to ensure that there are no misunderstandings and in furthering the good work of the British Council. There is huge affection for the organisation across Parliament.

The UK is often termed a “soft power superpower”—that phrase is reasonably well known. We rank very highly indeed and we usually top that table. That is down to our country’s extensive and impressive assets of attraction and influence, which include world-renowned arts and cultural bodies, world-class universities and research, and our sporting prowess, along with our respected national and international institutions. The British Council is one of those great institutions. Since the 1930s, it has been promoting British culture and the English language abroad, as well as facilitating cultural exchanges and, crucially, building trust between the UK and other countries. There are few Government Departments that do not directly benefit from its work.

The British Council also represents excellent value for money. In normal times, it receives only 15% of its income from the state, whereas many of its international counterparts receive much more. For example, its French, German and Japanese equivalents receive 48%, 62% and 65% respectively. That is in large part because the British Council has a commercial element, in the teaching of English abroad. It is tremendous value for money given the influence it exerts and the trust it builds between us and other nations.

As the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council, it was my pleasure to oversee the production and publication last July of our report on opportunities for global Britain. I thank all those who contributed to the report, including the officers of the all-party parliamentary group, who contributed to such effect. The report highlights the importance of showing not telling and of persuading rather than being more forceful, thereby ensuring that our values of openness

[Mr John Baron]

and tolerance are there for all to see around the world, and the important fact that soft-power institutions such as the British Council and the BBC World Service are at their most effective, innovative and entrepreneurial when they have operational independence from the Government. I have no doubt that the Government get that, but it is important to reiterate that there must be an element of operational independence.

Our report also highlighted the Government's short-sighted decision to curtail British Council activity in 20 countries because of its failure to close the £10 million shortfall between the amount of pandemic support given to the organisation and the costs of maintaining its international network. The 20 closures are already in train—the decision was largely taken last July—and represent the largest single set of closures in the British Council's history. Our report particularly recommended that there should be no further closures among the British Council's overseas network, and we received an assurance on that from the Minister in charge at the time.

The APPG is concerned that the British Council faces the closure of a further 20 country operations, which would result in 40 closures in total. This idea stems from discussion between the British Council and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on cutting the British Council's funding allocation still further over the coming three-year spending review period, despite the FCDO's budget increasing by 21% over the same three-year timeframe.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good and hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. I am a huge fan of the British Council and have seen it operating abroad. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we withdraw something like the British Council from a country, the image given is that Britain does not care about that country? The soft power that we gain from having the British Council firmly in place in a capital or major city is a huge influence on how a country looks at the United Kingdom.

Mr Baron: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: when the Government are quite rightly talking about the importance of global Britain, it sends completely the wrong message to the world to close, in many countries, an organisation that represents the very best of British.

The irony of the situation is that the additional closures can easily be prevented, without any new money from the FCDO, by allowing the British Council to retain a share of the savings that it is currently making through cuts that are already in train. That is something to reflect on. As my right hon. Friend said, once the British Council ceases to have an office in a given country, it is unlikely that a presence will be easily re-established. It also leaves the way clear for others to fill the vacuum. The closure of 40 offices worldwide will not go unnoticed. Will the Government urgently review the situation and provide clarity?

Is it the Government's intention, at a time when the FCDO's expenditure is, courtesy of a very generous Budget, going up by more than 20% over the comprehensive spending review period, that the British Council's funding should be cut? Is that the Government's intention, or is

there simply a disconnect? Is this cock-up, frankly, rather than conspiracy? Clarity is needed; uncertainty helps no one, not least the British Council, when it comes to planning. If that is the Government's intention, I urge them to rethink their decision to require the additional 20 closures and ideally, if I am being somewhat presumptuous—and why not?—rethink their decision to close the 20 offices as announced in July. These mass closures will do enormous damage to our soft power, as my right hon. Friend has alluded to. They will be viewed as an unwelcome retreat from the international stage and will leave the door open to our competitors. This simply does not fit with the concept of global Britain.

I make no excuse for raising this issue now given what happened last time when the first set of 20 closures were announced. As soon as we got wind of it, being a proactive all-party group, we made every effort to communicate with Government through the normal channels. I had meaningful conversations with the then Foreign Secretary, a meaningful conversation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and two decent conversations with the Prime Minister. They all got it. They all accepted that the British Council was a valued organisation, helping to build trust. They got its worth; there was no need to persuade them. So what happened? There seemed to be a disconnect in Government. The clunky levers of the bureaucracy still manufactured a £10 million shortfall that was desperately required. It was desperately required because, over the past 18 months, the British Council has been unable to be proactive in commercialising its operation—its teaching of the English language—simply because the pandemic closed down its major markets in the far east, but still there was a £10 million shortfall, and still to this day, they are in the process of closing 20 country operations at a time when we are espousing the principles of global Britain. It simply does not make sense. There is a disconnect.

The reason for holding this Adjournment debate—I ask the forgiveness of the House because I am keeping it here late on a Thursday, at the end of the business day—is that if we do not make noises now, given what happened last time, we will get a repeat, and 40 closures—the 20 in train and the 20 now being rumoured—would be a disaster not just for the British Council, but for the country as well.

I could go on, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I know that perhaps I should not. In summing up, I want to raise very briefly something that is connected to the British Council, and I know that the Minister also takes it to heart. I reiterate the all-party group's urgent concern for those 200 Afghans who worked for the British Council and who are still in Afghanistan, fearing for their lives and unable to leave. I had a heartrending email from a former British Council employee—I will not read it again because I have already paraphrased it in Defence questions—who literally said that they were in fear of their lives. They were in hiding from the Taliban. They had run out of money, but for some reason the bureaucracy was getting in the way. It seems that slow-moving bureaucracy in Britain is preventing them from receiving the documents they urgently require. We owe these people a debt of gratitude.

As I said, I raised this issue at the last Defence questions. The Secretary of State agreed with the need for urgency, but suggested that this was more of a responsibility for the FCDO. He did, however, suggest a

meeting for MPs involving all relevant Departments. In addition to the questions that I have already posed my right hon. Friend, I ask him to ensure that the FCDO, once it is invited, participates in this meeting fully. If it is not invited, it should ask questions why it is not. My understanding is that the Ministry of Defence is co-ordinating this. We, as Members of Parliament, need better sight of the system in order to play our part in ensuring that there is clarity, less bureaucracy and more action when it comes to helping these people. I look forward to hearing the answers to my questions from my right hon. Friend.

2.49 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing this debate. It gives me great pleasure to see that Essex Members of Parliament now represent the majority of those in the House this afternoon. I thank my hon. Friend for the hard work that he puts in as the chair of the British Council all-party parliamentary group, and the hard work that the other members of the APPG put in, particularly on the group's recent report on opportunities for global Britain. I also pay tribute to my good, right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who I am willing to make an honorary member of the Essex mafia this afternoon for his thoughtful contribution.

Bob Stewart: I want to correct the Minister. I do not need to be an honorary member of the Essex mafia, as I am a member of the Essex mafia; I spent 10 years at Chigwell School.

James Cleverly: That makes you the odd one out, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I am sure that we will forgive you.

The Government are determined that Britain will remain an outward-looking nation that is positive and patriotic, and demonstrates leadership and innovation, and I assure the House that the British Council is a key part of that. Its mission is to teach English, and to promote UK education, arts and culture across the globe. In doing so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay said, it showcases our strength and values, but it also builds trust and opportunities between nations. The APPG report rightly identifies the British Council as one of the UK's real assets, and that position is reflected in our own integrated review, which was published earlier this year. The review recognises the British Council as a key aspect of our global influence.

For 85 years, the British Council has boosted Britain's status as a cultural superpower. Its programmes reach 790 million people in more than 100 countries every year, and it plays a vital role in enhancing our standing in the world. It forges connections, understanding and trust between the UK and other countries. That trust is already strong, and the council's recent report on soft power noted that the UK is ranked first among G20 nations for overall attractiveness and second in the G20 for trust. The British Council adds significant value in this respect. When the council is involved in cultural and educational exchanges, trust in the UK increases by 16% on average. I am sure that the House will agree that it is more vital now than ever—as we work with our

allies to promote democracy and collaborate on the very biggest challenge that the world faces—that we enhance this global trust.

My hon. Friend highlighted in his speech further opportunities to promote global Britain through the British Council. The APPG report identified potential key partners in the Indo-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa, among others. The council has ambitious targets designed to take advantage of these opportunities. By 2025, it plans to reach 140 million English language learners and attract 600,000 international students here to the UK. It also hopes to connect to 30 million people with UK arts and culture, either in person or remotely—for example, by visiting our world-beating film and arts festivals in cinemas and galleries, or indeed online.

Next year, as we host the Commonwealth games and mark the Queen's platinum jubilee, the British Council will lead international partnerships in education and the arts, including work to connect young people across the whole Commonwealth. School twinning schemes and cross-curricular programmes will boost understanding of our values and aspirations, including the education of women and girls, which remains a core Government priority. Her Majesty the Queen's 70 years of service and leadership have also inspired the British Council. From its alumni the council will build a network of young, inspiring women leaders across the Commonwealth, who will develop projects to address the global challenges still faced, sadly, by many women and girls.

Meanwhile, advisory committees for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland support the British Council as an institution for the whole of the United Kingdom. They help to shape programmes and priorities and ensure there is a clear focus on all aspects of the UK's rich culture. For example, the British Council's Go Digital programme includes collaboration between artists and art organisations in Wales and sub-Saharan Africa. Go Digital aims to develop and showcase the arts, which have suffered so much during the pandemic. The council also works to forge connections between Northern Ireland and other societies emerging from conflict—for example, offering insights into the issues that fuelled conflicts in Northern Ireland, India, Lebanon, Sierra Leone and South Africa. Students are encouraged to turn these lessons into creative expression.

Bob Stewart: I thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene a second time. What he has said is really grist to the mill, because the British Council is a huge success, as he would accept. The British Council has actually survived, somehow, during the pandemic. Goodness knows how country directors are able to budget during the pandemonium that has been the past two years, but somehow they have. So it does seem strange that with the success that the British Council has had in soft power terms and in floating what a great place the United Kingdom is, we are prepared to scrap 10 locations—actually, a total of 20. May I plead with the Minister to get Government to make a decision to rescind the orders so that those 20 centres remain in being, if that is possible now?

James Cleverly: I will address the situation with regard to funding and our footprint shortly.

Together with the University of Edinburgh, the council is developing an online course, open to all, on sustainable living. This touches on key issues that connect us, from

[James Cleverly]

climate change to gender equality, health and inclusion, encouraging informed personal responses.

With regard to the funding situation, sadly, like so many organisations, as my hon. and gallant Friend mentioned, the British Council has been acutely affected by the impact of covid-19. More than 90% of its teaching and exam centres were shut at the height of the pandemic. It has done a genuinely exceptional job of rapidly expanding its digital services, including online teaching platforms, in response to this crisis. We continue to work closely with the council as it builds back from the pandemic. We share its ambition to innovate and to increase its digital capacity even further. I was very pleased recently to meet the British Council's new CEO, Scott McDonald, who brings a genuine wealth of commercial experience from his previous roles. In partnership with the council's chairman, Stevie Spring, I have no doubt that Scott will bring the strong leadership needed to drive forward the council's transformation and put it on a sustainable future-facing footing.

Sadly, as with so many organisations, the pandemic also had a devastating impact on the British Council's commercial activities and therefore its finances. The Government remain committed to the council's future success, and I am confident that it will emerge stronger than ever. The funding we secured through the 2021-22 spending review demonstrates that commitment. Since the start of the pandemic we have allocated more than £600 million to ensure that the British Council can continue to deliver on our priorities during this uniquely challenging time. Earlier this year, the council, as has been said, announced that it will stop spending grant in aid funding in 11 countries. In a further nine, it will deliver grant in aid programmes remotely from other countries. These decisions were taken in partnership with the council, focusing on where it can achieve the biggest impact.

Mr Baron: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about those at the British Council, who will be heartened to hear what he says. I know it will not be strange to them, but it is nice to hear it from the Dispatch Box all the same. I concur with his comments about the new chief executive Scott McDonald and Stevie Spring, too. They will bring a lot to the British Council at this important time. I hear what he says about the figures, and one does not dispute the moneys put into the British Council as its commercial activities collapsed, but the Government were still £10 million short of what was required to keep those 20 country operations fully operational, and that was the crime there. When one spoke with Ministers, there was no problem at all—they got it—but it still translated into a £10 million cut. The fear is that something similar will happen now going forward.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises the prospect of additional closures, and I understand his concern about that. The simple truth is that we continue to operate, notwithstanding the spending review allocation, in a challenging financial context. We continue to work closely with the British Council on the implications of the 2022 to 2025 spending review. I assure him that the funding settlement has not yet been finalised, and any decisions that we make will be in close consultation

with the British Council. We will continue to work with the British Council on its future strategy to ensure that it continues to deliver not only excellence but maximum value and maximum impact.

Mr Baron: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's generosity in giving way again, but we have a little bit of time, without wishing to detain the House for too long. I accept what he has just said, because I know he is a decent fellow, but my worry is that this message, despite his exalted position in the FCDO, does not translate, frankly, because it did not translate last time. May I tease him a little to see whether he can go further? Would he wish to see further closures in the British Council, as we have seen in the past?

James Cleverly: Mr Deputy Speaker, you can see the political chess moves, the political judo and the political jujitsu that my hon. and gallant Friend is performing. I know he would want me to provide assurances in strict financial terms. Sadly I am not able to do that at the Dispatch Box at this moment, but the assurance that I can give him is that the hugely positive impact that the British Council has on the lives of people around the world, as well as the hugely positive impact it has on the UK's standing around the world, are not lost on anyone. I enjoyed a very good conversation with the new CEO. I can assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work with the new CEO and the rest of the leadership team at the British Council to ensure we protect the excellence that this organisation delivers. I would wish, were budgets infinite, to have a British Council presence everywhere—I know that is a cheeky response to a bit of a cheeky question—but sadly we do not live in an environment of infinite resource.

My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point about Afghanistan and our commitment to helping those Afghans who helped us, including through their employment or work with the British Council. The FCDO remains in close and regular contact with the British Council's management about the cases of eligible staff and contractors and their dependants in Afghanistan. Applications from British Council contractors for resettlement will of course have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. We will work across Government to find a way of expediting any decisions made, so that we can provide assistance as quickly as possible.

Mr Baron: I thank my right hon. Friend for being generous in giving way. Of course I do not doubt his words, but what seems to be happening is a disconnect between Departments. This week in the House the Defence Secretary, who is a good man, said he thought it was more a responsibility for the FCDO. This situation needs gripping, because the sense is that bureaucracy is getting in the way. There are 200 level 1 and level 2 applicants for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme, and the paperwork is simply not being produced.

James Cleverly: I completely understand my hon. Friend's point. The repatriation work through Afghanistan has proved to be one of the most difficult and technically complicated, and in many instances very sensitive operations we have had to work. It is inevitable that we have to work across and exchange information between Departments.

Ensuring that individuals who worked for organisations that came under the remit of the FCDO, but whose resettlement cases might be facilitated through the Ministry of Defence, will of course mean that we will continue to need to work cross-departmentally, as we have done. I pay genuine tribute to my colleagues in the Home Office, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and, of course, the Ministry of Defence, who I know are passionate about this and work tirelessly, often with incomplete information. We will continue working with them on that.

To conclude, as we all work tirelessly to promote global Britain, our partnership with the British Council remains vital. We will continue to support it as it brings people together across nations, through arts, culture, education and, perhaps most importantly, the English language. In this way, by showcasing our values and delivering opportunities, we will build connections, understanding and trust.

Question put and agreed to.

3.7 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 18 November 2021

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Automated External Defibrillators: Public Access

1.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin, I am required to read out some advice from Mr Speaker. I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate. That is in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate. That can be done at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public access to Automatic External Defibrillators.

I am pleased to see many hon. Members from all political parties in the Chamber. I will also say, because I mean it, that I am especially pleased to see the Minister in her place and I look forward to her response. She understands the importance of the debate. Each hon. Member who speaks will illustrate the strength of the need for the Government and—dare I say it—civil servants to understand the importance of the debate. If they understand it, and if the Government press the issue, the general public will be glad to see it happening.

It is a pleasure to have this debate before the Second Reading of the Automated External Defibrillators (Public Access) Bill on 10 December. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting my application. The intention is to deliver public access to AEDs across the whole United Kingdom. All MPs will have at least one person in their constituency who has been saved by an AED.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) who co-sponsored the debate and supported me in making it happen. I appreciate his co-operation, partnership and friendship. He made representations to the Committee alongside me and shared his own experience, which he will tell us about shortly. He has referred to the dedicated work of his constituent Councillor David Sutton-Lloyd, who advocates and lobbies with him about the importance of awareness and public availability of these lifesaving devices.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In my constituency, Councillor Mo Razzaq has been championing the cause and has fought hard to improve provision, which has led to a community defibrillator installation outside Strachan Craft Butchers in Blantyre. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that locally elected representatives can be instrumental to the cause?

Jim Shannon: I appreciate the hon. Lady's intervention about the importance of councillors, which I will return to, such as the friend of the hon. Member for Sedgfield. Communities lead on such matters.

There are many defibrillators across great parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but the Bill legislates so that everyone must have one in place. There is no cost to the Government; the Bill just puts in place the necessity to do it, rather than saying that it must come from community activities or otherwise.

To give an example from my constituency, in Newtownards some of the shop owners got together and spent £1,000 on a defibrillator, which is available on the high street in the middle of town. Every school in Northern Ireland has a defibrillator. As I will say later, I had a meeting with the former Secretary of State for Education about this issue, and he was committed to it in that role.

I am deeply encouraged by and thankful for the amount of support for the Bill on both sides of the House. I thank hon. Members present for contacting me to offer their support and for suggesting that I hold a debate before Second Reading. The purpose of the debate is to raise awareness and to build the campaign outside the House. We are all able to point to many cases. It is a fundamental aspect of our democracy that Members are able to scrutinise and debate proposed legislation. This debate offers Members the chance to do just that. I have worked with the Minister and look forward to continuing that work to bring this important piece of legislation forward—to bring this ideal into reality. If we can do that, and deliver across the United Kingdom, I will be more than pleased.

Since the Bill's First Reading, I have been overwhelmed by the amount of support. Support has come from across the House—from all sides, from all parties—which is a reflection that it is welcomed across society. I thank all Members who wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care urging him to engage on this issue. I was able to meet the Secretary of State to discuss the Bill and he demonstrated his sincere support, which we appreciate. The members of the public and people in industry who have contacted me—I have held meetings with as many as possible over the past few months—are the driving community spirit behind this Bill. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to that community spirit. It drives us as constituency MPs.

I thank the Minister for her invaluable contribution. I thank Tom, Sandra and Daniel from Stryker, Matthew Spencer from Healthcomms Consulting, Greg Quinn from BD, Sarah French from SADS UK, Gabriel Phillips of APCO Worldwide, Iain Lawrence from Aero Healthcare UK, Sudden Cardiac Arrest UK, as well as the Arrhythmia Alliance, the Community Heartbeat Trust and British Heart Foundation Northern Ireland. I suspect most of those bodies have already contacted the Minister, as well as her local community and other community groups.

I have been interviewed by university students about the Bill. This demonstrates the concern and interest of a wide cross-section of society about the need for public access to AEDs. I am very grateful for their interest and for broadening my knowledge. No matter what age I am, I will always learn. Today I learn more, and the next

[Jim Shannon]

day more again. I have an open and active mind, and I want to respond and to learn things that we can use in this House for the benefit of everyone. They taught me about the consequences of a lack of awareness of and training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, which added to my knowledge and understanding of sudden cardiac arrest.

There is momentum growing, not only from *The Mirror*, which has its own campaign. I turned on the Denmark match at the Euros and did not realise what had happened. I was trying to figure out what was happening on screen, as I had missed the first 30 minutes or so of the match. I thought somebody had got hit on the head by a bottle thrown from the crowd or something. The Danish team were all around Christian Eriksen, and I realised that he had had a heart attack. That day, an AED saved his life, because it was there. The Premier League has donated 2,000 AEDs or thereabouts, aiming for them to filter down to some of the junior clubs. There is definitely a growing momentum out there.

I want the debate today to be marked by hope and commitment, but also by respectful demand. We should all support this issue. I am in no doubt as to the wishes of people in the community with regard to the proposed legislation, its importance and the need to have it in place now.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): This is an incredibly important debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that AEDs should be put on public buildings? Those buildings are not open 24/7 and the AEDs should be accessible to the public 24 hours a day, so they should be on the outside of the building. Does he also agree that if every child in school had one hour's training in CPR every year, we would have far fewer deaths? A combination of those two measures would save many more lives.

Jim Shannon: I do agree, and I think there would be a positive consensus in the House on that. I will give an example later of how an AED in a school saved a life in my constituency. I have two examples to illustrate the point.

I have seen over the past year how we have begun to address the importance of CPR training, to which the hon. Lady referred, and AED availability. I agree with her. The AED in Newtownards is in the street, but it could have been in the shop, which closes at six o'clock, so from 6 pm to 9 the next morning it would not have been available. The hon. Lady is right about what should be done.

The right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) backed the campaign, in his former role as Secretary of State for Education, to see all schools equipped with defibrillators. I believe that has been accomplished. I was encouraged by that, as we are trying to do it back home as well. However, it is not just about primary schools; it is about having AEDs available in streets, shopping centres, Government and local government buildings, and leisure centres. The Bill says that they should be available, but it does not put a cost factor on it. To make this happen is a win-win for the Minister and the Government.

I will explain where the campaign came from. The Minister will remember that we met Mark King, of the Oliver King Foundation, whose 12-year-old son Oliver died of cardiac arrest during a school swimming lesson in 2011. I was incredibly moved, as I know the Minister was, by Mark's experience. I was motivated too by his commitment to installing AEDs as far and wide across the community as possible. I know that he will be watching the debate today, and it will be a poignant one for him. Throughout this journey, I have stayed in touch with the foundation. I want to remind Members that this Bill was inspired by a young fella called Oliver King—a 12-year-old—and that we bring this debate to the Chamber in the hope of ensuring that Oliver's legacy continues.

I am encouraged that in Northern Ireland, the Education (Curriculum) (CPR and AED) Bill has reached its second stage. This is not about politics; it is about the issue. That is the way I see things. I am a political person, of course, but what drives me is asking what is the right way to do things—that is important. One of my colleagues who is not of my party, Colin McGrath MLA, has brought the Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly. We have worked together; he was keen to know what I was doing and I was keen to assist him back home in the Assembly. He has expressed his best wishes for the Bill, because it is just as important for children to acquire the CPR and AED skills that the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire referred to, as it is for adults. It is good to see a devolved Administration talking, taking this on and encouraging others to follow suit.

I believe in acts and not just words. Very shortly, the hon. Member for High Peak (Robert Langan) and I will be doing an AED instruction session in the House, when we are able to. I am not sure when that will be, but we are hoping to do it this side of Christmas—the idea is to have a date that coincides with the Bill's Second Reading on 10 December. It will be with David Higginbottom of Driver First Assist. My staff and I back home will also be taking part in a CPR and AED training session in the office in Newtownards led by Mrs Pauline Waring, superintendent of the St John Ambulance Dufferin Cadet Unit in Bangor. She, along with many other volunteer leaders, does incredible work with St John cadets by training them in first aid and lifesaving skills. It is always good to remember that the St John Ambulance is voluntarily staffed and funded by its own efforts; I encourage Members to engage with their local St John Ambulance if they can.

The hon. Member for Sedgfield, in his representation to the Committee for this debate, raised the very important point that many people are afraid of AEDs. They should not be, and that is why the training is important. Right away, people ask, "Will I know what to do?". They will know what to do, because it is quite simple. I am not being smart by saying that; the instructions are really easy—they are easy for children to use as well, if that is necessary. People will learn that AEDs and CPR cannot do any harm; they can only do good. That is the motivation. I refer again to my message of hope for this debate, because anything that equips and inspires our young—anyone, in fact—to do good for the community carries the spirit of hope.

I want to raise some important facts about AEDs and CPR because they are two of the links in the "chain of survival" referred to in the UK Resuscitation Council's

updated guidelines. The third link is targeted temperature management. I want to touch on TTM here because I have been made aware of how this impacts on the recovery process. While the focus of this debate is on promoting the prevalence and availability of AEDs in public spaces and buildings, it remains essential that we consider the whole “chain of survival” once a person has experienced a cardiac arrest and been resuscitated.

In my constituency of Strangford one Saturday afternoon at a football match, one of the supporters collapsed at the side of the pitch. I spoke about this at the debate on the ten-minute rule Bill in February. What saved that man was the fact that the club had a defibrillator at all its matches. That is characteristic of all football matches in my region. People were able to resuscitate that man and he is alive today because the Portavogie football team and one of its staff members were able to get him back. He is alive today and can still attend football matches.

I want to give another example, but I am conscious of the time and other Members want to speak. A father was outside a school after leaving his children there. Unfortunately, he then had a heart attack. The children were inside and did not know what was happening to their daddy. The school had a defibrillator and, again, access to an AED saved that man’s life—he is alive today. Not only is he alive; he is able to continue taking his children to school.

I have given two examples, and I know that other Members will have lots of their own. It is hard not to get enthused about this issue, because of the clear benefits. I have referred to Christian Eriksen who collapsed at the football match. I acknowledge and praise the hard work and unflinching efforts of the Minister, who proposed legislation in 2016 and 2019. Her support is needed if we are to get this done.

In May 2021, the Italian Government passed legislation requiring all offices open to the public with more than 15 employees, transport hubs, railway stations, airports, sports centres and educational establishments—schools, universities and all those places—to have public access to AEDs. In France, a Bill was passed in 2018 requiring almost all buildings where people gather to have access to an AED, including restaurants and shopping centres. It went a stage further by including holiday centres, places of worship, covered car parks and even mountain refuges. In Singapore, AEDs are carried in taxis.

In this House, we are at an important stage. We have more AEDs per head than across the whole of the country—that is not a criticism, Mr Hollobone. I am not saying we should not have them, but I would like to see that replicated everywhere else.

Margaret Ferrier: Following cardiac arrest, for each minute that passes the chances of survival fall by a massive 20%. Outside urban areas, and certainly in very rural locations, ambulance call-out times are often much longer than a matter of minutes. Does the hon. Member agree that provision needs to be prioritised in rural areas?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. Living in a rural area as I do, I know the hon. Lady is absolutely right. I would hope and expect that to be the case. I want to give others the opportunity to speak and will make my closing comments now.

Let us remember why we are here today. We are here because there are currently over 30,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests in the United Kingdom each year. Of those people, only one out of 10 will survive. I put it to the Minister, the Government and civil servants that I want—indeed, I think we all want—the other nine to survive as well. How can they survive? They can survive if we have access to AEDs in the places where people are, including in rural places. That is why we must push this forward.

What value do we put on a life? A typical defibrillator for the community can cost £800. The Library notes refer to the cost being between £600 and £2,500. However, across Northern Ireland, with the efforts of all the charities and groups I have mentioned, the defibrillators are already in place. I have also mentioned the efforts of organisations such as the Premier League and the Education Ministers here in Westminster and back home in Northern Ireland, and I suspect the same is true in Scotland and Wales as well. That is why, when the legislation is introduced, it will be to encourage those who have not yet gone to that extra stage to make sure that there are defibrillators. That is why this debate is incredibly important. If the cost is £600 or, as it is in Northern Ireland, £800, that is a small price for the Government and the private sector to pay potentially to save lives.

Is it not right that every leisure centre should have a defibrillator? Is it not right that there should be one in the centre of every town? Is it not right that defibrillators should be available and accessible in restaurants, and outside buildings for times when people are out and about, including to visit pubs and restaurants at night time?

There is a campaign called The Circuit, which registers all community AEDs. The sale of AEDs rose significantly after the Euros incident, and when AEDs are registered on a central database, emergency call handlers can direct callers to the nearest AED. The objective of this Bill is to have an AED within three minutes of everyone. That is what the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West wants to have; indeed, I think it is what we all want to have.

The Bill does not cost the Government anything. I have said it three times now; forgive me for saying it three times, but I want to emphasise it and say why it is important. Here is a Bill that delivers across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This Bill will save lives, which is why it is important.

I say to my hon. Friends—all the Members here are my hon. Friends; to be truthful, on this issue all Members are probably hon. Friends whether they are in the Chamber or outside it—that this proposed legislation is neither to the left nor the right of politics. It is about what is right and what is wrong. It is about our whole society and equipping it with the means to save lives. Can there be a more civilised or caring thing to do? If words could make the difference—I will use a quotation, but before I do so I will say one other thing.

Today, this House can support the campaign to deliver AEDs, at no cost to the Government. AEDs save lives. That is the purpose of the Bill—it is to save lives. It is about those nine out of 10 who die every year because the AEDs were not available. It is as simple as that. It is about saving lives. For me, that is the crux of it.

[Jim Shannon]

I say that life and death are in the hands of the Minister and her Government, and they would seem to be in the hands of civil servants too. So what action will those hands—the hands of Ministers, the Government and civil servants—take in the coming days when the Bill comes back to the House on 10 December?

I will close with very poignant words. I know that the Minister knows that they refer to wee Oliver King. His dad said, and I have never forgotten it:

“Had the swimming pool had an AED, my son, Oliver, would still be here today.”

That is what we are here for.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 3 o’clock. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 2.27 pm and the guideline limits are: 10 minutes for the Scottish National party; 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition; 10 minutes for the Minister; and then Jim Shannon will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. So, until 2.27 pm, we are in Back-Bench time. Four distinguished Back Benchers are seeking to catch my eye and we will start with Rob Roberts.

1.53 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on such an important matter; as he says, it is a matter of life and death. I have no doubt that this issue will draw agreement from all political parties, and such is the nature of the hon. Gentleman that he is one of the few Members who could rightly be called “my hon. Friend” by Members from all parties in the House.

It is vital that there is greater access to defibrillators in local communities across the whole of the UK. To save myself tripping over the word “defibrillators” for the next five minutes, I will shorten it to “defibs” from this point onwards.

Every year in Wales, around 6,000 people suffer from cardiac arrest. About half of those incidents occur outside hospitals, with just one in 20 of the people affected surviving. The National Institute for Health Research has found that survival outcomes for people experiencing out-of-hospital cardiac arrest are greatly improved when bystanders use a defib.

When we consider that, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said in an intervention, someone’s chance of surviving cardiac arrest decreases by at least 10% to 15% with every passing minute, it is vital that everyone in the community not only knows where the nearest defib is located but—most crucially—has the knowledge and confidence to use it.

I understand how important it is to improve the teaching of these lifesaving skills having campaigned with the family and friends of Janene Maguire, a loving mother of three who unexpectedly passed away of a cardiac arrest in February 2000. Sadly, and almost amazingly, nearly two decades later one of Janene’s daughters also suffered from a sudden cardiac arrest. Fortunately, she was with her friend, who saved her life by performing CPR until a paramedic arrived.

The experience of that family in my constituency highlighted to me the importance of improving awareness and knowledge of both CPR and defibs. I am pleased to say that, as a result of our campaigning, the Welsh Government committed to including these lifesaving skills in the school curriculum in Wales, as they are in the curriculum in England. I hope that equipping young people with the knowledge to save lives will ensure that the survival rate for out-of-hospital cardiac arrests is greatly improved.

Despite the success of having added to the curriculum in Wales, the campaign to improve lifesaving skills and access to lifesaving equipment is far from over. Access to defibs and the knowledge of how to use them still needs to be greatly improved. As part of my commitment to improving these skills, I will continue to work with the Welsh charity Calon Hearts to organise a number of CPR events in my constituency in the new year. Participants will be able to learn the skills and gain the confidence to apply them, ensuring that people from all backgrounds have that knowledge, so that they too are able to save lives.

Although the Resuscitation Council has provided guidance for adult basic life support, which advises on how CPR and defibrillation should be administered during a sudden cardiac arrest, the vast majority of people still do not have that knowledge and are unable to use it when needed. Currently there are 5,423 public access defibs registered with the Welsh ambulance service, but the British Heart Foundation estimates that there are thousands more defibs that the trust has no record of. With that in mind, there is an obvious but important question to ask: what is the point of increasing the number of public access defibs if people do not know where they are or how to use them?

There seems to be a simple solution to the issue. Why not create a comprehensive, UK-wide database, on an app that can be downloaded to smartphones, including all defibs and their precise locations, and simple, easy-to-follow instructions on how to use them? It seems as though that would be a relatively simple database to establish and maintain. It should not be beyond the wit of man to put something in place along those lines. There are currently a number of different defib databases covering different areas of the UK, so it is certainly a feasible idea. Much of the data is already there, and just needs to be amalgamated in one comprehensive database. If all NHS systems in the UK worked together with organisations such as The Circuit, the national defibrillator network, it could easily be achieved, and would undoubtedly help to save many more lives.

The Welsh Government, to their credit, have recently committed £500,000 to improve community access to defibs. I encourage them to collaborate with the UK Government, and indeed the Scottish and Northern Irish devolved Administrations, to ensure that public access to defibs and the knowledge of how to use them is improved across the UK, and that it is mandatory for all defib providers to register every new device on the database.

When someone goes into cardiac arrest, every second counts. I want to ensure that as many tragic and unnecessary deaths can be avoided as possible, by equipping the general public with as much knowledge and as many skills as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I call Richard Thomson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I am the Front-Bench spokesperson, Mr Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I do apologise—my mistake. In that case, your able replacement is Stuart C. McDonald.

1.58 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I am very honoured to be a replacement for Mr Thomson—I do not know how able, but I will do my best.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to this vital debate. I too pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has been championing this cause for a considerable time and therefore is an expert on it, as he showed with his opening speech. I confess that, in contrast, I am comparatively new to the issue. Like many others, I had my interest in it sparked by the lifesaving treatment of Christian Eriksen at this summer's Euros, to which the hon. Member referred, and by subsequent conversations with constituents. I have been able to start some productive local conversations with the two local authorities that serve my constituents and with the British Heart Foundation. I am keen to learn more, and already have learned quite a lot more in the course of the debate.

In launching a small local campaign to help raise awareness of cardiac arrest and how to respond, and to try to increase access to lifesaving CPR training and defibrillators, we opted to call it Every Second Counts. That is not remotely original, but it reflects the fact that, as hon. Members have noted, when it comes to surviving a cardiac arrest, every moment really does matter.

The numbers are stark when it comes to survival rates for the 30,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests that people suffer each year in the UK—just one in 10, as we have heard. However, if we think about that from a different perspective, it means that we have the opportunity here to save hundreds—thousands—of lives if we get the response right. The basic components of a successful strategy seem uncontroversial, as we have already heard. We need to ensure that people can recognise what a cardiac arrest looks like so that they can take appropriate action. We need to ensure that they know to call 999 and can perform CPR. We also need them to use a defibrillator if one is available.

Access to defibrillators is a vital component of the chain of survival. How do we improve accessibility, because currently, as we have heard, only a small percentage of out-of-hospital cardiac arrests receive bystander defibrillation? It is important that there is a greater understanding of when and how to use defibrillators. We must get across the message that they are easy to use so that people do not hesitate for fear of doing it wrong. I look forward to taking part in the training that the hon. Member for Strangford is going to put on for us.

We need to get defibrillators across the country registered on The Circuit so that when we call 999 we can be directed to the nearest accessible defibrillator. We all know that early defibrillation can massively increase someone's chances of surviving an out-of-hospital cardiac

arrest, but many defibrillators are never used because the emergency services simply do not know about them. The Circuit, an initiative by the British Heart Foundation, could prove an important step forward, and we all have a role in raising awareness in our constituencies.

A lot of good work is being done across the UK. We have heard about that already today. We all need to learn from each other, but we can also learn from good practice and what works by looking at examples from abroad. Denmark seems to be a model of good practice, which seems appropriate given what happened to Christian Eriksen. A training programme, the placement of 17,000 AEDs in the community and the implementation of a registry of where they are has seen impressive results. Survival rates have tripled largely because the rates of bystander CPR have shot up from 19% to 65%.

The Danes also use a smartphone Hearrunner app to alert responders trained in CPR and the use of defibrillators to any nearby cardiac arrest and the nearest publicly accessible defibrillator. Some 16,000 citizens joined that system in its first two months.

Sweden has seen survival rates double in the last 20 years, partly through mass CPR training—something we have heard about today—and SMS Lifesavers, which seems to be along the same lines as the Danish Hearrunner model.

It is not just about the number of accessible defibrillators, but where they are. It is brilliant to have two installed by voluntary organisations in the same street, but ideally we need to be able to target them where they are most needed, and we need to map that out. Some 80% of out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur at home, so how do we get as many into areas of concentrated housing as possible? Some public buildings will be ideal for that, with many schools situated in the heart of communities, for example, but other large housing estates might not have such buildings, so how do we deal with that? On the other hand—the hon. Member for Strangford touched on this earlier—our more remote areas have low concentrations of people, but possibly longer to wait for an ambulance, so defibrillators could be all the more vital.

Again looking to Denmark and Sweden as an example, I understand that 200,000 people have access to emergency medical deliveries of defibrillators by drone. Studies in Canada have suggested that that could be a lifesaving option for rural areas. But perhaps we should learn to run before we try to fly. NHS Grampian has had some success in reducing response times to remote areas with teams of trained volunteer responders equipped with AEDs and vehicle locator systems.

On another related issue, I was concerned to read that those in the most deprived areas of the country are almost 20% less likely to receive bystander CPR, so we need to try to understand why that is and how we can address that problem. We need to address these issues to ensure the best response, and we would be wise to look at the type of work that has been undertaken by the resuscitation research group at the University of Edinburgh. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House to make sure that every second counts, and that we do everything we can to save lives.

I thank the hon. Members who supported this debate and express my support for their call to action.

2.4 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and on his private Member's Bill. It may be the case that we do not have time for it on the day it is scheduled for, but I hope the Government will look carefully at the Bill.

The debate is well timed for me, because I am due to visit a school in my constituency tomorrow that installed a defibrillator only last Friday. However, I am afraid the background to that installation is tragic. Ravensmead Primary School in Bignall End in my Newcastle-under-Lyme constituency has had a very sad loss in recent weeks. A teaching assistant suffered a heart attack at school and later passed away. Sam Benson was a much-loved member of the Ravensmead community, a mum of three children, and a teaching assistant who had been involved with the school for 20 years, initially as a volunteer to help children with reading and later as a member of staff. In the words of her headteacher, Melanie Goodall:

"Sam was a fabulous teaching assistant. She was fun and loved life. She was always bright and colourful. She used to work in the school office and was the first face that many parents saw here. She would have Michael Buble on a loop in the office."

The circumstances of Sam's death are not only tragic, but illustrate the problems with access to defibrillators. When she collapsed one morning in September, several colleagues raced a hundred yards up the road to a local pub, which thankfully did have a defibrillator, while several other colleagues commenced CPR immediately. However, it took them several minutes to get hold of the equipment as they needed to phone for the access code. Fellow teaching assistant, Heather Evans, was one of the members of staff trying to access the defibrillator at The Swan pub after Sam's collapse. She told our local paper, the *Stoke Sentinel*:

"Running up the road, it was like running up Everest".

By the time they got back to the school, the paramedics were already there. Sam was taken to hospital, and sadly died five days later.

I am enormously pleased to hear how quickly the paramedics were able to attend the scene, which is commendable given the pressure that the ambulance service is experiencing. However, as has been raised already, it is widely known that every minute counts when responding to cardiac arrests. The chance of successful defibrillation decreases by 23% for each minute that passes, according to a 2003 study. Therefore, if a defibrillator had been more readily available and used a couple of minutes sooner, who knows what difference it might have made? We will never know, but Sam's chance of survival may have been higher. She was lucky that CPR was started almost immediately, which would have given her a much better chance than those who collapse alone.

In Sam's honour, her husband Neville Benson, friends and members of the school community have been raising money for a defibrillator at the school and have raised over £4,000 in Sam's memory. Tesco Express in Audley has actually donated a device, which has been installed, so that money will be used to help other schools in the

area have access to the same device. Neville has also been in touch with me to talk about his desire that these devices be made mandatory in all schools—indeed, I spoke to him this morning. I know that new and refurbished state schools are required to have defibrillators. I saw the answer from my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education, to a written question on 10 September that the Government are looking at what more they can do, and she referred to what the previous Secretary of State for Education has done on the issue.

When Neville spoke to me this morning, he also made the sensible point that while it should not be a cost-benefit analysis, there is a financial benefit as well as the health benefit because quicker defibrillation reduces the chances of long-term disability, which could save society an awful lot of money for a relatively low cost in the short term. I would like to briefly mention the amazing work of the charity Cardiac Risk in the Young, which aims to provide heart screening for a minimum of 200 young people per year. I was introduced to the charity by David Hughes, my constituent in the same parish, who raises money for the charity in honour of his son, Daniel Hughes, who died suddenly at the age of 28 in 2015. In memory of Daniel, Dave has been working to raise awareness and reduce the frequency of young sudden cardiac death. He said:

"We will never know if heart screening would have saved our precious son's life but we never want another family to go through what we went through. There are no words to describe the emptiness and heartache we feel everyday; all we can do is work hard to ensure that Dan's legacy lives on for years to come and that he continues to make a difference to people's lives now as he did when he was with us."

Dave has raised hundreds of thousands of pounds since Dan's death. I have been out to support him on some of those things. If the Minister could take this message back to the Department, I know Dave would be very grateful.

Defibrillators can mean the difference between life and death, as we know only too well. Of the 30,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests across the United Kingdom each year, the overall survival rate is a shocking one in 10. It is estimated that publicly accessible defibrillators are used in fewer than 5% of those incidents. That is a very sad statistic, but a sadder one still is that, according to research conducted by the Resuscitation Council, less than half of bystanders in the UK would intervene when they witness someone collapse. That statistic is substantially lower than figures for other regions and countries that have comparable demographics. The willingness rate is 73% in Norway, 66% in Seattle and 60% in north Holland, and their survival rates are over 20%, so that is something we also need to tackle. Norway has been teaching CPR in schools for many years, and that bystander CPR has got its survival rates as high as 25%, compared with less than 10% in the UK. I am very pleased to see that, from September 2020, we did add CPR to the national curriculum in secondary schools.

Finally—this is another point that people have raised—most of us will remember the Euro 2020 footage this year, when Danish footballer Christian Eriksen collapsed. Of course, his chances of survival were greatly increased from the start because of the urgent medical assistance that arrived immediately. CPR and a defibrillator were applied during those crucial first few minutes. Those scenes were deeply distressing to witness for everyone

watching in the stadium or from home, but thankfully he had a good outcome. He is now doing so well that he is working towards returning to playing football. We should be giving that same best chance of survival to everyone.

2.10 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It has been an absolute pleasure to support the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his endeavours. I thank him for his kind comments, and thank all other colleagues who are supporting the debate.

The importance of access to AEDs in a life-threatening medical emergency cannot be disputed. In addition to the high-profile and extremely upsetting events at Euro 2020 when Christian Erikson suffered his cardiac arrest, there was a similar event in Newcastle's football ground on TV the other week, when an 80-year-old gentleman collapsed. Fortunately, there was an AED to help that situation too.

Is the Minister aware that in the UK, nearly 300 school children die of sudden cardiac arrest every year? The emotional statements of colleagues on the specifics mentioned only further endorse the need for something to happen on these proposals. An obvious start for this is our public buildings, such as schools, libraries, and local government buildings, to have access to AEDs.

Unfortunately, without on-site and urgent access to defibrillation, the vast majority of cardiac arrests will be fatal. At present, there are just not enough AEDs accessible to people. As has already been said, for each minute that passes following a cardiac arrest without CPR, the survival rate drops by 20%.

Given that the average response time for emergency services to a cardiac arrest is just under seven minutes, we cannot rely purely on our emergency services—however good they are—to fill the gap. If we want to save as many lives as possible, we need as many defibrillators in the community as possible. That is particularly true in rural areas, like most of my Sedgefield constituency, where call-out times are naturally longer, simply because of the distances the emergency services will have to travel. Prompt, community access to defibrillators can dramatically help improve the chances of survival. Indeed, it would help to level up between urban and rural communities.

The AED Bill would make an important legislative change, helping to build a better, safer environment for people in the community and increasing the cardiac arrest survival rate. As a nation, we have the opportunity to be world leaders in ensuring that we all have access to defibrillation. We should we pass this legislation into law and be the first country to mandate that new public buildings provide access to a defibrillator.

I am aware that the Department for Education offers reduced-cost defibrillators through NHS Supply Chain's Defibs4Schools programme, which in itself shows that it values the provision. Could the Minister encourage it to go further, particularly with new school builds, and also push other Departments to follow suit? It is clear that it would be challenging to ensure that all current public buildings have AEDs, but it is something the Minister should look at trying to mandate. I strongly encourage her to push her Department—and indeed other ministerial colleagues—to look for cross-departmental

engagement to introduce that compulsion for new public buildings, whether they are for local government, health, education, or other purposes.

As has been mentioned, mandated AEDs on public buildings will work best if they are comprehensively mapped so members of the public could be directed to their nearest location. On that, I do like the earlier proposal for an app-driven solution. The proposed Bill would take an important step towards ensuring that AEDs can be readily located wherever they are needed. In addition to ensuring that AEDs are mapped, we need to ensure that we have a system in which people are clear about whose responsibility it is to maintain them, particularly if they are in the public domain.

We all know—we have heard many representations today—that excellent work has been done up and down the country by volunteers who understand the importance of AED access to their communities. As already mentioned, in Newton Aycliffe, for example, David Sutton-Lloyd has worked tirelessly to ensure that 32 AEDs are now available to residents. However, I believe that we, as the legislature and elected representatives, have a duty to ensure that all new buildings are fitted with AEDs, and that the work of volunteers is to complement that, rather than provide the initial provision.

Again, this was mentioned earlier, but I have been educated on the use of defibrillators. Mr Sutton-Lloyd is incredibly active in running training courses. I am not sure “training” is the right word. It is not training, it is education. Unless we know about these pieces of kit, we could get concerned that the electricity could cause problems. As has been mentioned, it cannot do that; the machines are good. The machine makes the decision and it is not possible to use a defibrillator on somebody if it is not the right thing to do. I encourage the Minister to promote campaigns to educate the public around this, so that when defibrillators are necessary people are confident and not worried about using them.

To summarise, the provision of AEDs, in and around our communities, is a real aid to saving lives, at minimal cost. The opportunity to make them compulsory in public buildings, at least initially in new-build public buildings, is surely a no-brainer. How could the Minister consider otherwise?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. Apologies to the Scottish National party spokesman for being so keen to get him in earlier, but his moment has now come.

2.15 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is still a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I hope I am not being flippant or not paying due respect to the seriousness of the subject when I say that I almost needed an AED when I heard my name being called early.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) not only on securing the debate, but on his long and distinguished involvement in many measures in this House to advance the cause of expanding the provision of public defibrillators. He is involved with a private Member's Bill that had run into the procedural buffers, for which he has picked up the baton. I know he has had positive dialogue with the Government, and I very much hope to see that Bill hit the statute book, by whatever means. It could bring real and tangible benefits to so many individuals and families, all across these islands.

[Richard Thomson]

Globally, cardiac arrests claim more lives than colorectal cancer, influenza, pneumonia, car accidents, HIV, firearms deaths and house fires combined. In the UK, that translates to around 30,000 people each year losing their lives through experiencing cardiac arrest. Sadly, fewer than one in 10 of those who experience cardiac arrest survive. It is something that can happen to anyone, in any place, at any age, at any time, with little, if any, warning.

All the hon. Members who have spoken, whether through a substantive contribution or a knowledgeable intervention, have made this an excellent debate. We have heard many examples of how early, rapid intervention has either happily saved lives or tragically could have saved a life.

A range of actors help to achieve the best outcomes here that they possibly can. We have heard about the examples of first responders, and we are familiar with the role that our paramedics play. I am pleased to have heard so many Members talk about CPR knowledge. I encourage everyone watching this debate, either live or afterwards, or reading about it in *Hansard* or in the newspapers, to make time to learn how to perform CPR, if they have not already done so. It could really save a life.

We have heard about, and some of us saw, the tragic events that afflicted Christian Eriksen during the European championships. I was watching with my children, and it was awful having to explain what was very likely happening and not being able to give them, at that time, the happy ending that they wanted. I remember the relief at being able to tell them that he was alive and in hospital. The quick action of his team mates and the medical professionals at the stadium saved him.

I would like to give an example of a case a little bit closer to home, at my former place of study, the University of Stirling. In February 2016, 20-year-old student Finlay Richardson, a third year student, collapsed during lacrosse practice on the university's training fields. Sports centre staff reacted quickly, realised what was happening and ran and got the sport centre's defibrillator. They were able to apply it to him. He was taken to the Forth Valley Royal Hospital where I am pleased to say he made a full recovery. In fact, he went on to secure a first class honours degree from the university in environmental science. In both cases, what made the difference, on top of the fast response, was the rapid use and application of automated defibrillators.

Those are two good outcomes, but sadly most outcomes are not positive. The single most effective measure that we could take to improve the survival rate is to increase the coverage of automated defibrillators around the country combined with increasing people's knowledge about how to perform CPR. In Scotland, over the last five years, the Save a Life Scotland partnership has equipped more than 640,000 people, about 11% of the Scottish population, with CPR skills. At the launch of Scotland's inaugural out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy in 2015, only about one in 20 people in Scotland who experienced an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest survived. By 2020, that had risen to one in 10.

The updated strategy for 2021 to 2026 aims to double the number of people equipped with lifesaving CPR skills and make sure that more than 1 million people

have them, and to give all school-aged children the opportunity to be equipped with CPR skills. Those measures contribute to the aim of increasing bystander CPR rates to 85% so that a defibrillator can be applied before the ambulance arrives in 20% of cardiac arrests, and it is hoped that they will increase survival rates from out-of-hospital cardiac arrests from 10% to 15%.

Importantly, some 80% of cardiac arrests occur in the home, but sadly public defibrillators are used in only about 8% of cases. That might be, as hon. Members have said, due to a lack of confidence in how to use them, a lack of understanding, or a lack of knowledge of the location on the part of the individuals or the emergency services. The British Heart Foundation's The Circuit campaign will be vital in drawing together the information about that lifesaving equipment. We need to increase that rate by ensuring that the locations of automated defibrillators are known and by increasing the public's knowledge of how to use them.

I am pleased to say that in 2019 there was a big community effort in the village where I stay—it is a small community but close knit. The school held fundraising events to buy a defibrillator for the village; we actually now have two. In April 2019—I think, if Facebook has not let me down—we held a training event in the village hall to learn how to use it. We learned about the appropriate pace of heart massage and were told to perform it while imagining that the Bee Gees were singing “Stayin’ Alive” in our head to get the rhythm right—that seems a bit incongruous, but I will not argue with medical experts.

We also learned how to give artificial respiration. The training was a great success in bringing the community together and in ensuring that, if the worst happened in our community, whether to someone who stays, is visiting or is passing through, there is a cohort of people who should be able to make a positive intervention and increase the chance of survival of anyone unfortunate enough to be in that situation.

I welcome the consensus in the Chamber and the Bill of the hon. Member for Strangford. The private sector has been incredibly accommodating and willing to host defibrillators and ensure that they are maintained, but some of our buildings with the highest footfall, particularly in rural areas, are the public ones. It is important to increase that coverage and do all that we reasonably can, through persuasion or by mandating, to ensure that those lifesaving pieces of tech are in place in our public spaces. I am keen to leave as much time as I can for the hon. Gentleman to sum up, so I will conclude by saying that this has been an excellent debate and I look forward to seeing how the House can come together to advance our shared objectives in future.

2.24 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it. He made a typically thoughtful case, as he did earlier in the week when we spoke in this Chamber about smoking cessation. I plan to borrow liberally from him today, as I did then, because I know he does not mind.

The hon. Member spoke about the wide cross-section of support for action in this area. Clearly, we are a very visible demonstration of that politically, in terms of the number of people who have been able to attend on a Thursday afternoon and the parties that we represent, because the debate is so important. He also detailed a long list of organisations in civil society that have come together for action. I know that they will be watching. I hope that they get a sense from the debate of how seriously Parliament takes the issue, and how clear the commitment is for action.

The hon. Member and other colleagues raised the case of Christian Eriksen, which was a very visible demonstration of cardiac arrest and how it can affect individuals with very little notice. It was a dreadful thing. Like the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), I watched it with incredible sadness and fear. It was an awful thing to happen to anybody, but it happened in the best place possible—a place that had lots of kit and medical expertise. I think back to all the football that we played this Saturday and Sunday up and down the country in rural communities that do not have the same infrastructure as a major football stadium. We are here today with that risk in mind.

Other colleagues made excellent contributions. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) made a point on schools. We talk a lot about personal and social education in this place. CPR, water safety and railway safety should be core parts of the curriculum, because some of our young people will need those skills, and they could save a life. That would be a valuable part of their education. The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) made a point on having great kit out there but not knowing where it is. I will expand on that shortly. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made points about inequalities—something that is close to my heart. I am conscious that as challenging as some of the outcomes that we have heard about are, they are worse in poorer communities such as mine. That calls us to act.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) raised the terrible case of Sam Benson, which I was not aware of. It was exceptionally saddening to hear about. I associate myself with all the remarks that he made. Sam's colleagues clearly made incredible efforts. Sadly, they were in vain, but her colleagues will at least take comfort that they behaved wonderfully in that situation. Perhaps we need to do more to ensure that others in similar situations will have access to the right kit as soon as possible. As he said, time can have a really significant impact on outcomes.

I know that the debate is a joint enterprise between the hon. Member for Strangford and the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), who made a point about St James's Park. I married into a family of Newcastle season ticket holders, and that case was very visible. Again, it was perhaps the right place for such a thing to happen because of those who were around, although we would never wish for it to happen to anybody. The point that the hon. Member for Sedgefield made about the 300 school children was sobering. Again, that shows why public buildings such as schools would be very good for this sort of thing.

Heart and circulatory diseases account for one death every three minutes in the UK. We know that many cardiac arrests take place in hospital settings, but more

than 30,000 take place outside of them and the survival rate for those is less than one in 10. In parts of the country, including the east midlands, the rate is lower. It has a range of causes, but whatever happens there is disruption to electrical activity in the heart, meaning that it is not pumping blood to the brain, lungs and other organs. That can lead to unconsciousness and, if left untreated, death, but advances in medical technology have given us the crucial tool of automated external defibrillators.

AEDs offer a lifeline to those suffering cardiac arrest because they provide an electric shock to the heart to restore normal rhythm. As colleagues said—I do not think that we can say this enough, because we need it to be understood more widely—they are very safe to use. They are portable and easy, they have clear instructions, and they cannot allow the user to give an accidental shock and hurt somebody, which I thought the hon. Member for Sedgefield made very clear. We cannot say that enough—I hope the people watching will get that picture. The statistics bear out how effective they are. If a defibrillator is attached to a patient by a non-medical first responder, the average survival rate is 40%. Other research puts the figure even higher. Every day, people doing extraordinary actions can be very effective indeed.

At the moment, only one in 10 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests involves a public access defibrillator. The British Heart Foundation says that our nation's low cardiac arrest survival rate is likely to be partly attributable to that lack of access. For this lifesaving technology to work, people must be able to access it. There are two elements to that. First, AEDs have to be there. The Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Strangford is a really good way to do that. Secondly and no less crucially, we need to know where the AEDs are, whether that is us as bystanders or the emergency services. It is estimated that there are 100,000 AEDs in the UK, but only 30,000 are known to ambulance services. That is a big gap in our response. As hon. Members have said, when a person suffers cardiac arrest, it is a race against the clock. A person's chance of survival decreases around 10% with every minute that passes.

Progress has been made, which we should say with some pride and with optimism for the future. I pay tribute to the British Heart Foundation, SADS UK, the Oliver King Foundation and others who campaign and have campaigned tirelessly over the years to improve the provision of AEDs and to provide training on how to use them. I also pay tribute to all those businesses and engaged citizens across the country who have done sponsored runs or bake sales, or put some of their business's own money into making AEDs available. It very much shows the best of Britain and a community response—a truly selfless act. With them having done all that, we can meet that ambition in this place to push things a little bit further.

We know it can work. Colleagues have used various different international examples—I will use one of my own. Across the North sea, in the Netherlands, they created a national network of available AEDs and a system to alert trained citizens to cardiac arrests. When it comes to out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, the Netherlands has the highest survival rate in Europe, which points us in the right direction. The hon. Member for Strangford has himself pointed us in the right direction with his Bill.

[Alex Norris]

We know about the vagaries of trying to get business proceeded with on Fridays—we may well see that again tomorrow. Whether or not the Bill can progress, we have the Health and Care Bill in the House at the moment, with its Commons remaining stages on Monday and Tuesday next week, I believe, and with Lords stages to come too. If the Government were minded to pick up the sentiment and theme of what the hon. Gentleman has set out, although I cannot speak for him I suggest he would be quite enthusiastic about that, and the Opposition would certainly be very supportive of it. I believe there would be widespread support across the House. There is clearly cross-party support for the common goal of an active network of AEDs, with citizens knowledgeable about their location and able to use them. We will support the Government in any measure they bring forward to make that a reality.

2.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and also for his passion and dedication in championing this cause. He will know of my interest in the subject before I became a Minister. If anyone can get these changes through, it will be him. I thank him for that. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), who is the No. 2 in these proceedings.

This is such an important issue. Twelve young people a week in this country die from sudden cardiac arrest. As we have heard, there are 30,000 cardiac arrests a year. This is not an insignificant issue. Behind every single one of those people is a family and a community. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) when he spoke of the tragic news of Sam Benson, the impact will last forever.

I reassure hon. Members that the treatment and prevention of cardiovascular disease and access to defibrillators is a priority for the Government. There has been some significant progress in the last two years. We know that about 90% of sudden cardiac arrests are fatal, but if a defibrillator is used in the first three to five minutes, survival can be around 50% to 70%. Again, it makes a significant difference if someone has a sudden cardiac arrest out of hospital.

The Government are supporting a number of measures and working with key stakeholders. I want to highlight some of the work being done to ensure the best possible access to defibrillators and that people feel confident to use them. Hon. Members may be aware that “The NHS Long Term Plan”, published in January 2019, includes a section on cardiovascular disease and defibrillators. The NHS has committed to developing a national network of first responders and access to automated external defibrillators, which will save roughly 4,000 lives a year by 2028. It is high on our agenda, but it is important that we deliver on it now. I think that is the key message from the hon. Member for Strangford, because the chance of survival from a cardiac arrest occurring out of hospital doubles if someone received CPR or defibrillation, so it makes a difference.

I will highlight some of the work that has been done, notably with the British Heart Foundation, which a number of Members have mentioned today. We have worked with the British Heart Foundation to put in place The Circuit, a national network providing evidence of where defibs are in all our communities. If someone calls 999 or contacts the emergency services, ambulance services can identify for them where their nearest defibrillator is.

The Circuit is now live and covers 10 ambulance services, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is working with the two remaining ambulance services, London and South East Coast ambulance services, to get them on to the system. We expect that to happen in the first half of next year. That means all our ambulance services will be able to direct people to the nearest defibrillator ahead of the ambulance attending to the person in need. Currently, 33,237 defibrillators are registered with the eight live ambulance services in England, so we now have a network that we can direct people to.

Although defibrillators do not yet need to be legally registered with the British Heart Foundation, we are working with manufacturers, stakeholders and partners to promote the registration of all defibrillators. My ask of colleagues here this afternoon and anyone who is watching is please to register a defibrillator with the British Heart Foundation. Please do check it is on the register, because it is crucial that the ambulance service can give directions to the nearest defibrillator if someone has a cardiac arrest. We can also ensure that existing defibrillators are managed and looked after and that the register is a live register. We all know that things happen in our communities—defibrillators can be vandalised, or a building can be taken out of use and the defibrillator goes with it. It is important that this is a live piece of work.

The NHS is also working with St John Ambulance. Again, a number of Members have mentioned its excellent work to increase the importance of CPR. It is true that although people do not need training in order to use a defibrillator—my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield put it well—it is about educating them so that they are confident in using them. I want to reinforce the message that no harm can be done with a defibrillator; simply stick the stickers to someone’s chest, turn the machine on, and it will tell us exactly what to do. In some cases, it will not be appropriate, in which case it will say exactly what will happen. It is a valuable piece of kit; almost idiot-proof, in that you cannot get it wrong. We want to give the public the absolute confidence that if they come across a defibrillator, they should feel free to use it, but that overall CPR training is also vital.

Paul Howell: Just to clarify the point about a defibrillator telling someone if it will not work, it actually will not work as a machine if it is used in the wrong way.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That gives people added reassurance that they can do no harm, because the machine is totally in control.

We are also using technology, and there are some exciting apps—the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) talked about having apps. Some mobile technology works with the NHS to help people play a role in becoming first responders. If people know how to do CPR—the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson)

seems to be trained up in that—I encourage them to use the GoodSAM app, which allows members of the public who can do CPR and feel confident about using a defibrillator to receive alerts. If someone collapses in the local area, they will get an alert on their phone, which will tell them where the nearest defibrillator and the person who needs help are. It integrates with ambulance dispatch systems and has a crowd-sourced map of defibrillators, including those in vehicles. The platform now has more than 19,000 volunteers and partnerships with 80 organisations, including the NHS and ambulance trusts.

We are also reassured that the British Heart Foundation is developing an app. It will link to The Circuit and show people where their nearest defibrillator is. Technology is being used to help communities to help themselves.

Rob Roberts: On a different but related subject, in this place and in the main Chamber, the Pensions Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has talked about how he is working with the BBC and other broadcasters to do some kind of nationwide campaign to raise awareness of pension credit. Is that something the Department of Health and Social Care could work on for this subject?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Some of the developments have been over the past two years and, during covid, they have not necessarily had the publicity they deserve. We all have a role in promoting initiatives. There is work to be done so that people are aware of the apps and initiatives.

In our communities, defibrillators are available at airports, shopping centres, train stations and community centres. School-age children are at low risk, but it can still happen, as I said earlier. As a result, and thanks to the work of the Oliver King Foundation, huge pressure was placed on the Department for Education, so defibs are now available for schools and other education providers across the UK to purchase through NHS Supply Chain. They can get those important pieces of equipment at reduced cost. As of January this year, more than 5,000 defibs had been purchased through the Defibs 4 Schools programme, so we are getting defibs out into our schools.

Since May 2019, the Government have required all new and refurbished schools in Department for Education school building programmes to have at least one defib in their buildings. We are pushing that out for new and refurbished schools, but that does not cover all schools in the network.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): To get defibrillators into the community, I established the Community Access Defibrillators for East Yorkshire campaign. I formed a committee and worked with the highly estimable Warren Bostock of the Yorkshire ambulance service, challenging him with the question: “What would a complete network look like?” His initial response was, “How long is a piece of string?”, but he came up with rules and a map showing all the communities that did and did not have defibrillators—60-plus did not—and over the past two or three years we have been working on that. We now have that figure down to fewer than 20 and hope that in the next 12 months we will have it down to zero. Colleagues might be interested to hear the history of that, to get a template that can be

applied elsewhere. If we have clarity about where we ought to have defibrillators, we can ensure that we have them there. In parallel, if we work on awareness and confidence, as discussed, we could save even more than the 4,000 lives that the Minister so rightly highlighted earlier.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his hard work in his community. There are some excellent examples of where defibrillators have been rolled out. Many communities now have them, but if we have them mandated in public buildings, we can address the gaps outside them with excellent work such as my hon. Friend’s. That is the point that the hon. Member for Strangford is making with his forthcoming private Member’s Bill.

We are also providing training, and CPR training is so important. From September of last year, all state-funded schools have been required to teach first aid as part of the new subject of health education, which was introduced alongside relationship education. Primary school children are taught basic first aid now, and pupils in secondary schools are taught further aid, such as administering CPR and the purpose of defibrillators, so hopefully the next generation will be far more confident than perhaps we are in performing CPR and using defibrillators.

Separately, Sport England has announced that it is working with the Football Foundation in support of the Premier League initiative to put £3 million into providing defibs for grassroots football clubs. A number of people mentioned Christian Eriksen. We also had the case of Fabrice Muamba in 2012. Very often in sports facilities, these are crucial pieces of kit that can save lives. We heard about the supporter at Newcastle who also benefited.

This is an incredibly important issue. I want to reassure the hon. Member for Strangford and all hon. Members here today that we absolutely take it seriously. It is an absolute priority to improve the lives and healthcare outcomes of people who suffer cardiac arrest outside a hospital. I hope that the work in the last two years, although perhaps it is not as well known, as the hon. Member for Delyn points out, shows that we are making key progress in some of the really important areas. But there are gaps in provision. We have heard that what matters is not just where defibs go but that they are outside, with 24-hour access. There are tricky issues such as whether to have a code on a defib. All these things need to be nailed down. I am happy to work with colleagues. This work does not involve just the Department of Health and Social Care; some of it needs the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Education, or the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It is a cross-Government approach, and I am happy to work with Members to bridge any gaps that still exist.

2.47 pm

Jim Shannon: First, I thank all hon. Members who have spoken for their contributions. A consistent theme is coming through about having all the data in place; and The Circuit network is going a long way towards that.

I am very keen to be aware of the Welsh perspective and what is happening in Wales. There might be lessons there for us all to learn about how to do what is needed. I thank the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) for giving us that perspective.

[*Jim Shannon*]

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) referred to access to AEDs and training. Again, that is a central theme that consistently comes up, with each and every person. He gave the example of Denmark. He also referred to the fact that in some cases AEDs can be delivered to rural areas by drone. I am not quite sure about the science of how that is done, but the point is that it is happening somewhere, and if it is happening somewhere and is successful, it might be the way to address this issue in some rural areas.

I was so sorry to hear about the lady whose case was raised by the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell). The necessary timescale very clearly was not there. As a result, there will now be an AED in place. It was not there when the lady needed it, and all of us, including the Minister, have said that we wish to convey our sincere sympathies to the family.

Aaron Bell: May I thank the hon. Member and all other hon. Members who have expressed their sympathy? When I see Mr Benson, I will ensure that they are passed on to him, and when I speak to the headteacher tomorrow, I will ensure that they are passed on to the school as well.

Jim Shannon: There is a united consensus of sympathy in relation to that case.

I thank the hon. Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) for his support for this cause. He gave us a salient reminder of the 300 children who die each year from cardiac arrest. Sometimes, when we hear the figure of 30,000 for out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, we do not focus on all the people that includes.

I think we are all really interested in what the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) has done in his constituency. We would be very keen to find out more about how that has happened, because there is obviously something that we could learn from there.

I am very impressed by the fact that the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) is so learned in this sector. I know him as a friend, so I am not surprised at his knowledge on this subject matter. I know that he is also a very athletic person. He gave the example of the sixth-form student who is alive today and pursuing a career because of an AED that was in the right place, at the right time. The hon. Gentleman and I feature in

many debates together; indeed, I cannot think of any debate on a health issue that we have missed. I thank him. I am certainly keen to look at that, and will discuss how to bring it forward in a positive way with the Minister and the hon. Member for Sedgfield, if that is possible.

I want to sincerely thank the Minister. She referred to the fact that some 12 young people die from cardiac arrest every week. It is shocking that we can lose so much young life—people who could have done so much and had their futures ahead of them. The hon. Lady will know of young Oliver King. He comes to my mind on many occasions. I never knew the young boy, but I knew his daddy—that is very real.

The Minister referred to discussions with stakeholders, the NHS and first responders, who do excellent work in my constituency. She also referred to teaching and training in schools. That is all part of the joint approach that we need, alongside St John Ambulance and CPR training. The Minister also referred to Bills that will require an AED to be in place in all those buildings and that AEDs will be mandated in any new build. I am very grateful for that positive response from the Minister.

However, my private Member's Bill aims to do one thing, if I can achieve it: it would mandate that all buildings, not just new buildings, must have AEDs. I know that the Minister agrees with that. We need a consensus across all Departments that have responsibility in this area. AEDs are available in lots of buildings already—in schools, Government buildings, many leisure centres, football clubs and so on. However, the Bill aims to achieve one thing: that AEDs are mandated in all buildings, and that those who are responsible for them will know that. The signage, training and all of the other things to which the Minister and others have referred are great points and are very important, but they illustrate that the Bill is so important. I hope that on Second Reading, on 10 December, the Government will see that the Bill is a win-win; there is no cost, but everyone gains. Those nine out of 10 victims of sudden cardiac arrest who are lost every year can be saved. The Bill is a lifesaver. I encourage the Government and all those involved to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public access to Automatic External Defibrillators.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Touring Musicians: EU Visas and Permits

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 563294, Seek Europe-wide Visa-free work permit for Touring professionals and Artists; Oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee on 4 February and 8 February 2021, on Arrangements for touring professionals and artists in the EU, HC 1116; Correspondence with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Minister of State for Digital and Culture, relating to Arrangements for touring professionals and artists in the EU, reported to the House on 20 January and 9 March 2021, HC 1116; Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on Arrangements for touring professionals and artists in the EU, reported to the House on 3 February 2021, HC 1116.]

3 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if they are coming on to the parliamentary estate. This can be done either at the testing centre downstairs or at home. Finally, please give each other, and members of staff, space when you are seated and when entering or leaving the Chamber.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered enabling visa- and permit-free working for musicians in the EU.

It is a great pleasure, Dr Huq, to see you in the Chair for this debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the application for this debate from myself and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music. That application had the backing of the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), and numerous MPs from all parties, from Scotland, Wales and every region in England. The concern is cross-party; the demand for Government action is UK-wide.

The music sector is important to the UK, both culturally and economically. It accounts for nearly 200,000 jobs and, at least before covid, it was worth £5.8 billion, £2.9 billion of which was generated in export revenue, with the EU being by far the biggest market. The finances of the sector—both of individuals and organisations—depend for a significant section of income on touring in the EU, with a survey conducted just before covid showing that 44% of musicians received up to half their earnings in the EU. Our music sector financially depends on touring in the EU.

Of course, we do not just look at this issue in economic terms. We have to recognise the role that music plays in the very quality of our lives, in the definition of our communities, and in our ability to engage with our emotions, and to understand ourselves and each other. Our music is precious and our musicians should be celebrated, protected and supported in their art. However, they face a great problem that is not of their making, which is the post-Brexit obstacle to touring in the EU.

A tour of Europe often needs to involve more than one country to be viable and sometimes many countries. The problem is that for British musicians to tour in Europe now there are 27 different work permit regimes, 27 different visa regimes and 27 different requirements for proof of the work that is going to be undertaken. That means hours spent on forms and certificates, downloading bank statements and acquiring certification and statements about the nature of the work; days spent travelling to and sitting in consulates; weeks spent waiting for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to process A1 forms to provide to employers in Europe; fees for applications; and further expense and time to obtain musical instrument certificates with expert verification that the instrument does not consist of endangered wood or ivory, with the risk of the instrument being confiscated if the paperwork is not in order.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. and learned Lady believe that specialised visa renewals for touring groups, which would streamline the time and the cost for visa applications for working musicians, would be a step in the right direction, and if so would the Minister consider that suggestion?

Ms Harman: We need to take all the steps in the right direction that we can, and we look forward to hearing from the Minister. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the debate today.

There is time and cost involved. I recommend to the Minister that she download and look at some of the forms that are required. I have only four of them here, but they are of mind-boggling complexity, and they are all different—that is the point. People cannot just get the hang of doing one of them and then do it again; they have to be done differently for every country, every time. That means plans being curtailed and opportunities being lost, and that is without even mentioning the dreaded cabotage rules that prevent a lorry needed to carry instruments or equipment from making more than three stops before returning back to the UK. That does not fit with how touring bands or orchestras work in just one country, let alone if they are touring a number of countries.

Some 85% of the European concert trucking industry is based here in the UK. Those firms will be put out of business or have to relocate to Europe unless this matter is sorted.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The industry was based in the UK, but, according to the information that I have, a lot of it has already gone to Holland. Although touring is not taking place at scale, the planning that goes into touring is taking place right now. It is necessary to get the rules changed now, and not when we discover we do not have an industry left.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Time is not on our side. We all recognise this is an immensely skilled and professional industry that we should protect, and it should not have to move. Our musicians and those who work to support them are highly committed, resourceful and skilled. They say there is a problem that they cannot solve and they need Government action. The Government must reach agreements with all EU countries for consistent regimes so that our musicians can once again tour freely in the

[Ms Harman]

EU. As the hon. Gentleman said, they should do it quickly. Plans are being made in the EU that leave out our sector.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for securing this debate. I declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on opera. She has referred to touring bands and orchestras, but there is also a real issue for singers and freelancers. For an individual singer, especially a young singer, trying to negotiate the forms is nigh on impossible. A production of “Peter Grimes”, the great Benjamin Britten opera, which requires an English-speaking cast at the Teatro Real in Madrid, was in jeopardy for months before eventually a workaround was achieved. Even though the situation in Spain has improved, in many places it is very difficult for British singers, and they are not getting the bookings. Bookings for opera companies are made years in advance, which is why we need certainty now.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. Plans are being made, and if the Government do not move quickly some organisations will become unviable. Some musicians at the top of their career will feel their best option is to relocate to Europe, and we do not want them to have to do that. Many of the next generation of musicians will never have the opportunity to get into the profession, and to develop their careers, without the financial and artistically important benefits of working in Europe. Whether it is established artists or those just starting out, big organisations or freelancers, our music sector needs the cultural creativity that they get from working in Europe. We do not want to become a musical Galápagos with our musicians locked out of the cultural partnership that is so important for creative development.

I hope the Minister will recognise the weight of opinion, which includes Sir Elton John, Sir Simon Rattle, Howard Goodall, Sting, Judith Weir, Nicola Benedetti, Ed Sheeran, the Sex Pistols, Roger Daltrey, Bob Geldof, Brian May and many more. I pay tribute to the work done by the organisations demanding Government action: the Musicians’ Union, UK Music, the Association of British Orchestras, BECTU, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and Carry on Touring, to name just a few. They all call for a concerted response from the Government to support the sector while matters are being sorted out.

The Prime Minister has said that there is a problem and he promised to fix it. I have talked to the new Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. She knows about this and I know she wants to sort it. We are genuinely not looking for a political row. We only want a solution, but we need absolute clarity and honesty from the Government. There is no point in telling the sector that the problem is solved if it clearly is not. There is no point in the Government just issuing more guidance. Those involved in the music sector do not need to be told what the problem is. They know only too well and they need the Government to sort it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Like others, I congratulate the right hon. and learned Lady on securing this debate. I agree with everything that she has said, but there is an aspect that she has not

touched on—the festivals around the country. In Orkney we have the world-famous St Magnus festival in June, which was founded by the late Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. In Shetland, we have the Shetland folk festival. Those are community enterprises, albeit highly professional ones. The administrative burden for them from having to deal with visas of the sort that the right hon. and learned Lady has already pointed out will be phenomenal. That cultural growth would be an enormous loss for our communities.

Ms Harman: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point. We have to think of the impact of those coming into this country: we need them to be part of our music sector here.

I welcome the Minister to her place and I wish her well in her work. If she wants any help to get this sorted, we are all here to help and do whatever we can to back her up on this. I look forward to hearing from her this afternoon that she acknowledges the scale and nature of the problem, and that she will deliver on the Prime Minister’s promise. I know she will have to work with many other Departments. No pressure, but we are looking to her to deliver. We want to hear from her what progress she has already made, and what further progress she anticipates the Government will make in respect of which countries and by when.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): This is a very popular debate. In fact, my name is on the original list of people speaking in it. To allow the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), time to wind up, the first Front-Bench spokesperson will start at 3.58 pm. If everyone can keep within a five-minute time limit, everyone will get in.

3.11 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and it is a pleasure to follow the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). I congratulate her on her words, on her continuing efforts in this area and on securing this important debate.

We should not be having this debate. It is endlessly amazing to me that the public consciousness, the media and the press can, day after day, follow the intricacies of fisheries and the arguments over the European Union and fishing rights, for example, but the music industry, which employs more people than the fishing and steel industries combined, hardly gets a look in.

We ought not to be having this debate because this should have been wrapped up long ago, but, on leaving the EU, the trade and co-operation agreement very much focused itself on goods rather than services, so cultural touring was left a little behind. I know the Prime Minister has openly committed to working flat out to solve the problem, and progress has been made, particularly this week with Spain, but we have a long way to go. The problem is not only the practicalities of UK musicians, artists, crew and creatives from other sectors touring the EU, but the perception that this is a niche, side issue and not one that we need to firmly address.

Looking at the facts, employment in the music sector has dropped by 35%, with revenues almost halving in the last year. We were riding high before the pandemic.

The sector grew by 11% in 2019, far beyond the rest of the economy, not only dragging the rest of the economy behind it, but flying the flag as well, by demonstrating the creative skill of the UK.

The EU is our most vital market. The European Commission itself said that UK acts “dominated the European panorama”, and that must continue. In order for it to continue, the uncertainties around cabotage, carnets, visas and work permits need to be resolved, not only in a purely logistical sense but because without the certainty, as we have heard, that comes from knowing that artists, orchestras, musicians and all their retinue can travel freely and work, it is impossible for them to book ahead and have the confidence to look forward.

Any work in any EU member state is still restricted. Although we have had good news and there may be only six EU member states with which we now need to organise work permits, we are still restricted to 90 in 180 days over all member states. For example, Austria allows only four weeks of permit-free working and Poland allows only 30 days for every 12 months. There are other restrictions. Any musician playing in France must be employed by a registered venue, and might be required to register in the host state.

The costs are also prohibitive. The cost of a Greek visa is £68 per person, and then there is the £300 cost of a carnet for an unaccompanied instrument. We are talking about hundreds or even thousands of pounds once there are a significant number of musicians to get on the road.

Then there is the cabotage. UK trucks are allowed to make only three stops, which is logically impossible and ridiculous. As we have heard, we are losing jobs as hauliers move from the UK to the EU. We have no carnet waiver agreement with the EU—which we need. Musicians need to source carnets well in advance of travel and get them physically signed off by border officials. EU musicians do not have to face that on entering the UK. That means that, while established artists or large orchestras can probably manage the mountain of paperwork, tick all the boxes and get on the road, artists who are starting out, new or breaking new ground really do not stand a chance. That means that we will see a further decline in the future dominance of UK culture; our future will not be as successful as our past.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music, and next week we are beginning an inquiry into these very issues, taking evidence from every part of the industry and, I hope, getting some pretty major stars as well—to sparkle the thing up. I know that conversations have been had and I understand the difficulties of negotiating with 27 member states, but we have to have clarity, fairness and equity for cabotage, cultural waivers and visas. If we do not solve the issues that the industry is experiencing, we will not only harm ourselves and the industry through even more unnecessary stress and job losses to the EU, but we will lose talent, lose our influence, lose our upper hand and—importantly—lose our leadership on the international stage.

3.16 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq, particularly on a topic that quite clearly means so much to Members and their constituents across the country. I congratulate

my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on securing this very important debate. I have said it a number of times—colleagues across the border may refute my claims—but music really is such a unique part of Welsh culture and identity. We have obviously seen some fantastic musicians from across Wales have great success across Europe and the world over the years, too. Indeed, it is about time that we recognise both the cultural and economic benefits that musicians and their craft bring to our nation. While I am hesitant to make reference to the undisputed king of Wales, Sir Tom Jones, this early on in a debate—it’s not unusual—it would be remiss of me to ignore the incredible influence he has had on so many artists, big and small, in Wales and beyond.

When we speak about musicians touring in the EU, we must also be clear to establish that there are also artists at the very start of their careers hoping to catch a big break overseas. As we have heard, there are the further complications when considering the needs of orchestras, or brass bands, such as the incredible Cory Band based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who travel with large instruments or require advanced technical support. The vast majority of brass bands are led by volunteers who have day jobs; they are unable to navigate and circumvent the necessary paperwork and arbitrary requirements needed to travel to all these countries.

The success of our music industry has been well documented in this place, but it really is remarkable that the UK—as small as we physically are—is currently the second biggest exporter of music in the world. It comes as no surprise to learn that Europe is our industry’s closest and most important international market. Put simply, it is not a market we should be seeking to cut off. We all know that European touring has become more expensive, more complicated and more difficult to execute. What is even more frustrating is that the confusion, lack of clarity and co-ordination over the requirements of the 27 EU member states for touring musicians was clearly an oversight by the UK Government during the negotiation period. The UK’s live music industry is completely reliant on low-friction barriers to entry and movement, allowing tours to move through countries seamlessly and quickly. However, as the world slowly begins to unlock from the restrictions that coronavirus has placed on us all, I fear that our creative sector will continue to pay the price for this ignorance and inaction.

As it stands, UK musicians and their teams are not able to tour around a fifth of Europe—six out of 27 member states—without obtaining certain visas and work permits far in advance. In an industry where last minute changes to tour itineraries are particularly frequent, how on earth can we expect that to be viable, particularly for smaller artists and groups whose income is solely reliant on revenue generated from their live music performances? Once again, the Government are widely missing the mark, especially given their recent celebration of the fact that 21 EU member states do not require visas or work permits.

The industry has known about these restrictions for some time now and has been leading on the campaign to increase visa free access across the EU. I must take the opportunity to congratulate the sector, and in particular the Association of British Orchestras and LIVE on

[Alex Davies-Jones]

their recent success in Spain. Instead of seeing meaningful policy developments from the UK Government to help the industry back on its feet, we see them disingenuously taking credit for the actions of the sector. Touring in the EU is a critical way for new and emerging artists of all genres to gain valuable experience, build their fan base and secure an income, but the artists are now being blocked due to financial barriers and a lack of information and support to navigate the process.

To conclude, sadly the points raised today are not particularly new—many of them have been repeatedly raised by colleagues across the House time and again. Musicians really want to get back out there, and I know, from the popularity of today's debate, that most colleagues across the political divide want to support the industry. Now really is the time for the Minister's Department to act, particularly as the Government have dragged their heels on this issue for too long. I sincerely hope the Minister will take our pleas seriously, and I look forward to hearing her plans to tackle this worrying problem, which is impacting musicians up and down the country.

3.20 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the Mother of the House—the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)—and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on securing the debate, although it is regrettable that we are here at all.

Years ago, in 2016, just after the Brexit referendum, I used to joke that this place should be renamed Brexit Minister Hall, because we spent so much time debating the ins and outs of the Brexit negotiating process, and here we are again. Despite all the assurances that we received in those days, it is plain that if Brexit had not happened, we simply would not be having this debate.

The difficulties that our musicians and performing artists are experiencing, the damage it is doing to their careers, the talent that is being wasted and the economic opportunities that are being missed are all because of Brexit—particularly the desperately hard Brexit driven through by this Government with a flagrant disregard for anyone who might be harmed by it or disagree with that approach. The problems that everyone has spoken about, and that we will continue to hear about, simply did not exist before the end of January 2020. I am sorry to drift slightly from the consensual tone with which the Mother of the House opened this debate, but I think that has to be said. This mess is entirely of the Government's making, so the responsibility for resolving it lies entirely with them.

We have heard about the industry's value to the country as a whole; it employs more people than the steel and fisheries industries combined but, perhaps because it is not as concentrated—or not as concentrated in Conservative marginal seats—we are not hearing quite so much interest or action. Where is the summoning of the ambassadors, which we have seen recently to resolve certain disputes in the fishing industry?

I have a huge concentration—a massive wealth—of talent, and indeed of economic wealth, for at least some of the music industry, in Glasgow North. It is home to

some of the finest venues and most famous artists in Scotland, but also to some of the smaller venues—an incubator for real future talents. The European tour is a hugely important part of the nurturing of that future talent and, as we have heard, the opportunities are simply drying up.

I have been wearing the mask of the Kinnaris Quintet, some of whom are based in my constituency—five of the finest young Scotswomen traditional music performers in the country—and their experiences are sadly being replicated all over the country. Jenn Butterworth, one of my constituents, said,

“as a musician I feel pretty let down by the government as I heard there was a possibility we could have been allowed visa free travel and it was denied by our own govt in the negotiations”.

Another said,

“we're totally in limbo with lots of things in the diary...we're losing any prospect of reaching audiences in Europe...One production was a main source of income and now the costs, hurdles to climb, uncertainties were just too much of a headache for the French promoters, so they decided to sack all the participants who didn't hold European passports.”

I heard of their desperate search for Irish ancestry, or some other European connection, because there is now a distinct advantage to having dual citizenship for people in this country. Musicians without that are increasingly finding it difficult, with stories of agents simply passing by artists who do not have straightforward visa access to Europe.

On fees and taxes, one of the bands that I spoke to said that if they want to go to Germany, they have to pay a 19% tax on any goods brought into the country. That means all their merchandise—they do not know whether they will sell it or not, but they have to pay that tax up front. Those sales would have covered some of their living costs, accommodation and food while they were on the road, and all of that is thrown into complete uncertainty.

We have already heard about the challenge of acquiring carnets, and all the costs that go with that. It is a particular problem—again, as we have heard—for orchestras or other large bands or ensembles. Previous models, based on freedom of movement, are simply unviable now.

There are solutions if the Government are willing to work for them, such as the 10-point plan circulated by the office of the Mother of the House, which I fully endorse. The Government should meet industry bodies, such as the Association of British Orchestras, UK Music, the Musicians' Union, LIVE, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the Scots music forums, get them all round the table and hear from them first hand.

A benefit of Brexit was supposed to be global opportunities, but I do not see easyJet flights to Australia appearing anytime soon. I am not sure how anyone is supposed to go on the road to the end of the Earth to promote their talent, so that argument falls flat on its face. It is not immediately impossible to undo Brexit, but there is a reason why support for independence is growing in Scotland, not least among our cultural and music sectors. It is our route back in—our lifeboat, literally and metaphorically—to get back across the channel and thrive in the way that we ought to be able to.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): The good news is that with drop-outs, including myself, we have stretched the time limit to seven minutes. I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Julian Knight.

3.26 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I will luxuriate in my seven minutes. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. It does not seem long ago that we came into this place and swore oaths next to each other. Here we are, only a few years later, two old lags—if I may be so bold.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Speak for yourself!

Julian Knight: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) and the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), for securing the debate. I concur entirely with her speech, which was conciliatory and thoughtful. I hope that the Minister takes that tone away from the debate: it is not a party political matter, but a matter of looking after our constituents, our wider cultural impact and, frankly, global Britain. Without these industries, we are not global Britain any more.

I will make some brief observations. We have heard about the enormous flurry of paperwork and the unworkable and patchwork system that is in place. The Select Committee has been aware of the issue for a long time. We invited Lord Frost to appear before us at the start of the year, but he refused. It was only after pinning the Prime Minister down in the Liaison Committee on 24 March that he said Lord Frost will appear and we will get this sorted. Lord Frost eventually appeared in June or July after avoiding the Committee for a long time, but in that whole time, there have been only four official bilateral meetings, one of which was on the morning of his appearance by some strange coincidence—that is one every two months.

I know that conversations have taken place, however, and that the Minister's predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), was, after initially trying to get her head around the issue, committed to it. She told us some good stories about how she would track people down at conference and try to have conversations, but there was always a feeling that there was a road block in the shape of Lord Frost.

It seemed that the issue was being drawn into the general feeling of antagonism between us and the EU, which was unnecessary. This is not a confected row to bring about a Jim Hacker sausage moment in politics in terms of the Northern Ireland protocol. That should have nothing to do with this issue, which is about people's livelihoods and our place in the world.

It is utterly farcical that we are 20 miles away from Europe and yet, in the case of at least six nations, we have the same rights of travel and access for brilliant creatives—not just musicians but whole swathes of people across industries—as people coming from the Cook Islands on the other side of the world. That is a ridiculous situation.

I say to the Minister that she is pushing at an open door. Provided that we keep the issue out of the mess that is going on with Northern Ireland, which I believe we can, there is an enormous willingness across the EU

to talk to us bilaterally, because they also want our talent there—they miss it. We have such a fantastic reservoir of talent. They want people to be there and to enjoy that cultural exchange. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) spoke about opera. I was talking to a lady who is one of the world's leading lights at the Vienna opera house. She is struggling to get work there. This is a person of such huge, global talent that she is called upon everywhere.

Sir Robert Neill: My hon. Friend makes such an important point. We forget just how significant the status of British artists is in the opera field—not only the leading stars, such as he refers to, but the young singers who cut their teeth in the repertoire houses in Germany and the festivals in Europe. They are losing out because of an inflexibility and a lack of joined-up Government between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Cabinet Office, and that has to change.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is singing from the same song sheet as I am. There is perhaps a misperception—we often talk about this on the Select Committee—of the importance of DCMS to our economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome referenced it, but to put it into real figures the DCMS sector is worth 23% of the economy. The Government are around 40% to 45% of the economy—it depends on where one is in the United Kingdom. DCMS is 0.5% of Government spending. When it has a few million quid, it has to go the Treasury—it is in the same building—and say, "Please can we do this?"

There is an idea within Government, and has been, I would say, for many years, that these industries are mendicants, always asking for hand-outs. That may be true of the Royal Opera House, but our creative sectors are the model of leanness and competitiveness. They have learned to survive without hand-outs over a long period. My view—this may be where I depart from Opposition Members—is that that has been of enormous benefit to their long-term health and robustness, but they cannot deal with the red tape and the lack of access and ability to work. I am a free-marketarian. This is not a free market because of circumstance and perhaps a lack of focus and will in certain parts of Government, though not within DCMS.

We have allowed a situation to occur where we are helping to damage industries in which we have a competitive advantage. There is an economic law of competitive cost advantage. The reason why we are really good is that we have the English language and a great history of creativity. We should invest in areas where we have a competitive cost advantage. We no longer have one in many industries, but we do in this one. Without the music industry and film production, the UK economy, pre pandemic, would have been in recession for four of the previous six years. That is why it is vital that we get this moving—because we will discover the damage that has been done only when it is too late.

There also may be a bit of sniffiness about the industry. We all remember during the pandemic the quickly withdrawn advert showing a ballerina whose next job was as an IT consultant. I am not dissing IT consultants, but being a ballerina is fantastic, top of the tree, and something that we should be proud of in this country. There are Members in the Chamber who really

[Julian Knight]

want to work with the Minister and see this happen, because we care about our constituents and our country, and we know that these are areas in which we can have genuine advantage and push ourselves forward. We have effectively given them a no-deal Brexit. We now need to mend that by dealing with the cabotage through the EU and having bilaterals to get this sorted.

3.34 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq, although it is a shame that you are not contributing to the debate because I know what a music fan you are. I do not think that I have to declare my membership of the Musicians' Union but I will, although, as I always say on such occasions, I have no musical talent whatsoever, unlike some of my colleagues who are speaking in the debate.

The fact that we are here in November 2021—well over five years since the UK voted to leave the European Union—is a damning indictment of the Government's failure to prepare for the consequences of Brexit. I think that is, in part, political. The Government just did not want to concede that there could be negative consequences to no longer having freedom of movement and to leaving the market. I have seen that in other sectors, too—the labour shortages in food and farming, for example—and the ostrich approach of burying our head in the sand has had real consequences for the people who are affected.

That approach has included ignoring the warnings from the industry. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said, so many people from across the industry—not just performers, but road crew, lighting engineers, truck drivers and so on—have come forward to try to tell the Government that action is needed, but there has been a refusal to host anything by way of meaningful discussions. An EU official told *The Guardian* in January that when the EU proposed a standard range of travel exemptions, “the UK refused to engage in our discussions at all”.

I know there was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing and trying to blame one another for that, but according to the EU sources, by June, the UK had still made no approach to remove travel barriers for creative workers.

As well as being political, I think there is an element of incompetence to the Government's approach. Quite frankly, that is a hallmark of this Government. It is also another sign of the Government's failure to acknowledge the importance of our creative industries. We have heard about the statistics and the pound signs attached to those industries: we are the world's second-biggest exporter of music, with an export revenue of £2.9 billion. The value of music, as others have said, is far greater than that. We not only have some of the biggest-selling music artists in the world, but some of the best—those are not necessarily the same thing.

I remember, when I was a student in what was then Leningrad, in the summer of 1984, being besieged by young Russians who were just absolutely desperate to find out more about UK music, which was a lifeline to them and their connection to the west. I remember being asked, on the beach on the bank of the Neva river, how many children Paul McCartney had. I must

admit, I did not know, and it was before the internet, but that just shows the soft power connected to our worldwide reputation for music.

We also know that the sector has been incredibly hard hit by covid, which is all the more reason why the Government should pull out all the stops to get it back on its feet. To an extent, the Government have been saved by covid, because people being unable to tour has masked the impact of Brexit on the live music sector. Now that we have, I hope, emerged from the worst of the pandemic, it is absolutely vital that the Government step up the pace on progress.

I am pleased that we have made some progress on visas, although I think it is a bit audacious for the Secretary of State to try to claim credit for that. We need agreements with the remaining six member states, and we also need bilateral discussions, because at the moment, any work is still restricted over all member states to a total of up to 90 days in any 180 days. As we have heard, there is still so much bureaucracy around that.

I will mention carnets and merchandise briefly. We have heard about the costs of taking unaccompanied instruments across borders—those costs are just for the paperwork. We know that smaller and up-and-coming bands in particular do not have lawyers, agents and managers to do all that for them; they have to deal with it themselves, and it is a real deterrent. Tim Burgess from the Charlatans tweeted earlier this week that the band was unable to sell any merchandise during its recent Dublin gig. We know that so many bands rely on merchandise to make a living because of streaming and everything else.

I will finish by talking about cabotage, as I know that that is what is expected of me as a member of the shadow Transport team. UK tour trucks made up close to 80% of the EU market prior to 2016 and Brexit. The three-stop rule for UK trucks forces them to re-route back to the UK, which is incredibly costly and time-consuming if they bother to do so, but most do not, making UK-led tours impossible. The band Public Service Broadcasting recently had to book a German bus for their European tour—something that they described as maddeningly stupid and self-harming. Big US acts have traditionally started their EU tours in the UK, so they fly into Heathrow, pick up the trucks, road crew, sound, lighting, caterers—everything—here. Why would they do that now? They are just going to go to Germany or somewhere else.

We have seen limited progress. The small splitter trucks have been ruled exempt from cabotage rules, and cabotage easement has seen inbound rules suspended on EU-flagged trucks to help the HGV crisis here, but that makes things even worse for UK music hauliers, as it is not reciprocal. UK hauliers have had no Government support to relocate to the EU either—I do not want them to relocate to the EU, but that proposal was put forward by the Government as an answer to the problems back in the earliest stage of the negotiations—so they cannot get around the restrictions that way. The music industry is part of what makes this country great. Why would we want to throw out an integral part of that, and tell it to go and set up shop in France, Germany or Portugal?

UK Music is calling for a derogation from cabotage for all trucks used for cultural events, so I conclude by asking the Minister whether there are active discussions

in her Department and the Department for Transport about this issue. When I have tried to talk to the DFT, it has told me that it is a matter for her Department, but when I have tried to talk to her Department, it has told me that it is a matter for the DFT. I rather feel that that has left a big, gaping void in which there are no discussions at all.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the only person I know who had an album out last week: Kevin Brennan.

3.41 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): That is very kind, Dr Huq. I have yet to receive an invitation to tour Europe with the album, but who knows after today? Given that I am entitled to an Irish passport because of my father's birthplace, perhaps I will be able to do so eventually. I declare my membership of the Musicians' Union and the financial support that it gave me at the last election. I am also a member of the Ivors Academy, and have some small earnings from MP4, the world's only parliamentary rock group—as you know, Dr Huq.

I congratulate the Mother of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), on her tenacity in pushing forward this issue over the last year or so, for not letting it go and for not letting the Government off the hook. The fact that she brings her immense experience and powerful advocacy to the issue is important to musicians across the country, who are all immensely grateful to her for her campaigning.

Everyone is right: a tremendous variety of artists from the UK of different musical styles and genres tour Europe, from major orchestras, to the up-and-coming opera singer mentioned by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), to the young singer-songwriter with an acoustic guitar and an easyJet ticket, with no support, but perhaps a few T-shirts and CDs inside their pull suitcase. It is an incredibly varied landscape, and the Government do not seem to have grasped the importance of that from the outset. And yet, it could have been so different.

I remember being in this very Chamber in January 2020 with the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who was the predecessor of the Minister here with us today. I welcome the new Minister to her place; I do not think we have had the opportunity to have a debate before, but I look forward to our exchanges over the coming months and years. The former Minister said:

“Touring is the lifeblood of the industry...It is essential that free movement is protected for artists post 2020.”—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 56WH.]

It was official Government policy in January 2020, just after we had left the European Union, that there was free movement for artists across the European Union. What went wrong? Why did that not get translated?

The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the Chair of the Select Committee, put it well. Our experiences of dealing with Lord Frost to try to untie this issue and get some movement on it were immensely frustrating. Not only were there delays, to which the Chair of the Select Committee referred, but when Lord Frost appeared

before the Select Committee, he said, in contrast to what the Minister's predecessor said in this Chamber on the record in *Hansard*:

“We do not agree with permanent visa waivers because they deprive us of control over our immigration system.”

That is the root of this. The issue is not about immigration, but about our creative industries, cultural exchanges and the touring of artists across Europe and across the United Kingdom. That is being conflated with an argument about freedom of movement and immigration, which has nothing to do with it.

In all my 20 years in Parliament, I have never heard anyone on the doorstep say, “What are you going to do about all these Polish violinists coming over here and entertaining our people? It's an absolute disgrace. When are you going to do something about it?”. It is nonsense, yet we have changed from the position of the former Minister, on the essentiality of freedom of movement for artists to be able to work, to a position where the Government are saying, “We don't believe in this because it undermines our immigration system.” What a load of nonsense and what a way to treat this hugely important part of our economy.

The creative industry is the fastest growing part of our economy and, as the hon. Member for Solihull rightly said, it is an important export earner for this country. It is an industry in which we have a comparative advantage and of which we can be proud. The industry brings immense prestige to this country in the soft power it exerts, as well as in the hard-line economic benefits we get from it.

Frankly, that has been the problem. The Prime Minister said at the Liaison Committee that he will “strain every sinew”, and he promised to fix it, yet a couple of months later this issue, which he said is so important that he will put his full weight behind it, was not even on the agenda of the first meeting of the Partnership Council in relation to Brexit. The Government, as an afterthought, included it as any other business, as Lord Frost had to explain when he came before the Select Committee.

I know that this is not within the Minister's power, but perhaps she can pass it on to her colleagues. Will the Government take this issue off Lord Frost? Let us get him a million miles away from this issue as quickly as possible. Give it to a senior Minister, or even an up-and-coming, able and talented junior Minister, which I am sure the Minister is. Give it to somebody with a cross-Government remit to sort out all the issues between Departments. We have heard about the Government not acting in concert or in harmony on this issue. Give it to somebody who can sort it out, not Lord Frost. I am not a believer in nominative determinism but, let us face it, Lord Frost has had a chilling effect on this issue. It is fixable, so let us fix it.

3.47 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman).

Like Camberwell and Peckham, Vauxhall is home to a thriving music scene and there are reminders of our musical past and present throughout my constituency.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

I am sure many hon. Members have visited the O₂ Academy to see the wide range of musicians from around the world who have performed there.

Perhaps the most famous tribute in my constituency is the mural of David Bowie just outside Brixton station. David is one of Brixton's most famous sons, having grown up on the boundary between Brixton and Stockwell. He attended Stockwell Primary School until the age of six, and he went on to be a worldwide cultural icon. Like many musicians of his time, he travelled up and down the country to play his music and draw inspiration.

Famously, David lived in Berlin for three years. During that time, as some hon. Members will remember, he recorded "Heroes", a song telling the tale of lovers on either side of the Berlin wall at a time when people as young as 18 were shot for simply trying to cross the border. A decade later, David gave an emotional performance of "Heroes" close enough to the wall for thousands of young people on either side to listen and sing along. When he died in 2016, the German Foreign Office paid tribute to him by linking to his performance and praising him for his work in bringing down the wall.

That shows the valuable contribution of our music. Music is perhaps one of our most crucial and valuable exports, and it has a profound political impact across the world. However, that only happens when our musicians can travel freely across Europe and across the world. It is not just the big bands that create such cultural capital, but the many smaller touring bands, orchestras and freelancers. They all give British music a unique standing in the world.

I cannot claim to have a record like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), but I can claim to have played the melodica at primary school—and to have played it very badly. However, I want to pay tribute to the cultural hub that is the South Bank Centre, home of the Royal Festival Hall, in my constituency. It supports so many young people from right across my constituency, from that of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, and from many other constituencies. Before covid, it hosted an annual music festival put on by the Lambeth Music Service, which saw over 3,000 young people coming together, performing and playing a range of instruments. That is how we support our young people to get active in music, so that they can fulfil their ambitions and professions. That will not happen if these barriers stay in place.

Not allowing our musicians to travel not only weakens our position internationally but severely impacts the income streams of many performers. After such a desperate few years, our musicians are crying out to perform. They want to do what they know best: they want to play to the crowds; they want to support local businesses; they want to support local residents; they want to be able to employ people to start their careers. That will happen only if we support them from the outset.

It is not right that our musicians are missing out on vital touring opportunities. The Government have to listen. I ask the Minister to listen to all of us—this issue has cross-party support—and to the Musicians' Union and others, and to reach an agreement so that our musicians can travel freely.

3.51 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) for securing the debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I always say that; I do not always mean it. In this case, I wholeheartedly do.

Oh, my goodness—here we are again! The needle is stuck. The arguments go round and round. I realise that I have spoken about this issue in the House six times over the past 12 months; let us hope that this is our farewell tour. We have today heard some very familiar lyrics, and as plaintive as ever. We know that swathes of the creative industry are suffering directly as a result of Brexit, with endless bureaucracy.

Lord Frost, that living rebuke to the unelected Brussels bureaucrat, fessed up at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and told us that the sector had been thrown under the Brexit tour bus mid-negotiation. Even Brexiteers booed metaphorically. As we have heard, only the richest artists can navigate the endless red tape and visa costs. But they are not all Elton. DCMS Ministers were not even a support act in those negotiations.

How did we get to this place? The much-trailed bespoke deal that the UK proposed had no precedent, as Ministers told us at the time. The Incorporated Society of Musicians warned that the EU would not sign up to it. Instead, the EU offered a standard visa waiver, the UK said no, and we found ourselves in this mess—artists abandoned for Brexit zealotry.

As the disastrous consequences of the hard Brexit that the UK Government were imposing on the sector dawned, the then Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hertsmer (Oliver Dowden), sprang into action, setting up the creative and cultural touring project, with the aim of striking 27 separate touring visa deals with EU countries. The group met a grand total of once, in January. When the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), then a Minister, appeared before the DCMS Committee on 16 February, she confirmed, shockingly, that no negotiations with EU member states had begun—lethargy, torpor, lazy chaos. Even today, six EU countries have no visa waiver arrangements with the UK. Carnets and other customs controls are delaying artists and their crews. Contingency days need to be scheduled into tours—needless Brexit bureaucracy, needless Brexit bills.

For wealthy artists, this is manageable, but for our new talent it is not. Music is perhaps these islands' greatest export, but if we lock young artists out of much of Europe, they will miss a vital market. Orchestras, which by their very nature have to transport at times hundreds of instruments, cannot afford to tour. As the Association of British Orchestras says:

"These added costs, delays and administrative burdens result in damage to our international reputation, to cultural exchange, and damage UK orchestras' already fragile business model."

The road haulage sector can be added to the long list of businesses suffering because of Brexit and the UK's disastrous failure to negotiate a decent deal with the EU. As Members will know, without multiple truck stops, there can be no European tours using UK hauliers. Currently, UK vehicles that weigh more than 3.5 tonnes are banned from making two stops before returning home.

That is having a crushing effect on UK haulage. The larger players will be forced to relocate much of their business, as we have heard, away from the UK to EU countries, but smaller players will be forced out of the market altogether. I do not remember seeing huge new visa costs, reams of new red tape and creative sector jobs lost on the side of that Brexit tour bus.

The UK Government are failing to engage with the industry in a constructive way. They continue to pursue headlines. That is what the House of Lords European Affairs Committee concluded last week, expressing the industry's despair in a letter to the world's worst negotiator, Lord Frost. I think we all think it is time for him to step aside and for the UK Government to stop pretending this problem is solved. The Pollyanna Brexit fantasy does not wash with musicians and road hauliers facing real hardship. Listen to the industry, Minister, and let us get this issue properly sorted once and for all.

3.56 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is particularly apt that you are chairing today's debate, as a published author on music, Dr Huq. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) not just for securing the debate, but for all the work she has done. We have seen a breadth of support on this issue, much of which she has corralled—and perhaps carolled—into being.

The creative industry is the fastest growing sector in the UK. There are 2,000 employed musicians, 10,000 freelancers and 2,000 administrative and technical workers. Millions of children and adults are currently undertaking music as an educational pursuit in schools, community settings and elsewhere. This country needs its musicians. We will be able to retain them only when we recognise the problems in the industry and work with them to resolve them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) made a very good point about her former constituent David Bowie, who I saw at Glastonbury. Will we see more artists like him if we do not resolve this issue? I have to say the Brixton Academy is one of the best venues in the country and I have been there many times.

This has been the most difficult time for the music industry in generations. Covid-19 has devastated live performance and meant restrictions on travel as well as performance and teaching work—a point well made by my hon. Friend and gig companion, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I look forward to many future concerts with her—perhaps one or two in the EU if we resolve this issue. The live events sector was the last to reopen after lockdown. Musicians across the country were forced to rely on the complex self-employment income support scheme, their savings or, in some cases, universal credit for income. Many have fallen out of the industry altogether.

We have emerged from lockdown into post-Brexit Britain, which has had a substantial impact on any musician or arts organisation that depends on touring in the EU. In 2019, UK artists played almost four times as many shows across the EU as they did in North America, sustaining an estimated 33,000 British jobs. As a result of the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement, in which the EU and UK failed to reach

agreement on a visa waiver for performers, EU countries now treat UK performers and crew as visa nationals when entering the EU to do paid work. As a result, as we have heard, UK musicians must now navigate 27 different sets of rules for 27 different countries. Add to that the complexity of navigating the various covid restrictions in each country and we have a significant problem.

The Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), rightly made prescient points about the lack of meetings and the lack of progress by Lord Frost. I do not blame the Minister, who is new in post, but I certainly blame Lord Frost.

I am pleased to note that in the past few days there has been a waiver for British musicians in Spain. Spain was a particularly challenging place for musicians to obtain the right to work without a visa; many musicians described the process as incredibly stressful and the amount of financial information required as extremely invasive. Although the issue has now been resolved, it is important to note that its resolution was within the gift of the Spanish Government, after extensive discussions with our music industry leaders. The problems encountered with Spain still exist in other EU countries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who is an accomplished musician and hopefully a future EU touring musician, was right to say that the issue had been made one of immigration. It should never have been about immigration. I am not the shadow immigration Minister; the Minister is not the immigration Minister. This is a matter for the creative and cultural sector.

Even getting across the border is a huge challenge. Carnets, cabotage and post-Brexit customs controls have meant increased time crossing the border, often costing days of touring time. Eurostar is not a designated port, despite the sector's repeated calls for it to be since the EU referendum, so musicians have no option but to fly to Europe rather than take the train. Touring musicians care deeply about the climate. Post COP, why are the Government pushing aviation emissions when it is quicker and easier to go to Europe by train?

Those who travel by road—particularly larger ensembles such as orchestras, which travel with special equipment—face big problems at the border. The Association of British Orchestras says:

“A specific concern for UK orchestras is that so many of the ABO's members operate their own trucks—these are adapted at sizeable expense to accommodate fragile and high value musical instruments—for example humidity and temperature controls, air conditioned, special suspension, special brackets inside to support the instruments.”

It points out that drivers also have specialist knowledge.

In preparation for this debate, I spoke to many musicians and artists who are struggling post Brexit. While I was at COP in Glasgow last week, I met Stuart Murdoch. I am really pleased that his Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), is present; we were both with Stuart at a Belle and Sebastian event last week.

Belle and Sebastian are touring nine European countries in the spring. Stuart told me:

“The new rules cause a significant difficulty for us, our crew and the whole industry. Financially, the additional costs incurred for touring clubs and small venues between 200 and 500 people make it impossible to organise a European Tour without third party support. We tour venues between 1200 and 2000 capacity

[Alex Sobel]

and we can just about make that work. Increased costs of visas, carnets and testing bring a double whammy of Brexit and Coronavirus. The big issue for crew is the 90 days of 180 which could push them out of the industry”—

a point made by the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on music, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), whose leadership on this matter I absolutely rate; I thank him for all his work and look forward to the inquiry that the APPG is launching next week. Stuart also said:

“Passports are retained by Embassies when they are needed to cross borders—even with 2 passports it’s proving near impossible to operate.”

Simon Rix, the bassist in West Yorkshire’s most successful ever band, the Kaiser Chiefs, told me:

“The current legislation post Brexit will make it impossible for the next Adele, Ed Sheeran, Kaiser Chiefs to learn their craft and reach the necessary wider audience that Europe provides. On a personal level it will mean us travelling there less for a number of reasons. Carnet rates at 40% and import duty on merchandise making it harder to make any profit. The merchandise alone would pay for fuel/accommodation for smaller bands and these rules make it financially unsustainable for all but the biggest acts. All this also means less tax income for the country. It would also lead to us outsourcing for crew, lights, PA and trucking meaning less UK jobs and companies moving their business to EU countries.”

Nathan Clark, who runs the best venue in the UK—Brudenell Social Club in my constituency, where I recently saw Sir Tom Jones, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) mentioned in her excellent speech—told me:

“The impact has been twofold. Both in some cancellations of venue bookings due to an artist’s tour not being viable enough across the whole tour, therefore economic cost to us. But the impact of local artists who are now skipping a tour in Europe due to both financial cost, but also mental stress of navigating a tour production, unlike ever before for new aspiring artists exporting their talent.”

There is a risk that when we talk about UK music output, we talk only of major recording and touring artists or highly esteemed orchestras. We can fall into the trap of talking about the industry only as an economic equation, as I did earlier in my speech, but the truth is that much of our cultural offering to the world comes from grassroots artists and freelancers, who are bringing art and culture from every community in the UK.

Matt Holborn is a UK-based violinist, band leader and touring artist. He articulated to me the real threat both to freelance musicians and to music itself, saying,

“as someone who has organised tours and one-off gigs across Europe, Brexit has certainly put a stop to all of it, for the time being. People who are signed to minor record labels...are having to cancel European tours that have been in the planning for years due to the complexity, uncertainty and potential costs...As a freelancer, I have basically written it off now, I haven’t organised with my contacts abroad and haven’t booked in the gigs that I did pre-Brexit and pre Covid. Covid has provided a double whammy, just as you get your head around the visa rules for each country you also have to consider the Covid rules as well.”

We are where we are, and at this time we do not want to start rehashing the debates around Brexit or covid, which might get us nowhere in the short term. In this debate, it is important that we on the Opposition Benches offer practical solutions to this problem, so here are some, and I hope that the Government will take them on board and offer the creative industry some assurance that this situation will get better. I hope that the Minister will respond to these points.

First, let us look at reciprocity. We need to deal with the fact that there are 27 different sets of rules for musicians and music workers to navigate, as compared with the UK’s relatively liberal rules for international musicians to come here through permitted paid engagement and tier 5 visas. We must redress that imbalance and seek reciprocal visa and work permit arrangements for our UK touring artists with the EU. Better yet, the Government should engage with the EU and seek an agreement on a visa waiver for performers, as exists between the EU and other third countries, as well as a waiver on carnets and cabotage. The industry must also have a transparent view of these negotiations through the Government reporting to it and to this House any progress that is being made, particularly in relation to countries that do not offer a cultural exception such as Croatia, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Malta and Cyprus.

Other practical steps would include making Eurostar a designated entry and exit point for carnets and cabotage, as well as agreeing a reciprocal arrangement with the EU for the movement of goods for cultural purposes or, at the very least, an exemption for operating on one’s own account. We need an agreement on truck stops, which may look like an EU-wide cultural exemption; on the movement of specialist vehicles; and on transporting concert equipment and personnel. During the negotiation period, the industry needs interim support to mitigate the large-scale disruption caused by Brexit. As we know, negotiations of this sort can take years, so we need something in place now to ease the concerns of the industry. DCMS must produce clear and accessible guidance for musicians at every level as to what they need, and for where. We need to support our musicians, not bury them in a sea of complex administration that is easy to get wrong. I know that thus far, DCMS has been reluctant to provide guidance, or to support any guidance produced by the sector. That needs to change, and greater partnership work in this area is essential.

In the long term, we need a viable plan for UK artists and crew to continue working in all EU27 countries without costly permits or bureaucracy. We have to look at ways to ease the burdens on European tours through some of the measures I have just outlined, and we also need to discuss and focus on what we can do domestically to provide a thriving cultural arena for musicians and artists. I hope that the Minister can address all those points.

4.7 pm

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and I am really glad to be here to discuss the important issue of touring. I am particularly grateful to the Mother of the House for engaging on this issue and setting out some of the economic, cultural and quality-of-life reasons why music is so important to us all. I certainly agree with her; I do not want the UK to become a cultural Galápagos, and I am confident that it will not. I am very glad that she has also spoken directly to the Secretary of State, and has acknowledged our mutual desire to get movement on this issue. I am also very grateful to her for offering to work in close partnership on this issue, and I shall take her up on that offer.

I appreciate the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). He is an accomplished musician and a great champion for the industry, and I look forward to working with him. He also makes a very important point about the importance of services as well as goods, an issue that I agree is too often overlooked. I also emphasise that the cultural industries are not niche industries but real economic drivers of growth. I also thank right hon. and hon. Members for the quality of the contributions we have heard today, especially from members of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I feel compelled to insert a Tom Jones pun, but the less we talk about sex bombs in this place, the better. *[Laughter.]*

I am also very grateful to the chairman of the DCMS Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who has made a similar point about how important DCMS is as a Department. This is not some Ministry of fun: it too often suffers from that perception, but it is a serious economic Department and it needs to have that place within Government—I would say that now that I have moved, wouldn't I? On the cross-departmental working issue, I reassure Members that I had a former role in the Cabinet Office, so I have contacts there. I understand how some of the European issues work—the committee structures and so on—and I am very keen in this new role to champion DCMS within those committee structures, and make the point that this is an incredibly important issue. I appreciate the comments that have been made about Lord Frost; I have no desire to promote myself to his position, nor would I have the power to, but he is doing some very difficult and complex work, and we appreciate the work that he does for the Government.

As we all know, the UK has left the EU, and it was inevitable following this that there would be changes in how creative professionals toured. I appreciate that the situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has led to uncertainty in the sector, which we are seeking to resolve.

Hon. Members talked about the difference between some of the larger groups, with more money behind them, and the complexity for a smaller band or individual that is touring, and how it can be very difficult to navigate the bureaucratic issues around touring. I very much hear that issue, so throughout this year my Department has been working very hard to support the touring sector by clarifying arrangements, helping the sector to adapt and, where possible, looking at what we can do unilaterally and with EU member states to make things much easier.

Indeed, I had a very good meeting yesterday with representatives of the touring sector; in fact, I think it was the seventh meeting of the touring working group. It was a really productive meeting. I took down a lot of notes myself about some of the issues that I need to raise with ministerial colleagues.

However, this week was also a positive week. We have made good progress with Spain in relation to short-term visas for touring artists, and I will meet the Spanish ambassador next week, when I hope to ensure that we have worked through all the different issues, so that there is not just a headline but we actually have the details in place. I also hope to use this moment of engagement with Spain to encourage the final six countries to follow suit and provide clarity for people on the issue.

It is clear that although some significant issues remain—I am not a Minister to try to gloss over any issues; I want to work through them—I also wish to emphasise that I think the arrangements are more workable than has at times been portrayed. It is important for all of us to try to build confidence in the sector and to say what can be done, as well as highlight some of the issues that remain.

Touring generally involves the movement of people, goods and vehicles. I will initially focus on visas and permits, but I will address some of the other issues in turn, to highlight what my Department has done and is doing to progress these issues, notwithstanding the fact that some issues are within the remit of other Departments.

In the negotiations for the trade and co-operation agreement with the EU, we sought to ensure that touring artists and their support staff did not need work permits to perform in the EU. However, those proposals were rejected. Our recent trade deal with three European Free Trade Association countries, which include those provisions, was based on the same offer, which shows that it is workable.

I am aware that there have been calls for the Government to negotiate a visa waiver; that issue was raised by a number of hon. Members here in Westminster Hall today. We have engaged extensively with the industry on this proposal, but unfortunately we do not think it is viable. It is not Government policy to agree visa waivers, and the EU did not offer a visa waiver for paid activities during the TCA negotiations. What it did offer was a reciprocal visa waiver agreement covering all current member states and any future member states for short stays, for example as a tourist. However, nothing in this proposal would have compelled member states to change their visa regimes for paid engagement, and we think that remains incompatible with our manifesto commitment to take control of our borders. In addition, we do not think that it would meet the sector's needs. We enable visa-free visits by EU citizens, but we wish to retain control of how we apply this policy, and it is important to stress that no major G7 economy has agreed to lock in its visa systems with the EU in this way.

Lord Frost has used the TCA's committee structures to note the importance of this issue to the Government and we have also raised touring during the most recent meeting of the EU-UK's Trade Specialised Committee on Services, Investment and Digital. However, our focus is now on working directly with EU member states and, as we have seen with the good progress this week, it is they who are principally responsible for deciding the rules governing what work UK visitors can undertake in their country.

We first want to address the uncertainty that is felt by some in the sector. It has been apparent that the information available online from member states regarding visa and permit requirements for touring musicians is at times lacking in detail and difficult to follow. As I have said, Spain has been a particular focus, and touring was raised with the Spanish Government by Ministers from across the Government, including by Ministers from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, from the Department for International Trade and from the Cabinet Office, as well as by our ambassador in Madrid. Following that, as I have said, I am very pleased that there has been movement on this issue this week.

Kevin Brennan: I am not sure that the point about the G7 and visa waivers is a particularly strong one. After all, three of the G7 countries are France, Germany and Italy, so they are members of the European Union. The others are Canada, Japan and the United States, which are all many thousands of miles away from the European Union. We are the only G7 country that—as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), said—is 20 miles away from the European Union and in the case of Northern Ireland no miles away. So I would not rely on that point as a very strong argument against locking in our system to a visa waiver agreement in relation to the creative industries.

Julia Lopez: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention and I also appreciate the point he made earlier about wanting to disentangle this issue, so that it is not an immigration issue; this is about the importance of our creative industries and their economic power. I am happy to explore this issue further in response to some of the points that have been made here this afternoon.

Spain is a major market for UK touring artists, and it is one of the big ones that we wanted to solve. The sector has done tremendous work in advance of the announcement. It was a good example of where we can all work together to dismantle remaining barriers.

Twenty-one EU states have now confirmed that they offer visa and work permit-free routes for musicians and creative performers. I recognise that the visa and permit situation for touring has changed since EU exit, and it requires adaptation, but it is important to recognise that those routes exist. We try to provide clarity on gov.uk, so that people understand the arrangements before they have to leave.

At present, six EU member states do not offer visa or work permit-free touring. We have lobbied and will continue to lobby those countries to allow creative professionals to tour easily. As I say, I want to use the Spain breakthrough as a moment to re-engage with those member states. Those countries would benefit from the cultural exchange and the positive financial spill-overs that touring inevitably brings. UK Music, as others have said, has found that in the UK, for every £10 spent on a ticket, £17 goes back into a local economy. Therefore, if those EU member states change their position, we believe that they will find a similar benefit. We have emphasised that point in our engagement.

Ultimately, those are decisions for those six member states, but we are using the diplomatic tools at our disposal to get a good outcome for our industry. It is important for the Government and the sector to work together in that effort. As I said, yesterday I spoke to the sector and to the touring working group, and the Secretary of State engaged earlier this week with Sir Elton John in a productive and positive meeting. As singers and performers know, combining our voices will make the greatest impact. I appreciate the help of everyone in the Chamber in making the case.

To turn to the concerns about the movement of goods and vehicles, there are new requirements, with potential costs and paperwork to do with the ATA carnet documentation, and the movement of merchandise or of instruments made from protected materials. Some of those were raised in the meeting yesterday. The new cabotage rules can limit the movement of vehicles to a

maximum of three stops. As I mentioned at the start of my speech, those changes could be particularly concerning for emerging artists. We have worked across Government to provide clarity on the issues. In many cases, the arrangements are much more workable than is at times reported—that is not to diminish the concerns expressed.

For example, a UK band can pack a van with their instruments, equipment and up to nine people and travel around the EU without being subject to the TCA cabotage restrictions. They may also take their portable instruments and equipment without the need for carnets, and EU rules state that each individual is able to take up to €1,000 of merchandise into the EU to sell on tour without paying customs duties.

In cases when a carnet is required, that is a single document that can be used for multiple items as many times as required in approximately 80 countries around the world for a 12-month period. Carnets have long been a familiar feature of touring. They were needed whenever touring was taking place beyond the EU, including for example to Switzerland, so this is a case of adaptation.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister clarify? When she says that there is one carnet, but everything has to be listed, my understanding is that with a drum kit, someone cannot just say, "Drum kit", but must specify every different cymbal and drum. Is that the case? Even though it is all on one piece of paper, that could still amount to a huge amount of bureaucracy.

Julia Lopez: I appreciate the hon. Lady's point and I am happy to take it away. I am fairly new to this area, so with some DFT issues I will not be able to give clarity on all the details. I am happy to write to her.

I have also been listening to the music sector's concerns about the possible designation of St Pancras as a port designated under CITES—the convention on international trade in endangered species—for artists carrying instruments made of protected materials. The number of CITES ports in the UK has already increased from 24 to 36 over the past year, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Border Force are working together to look at the possibility of St Pancras being added to that list. I am keen to accelerate that.

The Government have engaged with the sector's concerns about the restrictions to do with cabotage and cross-trade that apply to single-use trucks, issuing a call for evidence on options in the summer. It is worth reiterating that during negotiations for the TCA, we proposed specific market access rights for specialist hauliers carrying out tours for cultural events, but the EU did not agree. To help artists navigate such issues, we have developed creative sector-specific landing pages on gov.uk to signpost relevant guidance. We continue to work across the board to encourage updates to guidance and to ensure that rules are clear and accessible.

The UK's cultural and creative industries are an integral part of our economy across the UK, and they play a huge role in a truly global Britain. That point was made by a number of hon. Members today. We continue to support our creative industries through a range of export support programmes, including the music export growth scheme. We also recently launched the export support service, where UK businesses can get answers to practical questions about exporting to Europe. In our

meeting yesterday, a Department for International Trade official highlighted some of the new services available to musicians. These are all with a view to strengthening the international reach and reputation of our creatives, and the benefits they bring to our economy, culture and society. I will continue to work with Departments, the creative industries trade and investment board, and sector representatives, such as UK Music, to see what more can be done to help the industries adapt to these new arrangements with the EU.

To conclude, leaving the EU has led to a number of changes. We recognise the uncertainty and concerns felt by our musicians and the creative sectors, and my Department and the Government as a whole have worked very hard to support them. Across issues relating to the movement of people, goods and vehicles, we have engaged extensively with the sector to understand and grip those concerns and help people adapt. Like hon. Members, I want to see UK creatives tour and perform in the EU not just for our musicians but because they have so much to offer people in member states, and I hope we can make sure that can happen.

4.20 pm

Ms Harman: We have heard incredibly compelling speeches. The Minister will have heard the real sense of frustration and that patience is running out, and I am sure she will take that to heart. Some problems are intractable for Government—this is not one of them. It can be solved, so the Minister should bear that in mind. Some actions that Government take cause a backlash. There will be no backlash when this problem is solved, and she should bear that in mind as well.

I would like to give the Minister a couple of sisterly suggestions, which are very genuinely felt. I suggest that she goes on a European tour, literally going to different European capitals, starting with Brussels, taking her officials with her and talking to her counterparts there. Before she goes, she should download the forms, see what she makes of them and try to fill them in herself. She should engage, as it were, as a musician and then go, as a Minister, to those European capitals, and she will find people willing to help and she will learn more. It will empower her when it comes to dealing with Lord Frost, of whom mention has been made today.

On behalf of Members, the sector, and the Government keeping their promises, she must be quite clear with Lord Frost that he must be part of the solution and not an obstacle to it. The Prime Minister is having enough rows with enough people right now. This issue does not need to be a row if Lord Frost becomes a facilitator rather than an obstruction. It is not always that a junior Minister can do something really meaningful, that will really make a difference, that gives real job satisfaction, and which people will be grateful for. She has that opportunity; I hope she will act very quickly because time is running out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered enabling visa- and permit-free working for musicians in the EU.

4.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 18 November 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Border Operating Model

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Today the Government have published an updated border operating model. This new iteration of the model reflects the revised timetable for the introduction of UK border import controls, as announced on 14 September. It also provides additional material on the detailed implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls and the goods vehicle movement service (GVMS). This update will bring the border operating model in line with other guidance available on gov.uk.

This updated border operating model will continue to help businesses which trade with the EU to understand the approaching new requirements and those which are already in effect. We are also encouraging businesses to access the resources available at <https://gov.uk/guidance/help-and-support-if-your-business-trades-with-the-eu>.

Future updates to the border operating model will be made online through gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-border-operating-model>.

A copy of the updated border operating model has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS401]

TREASURY

Tax Administration and Maintenance Plans

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): Autumn Budget and spending review 2021 announced that the Government would bring forward a further set of plans for tax administration and maintenance later in the autumn, which follows a similar set of announcements published in “Tax policies and consultations: Spring 2021” [CP 404] after the spring budget. I am pleased to confirm that the Government will set out these announcements on 30 November. The tax administration and maintenance Command Paper will outline further steps the Government are taking to further progress tax simplification, tackle non-compliance and ensure our tax system is fit for the modern world.

[HCWS403]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Amesbury Incident 2018

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I am announcing today the Government's decision to establish an inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, to investigate the death of Dawn Sturgess in Amesbury on 8 July 2018, after she was exposed to the nerve agent Novichok.

The inquiry will be chaired by the hon. Baroness Heather Hallett DBE.

Baroness Hallett is a Cross-Bench life peer who was nominated by the Lord Chief Justice to lead the investigation and inquest into Dawn Sturgess's death. In accordance with section 3(1) of the Act, this inquiry will be undertaken by Baroness Hallett alone as Chair.

The Government are establishing an inquiry after careful consideration of advice from Baroness Hallett that this is necessary to permit all relevant evidence to be heard. This is an important step in ensuring that the family of Dawn Sturgess get the answers they need.

The current inquest will be adjourned after the establishment of the inquiry.

I will place a copy of the terms of reference for the inquiry in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inquiry's investigations will be a matter for the Chair. As the sponsoring Department, the Home Office will provide support and ensure that the inquiry has the resources that it needs.

JUSTICE

[HCWS402]

Taking Control of Goods (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Wolfson of Tredegar) has made the following written statement.

“I have today laid before Parliament the statutory instrument, the Taking Control of Goods (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2021. This instrument clarifies the circumstances where a cost equivalent to the VAT incurred on fees may be recovered from a judgment debtor.

The Taking Control of Goods (Fees) Regulations 2014 (“the fees regulations”) set out the fees and disbursements that enforcement agents may recover from judgment debtors when enforcing debts. The regulations were designed to provide fairness, clarity and transparency to allow judgment debtors to check that they had been charged the correct fees.

In March 2020, the Ministry of Justice consulted interested parties about draft guidance on the recovery of VAT on High Court enforcement fees. This set out that, while the judgment creditor is liable for any VAT due, a sum equivalent to the VAT costs may be collected from the judgment debtor where it is correctly a cost of enforcement because the creditor cannot recover it from HMRC.

On 13 October 2021, I issued a final version of that guidance to the High Court Enforcement Officers Association. In response to feedback about the draft, the guidance restricts the recovery of a sum equivalent to VAT from the debtor to cases where a creditor is not VAT registered. This is intended to make it as clear as possible about when the debtor may be asked to pay those costs.

Concern has been raised by some parliamentarians and interested parties about whether the law allows a sum equivalent to VAT costs to be recovered from judgment debtors in cases when it would represent a cost to the creditor and whether it is fair to do so.

While we take the view that the taking control of goods legislation when considered together with the common law position permits the recovery of VAT costs from debtors in this way, we have accepted, however, that this is an area where it would be beneficial to set out the position in regulations to put the matter beyond doubt.

This instrument, therefore, amends the fees regulations to clarify that a cost equivalent to the VAT incurred on enforcement agent fees and disbursements may be recovered from a judgment debtor if the judgment creditor is not VAT registered.

We consider that this instrument strikes the right balance between seeking to ensure that as far as practicable creditors are not left out of pocket as a result of enforcement and that debtors are not over-charged.”

[HCWS404]

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