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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 15 December 2021**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 15 December 2021*

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## ROYAL ASSENT

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

Critical Benchmarks (References and Administrators' Liability) Act 2021

Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) 2021

Armed Forces Act 2021.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### SCOTLAND

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Renewable Energy Generation

1. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on supporting renewable energy generation in Scotland. [904684]

2. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on supporting renewable energy generation in Scotland. [904685]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart):** I regularly discuss issues of importance to Scotland with Ministers, including support for Scotland's renewable energy sector. Our recently published net zero strategy will leverage up to £90 billion of private investment by 2030 across the entire UK.

**Bill Esterson:** Edinburgh based Nova Innovation is a success story in the tidal energy sector. There are plans for tidal energy schemes across the UK, including in the Liverpool city region, with the Mersey tidal barrage. Thanks in large part to the Labour party and the industry, £20 million is now available in the contracts for difference scheme, after years when there was nothing. Will the Minister commit to long-term support for the tidal energy industry, which has so much potential in Scotland, for my constituents in Merseyside and across the UK?

**Iain Stewart:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point to contracts for difference, the fourth round of which was announced at the beginning of this week and is bigger than the other three rounds put together. Scotland has punched above her weight, securing 21% of

the capacity in the previous rounds, and stands well placed—not just in tidal, but right across the spectrum of renewable energy. We are funding this in the short and long term.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The British Government have not backed the Acorn carbon capture and storage cluster, which is vital to Scotland's path to net zero, but are maintaining support for the Cambo oilfield, which would dig up more fossil fuels for years to come. Does the Minister agree that the priority should always be supporting renewable energy generation, not fossil fuels?

**Iain Stewart:** The hon. Gentleman paints a misleading picture of the support that we are giving. I have just outlined to the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) the long-term support that we are providing to the renewables sector. It is wrong to say that we are not backing Acorn. There was a competitive round for two carbon capture and storage schemes. Acorn was a good project; it is a reserved project. We continue to work with it to ensure that it has a fighting chance of securing the next tranche of the carbon capture and storage schemes.

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the remarks made by my hon. Friend with regard to Acorn in my constituency, which is still very much on the table, despite protestations from Opposition Members. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government also provide the oil and gas industry with vital support for the energy transition through the North sea transition deal?

**Iain Stewart:** I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I pay tribute to the tireless work that he does to champion the energy sector, both as a Minister and as a local Member. He is absolutely right; yes, we need to transition to renewable, but we have to be aware of the fact that we will need oil and gas during that transition period—not just for energy, but for the all the other purposes for which fossil fuels are required, such as the production of medicine.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome shadow Minister Liz Twist to her new post.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The post-COP26 message is that Governments have little time to act on climate change. As the Secretary of State is aware, the Acorn carbon capture and storage project has not been given the go-ahead by the UK Government, but it could create 15,000 highly skilled jobs in Scotland and demonstrate that a just transition is feasible. The shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), wrote to the First Minister to encourage her to find a joint solution, but the reply contained more reasons not to work together and grievances than finding a solution for the project. Rather than the UK and Scottish Governments trading insults, will the Secretary of State back the Acorn project by finding a joint funding solution with the Scottish Government?

**Iain Stewart:** I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position. I look forward to our debates in the weeks and months ahead. I can advise her that she should probably

not be too surprised when letters from the Scottish Government are full of grievances—that is par for the course. On Acorn, we do support the scheme. There was a competitive bidding round, where it placed third. It is a reserved project, and we are working with it to ensure that it stands a good chance in the next tranche of the carbon capture and storage scheme.

**Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): Alongside renewable energy, we need to accept our current energy mix with the energy transition. Does the Minister therefore share my anger at the Scottish Government's complete dismissal of the Cambo oilfield, at the expense of oil and gas workers in Scotland and across the country?

**Iain Stewart:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I said a minute ago, we cannot just switch off oil and gas immediately. We want a transition, and this Government are investing significantly, with £160 million in floating wind farms, £20 million for tidal stream and the £285 million next round of contracts for difference, but it is important that we do not lose our domestic oil and gas supply not only for energy, but for the whole range of purposes, including medicine and other vital products.

### Standards Impropriety: The Union

3. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications of allegations of standards impropriety for his Department's work on strengthening the Union. [904686]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** We remain focused on delivering for Scotland within a strong United Kingdom. This can be seen by the scale of our investment, with more than £191 million of UK Government funding being invested directly in community projects across Scotland. This is real devolution in action.

**Steven Bonnar:** People in Scotland have rejected the Tories for the past 50 years. We decisively rejected the Prime Minister's Brexit projects, and we rejected them once again at the last election. Some 65% of people in Scotland say that the Prime Minister is totally corrupt and 65% of people in Scotland also believe he should resign. Given that this coincides with a surge in independence, with more than half of the population in Scotland now supporting independence and the Scottish National party, does the Secretary of State agree that the corruption of the UK Government is driving Scots away from the Union? If he were truly interested in saving the Union, should he not be joining the rest of us in calling for the PM's resignation?

**Mr Jack:** I will stick to the question, which is what we are doing to deliver for the people of Scotland, and I am delighted to answer that question. I will give the hon. Gentleman one example: with the Union connectivity review, there are huge opportunities to improve transport links between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and I am dismayed that Members on the Opposition Benches refuse to support that.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who has left the shadow Scotland team and been significantly demoted in my view to the ministry of fun? I thank him for everything he did in that role. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I do not know what she did in her previous life to deserve it, but she will, as the House has already seen this morning, be wonderful in her new role on the shadow Scotland team, and we welcome her very much.

Every day, there are more and more revelations about the Prime Minister and this Government breaking their own lockdown rules. It truly is one rule for them and one for the rest of us. As the country cancelled Christmas last year, the Prime Minister had a party or three. The Government have lost all moral authority to lead this country, with scandal, sleaze and cronyism writ large. The Scottish Conservative leader was asked three times in the media at the weekend whether he could think of any positive attribute for the PM, and even he could not answer. Can the Secretary of State think of any positive attribute for the Prime Minister? Can he tell me any reason why this morally bankrupt Prime Minister is not a bigger threat to the Union than any nationalist?

**Mr Jack:** Absolutely, without any difficulty, I can. The Prime Minister is a man of optimism, he is a man of vision and he is a man who delivered the trade deal running up to Christmas last year when no one said he could. He showed courage. He showed foresight in investing in the vaccine development, and he has gone on to deliver the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe.

**Ian Murray:** I congratulate the Secretary of State on his reading ability, and I notice that he did not use the word "honesty"—there's a surprise. I know the Secretary of State has cancelled his own Christmas party this year, so I look forward to seeing the photographs from it in the press shortly.

A major strength of the Union is of course the pooling and sharing of resources. The First Minister has announced a raft of new covid guidance this week that has devastated the hospitality trade. At the same time, she has offered pitiful financial support and criticised the UK Government for not providing funds. Such sectors want our two Governments to work together: they need our help. A hospitality business in my constituency sent me an email last night, saying:

"my customers have been driven away so we won't survive these latest restrictions without government support. We always need a good festive season to see us through the winter. Where is the financial support?"

Why can the UK and Scottish Governments not work together to provide the financial support that these hospitality businesses deserve and need?

**Mr Jack:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very serious point. Hospitality is under a lot of pressure across the United Kingdom, not least in Scotland. The Treasury announced yesterday afternoon, just ahead of the First Minister's statement, that we were giving the Scottish Government certainty over their finances, and that is the first point I would make. What the Scottish Government have failed to do is set out what measures they believe are right for Scotland and how much these would cost, and that is an important thing to understand. They

have also failed to explain how they cannot afford to act on their own, given that they have a record settlement this year of over £41 billion of block grant—the highest block grant settlement in real terms since devolution began.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Following on from the shadow Secretary of State, could I ask the Secretary of State whether he was invited to any of these parties in Downing Street and whether he had any knowledge of these parties?

**Mr Jack:** If the hon. Lady had been at the Scottish Affairs Committee last Monday, when I was one of the witnesses—or if she had read the briefing from that—she would know that I was asked that question by the Chairman, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and I answered very clearly that, first, I had no knowledge of the parties, and secondly, I was not at any of them.

**Mhairi Black:** I am sorry for the floundering social life of the Secretary of State, but if I could, I will move on to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) made. We talk about the Prime Minister's vision, but does that vision not go against what the majority of people in Scotland voted for, given that they are against Brexit, the majority are against the Prime Minister and they are against the Conservatives? So is it not the case that the best chance this Prime Minister has of saving the Union and rebuilding trust in our covid response is by resigning?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am going to allow that, but we really need to be within the scope of the question. It is party politics, and I do not want us to get into that, but it is Christmas, so I am sure the Secretary of State will want to answer.

**Mr Jack:** You are right, Mr Speaker. I would say again to the hon. Lady, if we are talking about majorities, that the First Minister failed to get a majority in May. Let us be clear that less than a third of Scots voted for her in May. Our focus, and the Prime Minister's focus, is on fighting this pandemic and then recovery from this pandemic, and on bringing forward great things for Scotland, such as the Union connectivity review, freeports and investing directly with local authorities structural funds.

### Cross-border Transport Connectivity

4. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on improving transport connections between Scotland and the rest of the UK. [904688]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart):** I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues about cross-border connectivity. Sir Peter Hendy's report, published last month, covers a wide range of solutions spanning all transport modes across the United Kingdom. We will take time to consider carefully all the recommendations in the report, and we will publish our response in the new year.

**Dr Davies:** Investing in zero-emission technologies is essential for future public transport connections. Scotland, as well as other parts of the country, is of course an important manufacturing base for buses. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government are working hard to ensure that British manufacturing leads the way in fulfilling our world-leading commitments to introduce zero-emission buses?

**Iain Stewart:** I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. We remain committed to supporting the introduction of 4,000 zero-emission buses and to achieving a zero-emission bus fleet. I think I am right in saying that transport is now the biggest single contributor in this country to carbon emissions, so it is absolutely right that we back our domestic industry to help deliver these zero-emission buses.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us bring in the shy Member—Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I ask the Minister this question? Now that the bridge between Scotland and Northern Ireland has been laid to bed at long last, can the Minister indicate what will be done to improve the roads from Larne to Stranraer and further on, because it is important for us in Northern Ireland, where we have tourism and we have business, that the roads are up to a certain standard? What has been done to improve those?

**Iain Stewart:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important question. The thinking behind the connectivity review is that we look at transport connections right across the UK. The A75 from Stranraer and Cairnryan to the motorway network is in desperate need of an upgrade, and that was one of the central recommendations of Sir Peter's report. We absolutely see that as an important corridor.

### Oil and Gas Sector

5. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the oil and gas sector in Scotland. [904689]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** My ministerial colleagues and I regularly discuss oil and gas with fellow Government Ministers and stakeholders. The oil and gas industry is hugely important to north-east Scotland, and most recently the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my noble Friend Lord Offord attended the North Sea Transition Forum, alongside the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, regulators, and representatives from the oil and gas industry.

**Andrew Jones:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. In the transition period to our net-zero future, we will still need oil and gas for domestic use. What role does the Secretary of State see for UK domestic production to meet that need, because the Scottish economy is well poised to deliver it?

**Mr Jack:** My hon. Friend is right: we will continue to need oil and gas as we transition to net zero. Developing our own supplies reduces reliance on imports that are

produced to less rigorous environmental standards. It will also protect jobs in our oil and gas sector during our transition. Comments by the Scottish Government on this have been, by turn, disgraceful and depressing. As Sir Ian Wood, one of the most respected authorities in the industry said, those Scottish Government Ministers are creating an “adverse investment environment”, to which I would add only this: careless talk costs livelihoods.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State aware of the evidence given to the Scottish Parliament’s Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee by Professor Stuart Haszeldine, who said that there was no advantage to the Acorn project having been given reserve bidder status, as that merely means “a lot of meetings”, and requires companies to “run on the spot with very little or no funding”?

Is the professor wrong in his assessment, and if so, would the right hon. Gentleman be good enough to tell us why?

**Mr Jack:** Acorn is the reserve for this round, and we would like it to be expedited in the next wave. We have met many of the stakeholders involved in the project, and they have agreed that if we can accelerate it to 2023, they can improve the bid and the Government can include it in the next wave. That is very much our focus.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the complete abandonment of north-east oil and gas workers by the First Minister of Scotland is an absolute disgrace? She did not call for an end just to Cambo; it was to all further exploration in the North sea. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this Government stand full square behind the industry and workers in the north-east, unlike the Scottish Government?

**Mr Jack:** I would add that the remark of the First Minister’s Minister, the Green party MSP, who said that only “hard-right extremists” want to explore oil, was also disgraceful. Even when we get to 2050, we will need oil for 20% of our power, and we will need gas for 15%, and for producing blue hydrogen. We will need that oil not just for power, but for important things such as the petrochemicals industry and for making instruments for the NHS. It is ridiculous to think that we can just turn off the taps and not destroy our economy.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): This is not just about what we extract from the North sea; it is also about what we put back in. That is why the Acorn project is fundamental. The Secretary of State mentioned Sir Ian Wood and his views on the oil and gas sector, but he will also be cognisant of Sir Ian Wood’s views about his Government’s decision to turn their back on Acorn. Will the Secretary of State finally admit to regretting the decision of his colleagues?

**Mr Jack:** I have discussed this matter with Sir Ian Wood, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman reflects his views fairly. Sir Ian Wood understands and agrees with us that the bid can be improved. To be clear, the difference between Acorn and Humberside, Teesside and Merseyside, was that Humberside, Teesside and Merseyside have a huge hinterland of industrial carbon.

Acorn was bringing the carbon from all parts of the UK and/or Europe to make the bid work. We are working on how to get more industrial carbon into the project, to make it more viable and to expedite it for 2023.

### Army Restructuring

6. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Scotland of plans to restructure the British Army. [904691]

13. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Scotland of plans to restructure the British Army. [904698]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** My office and I have regular discussions with the Ministry of Defence on all matters relating to defence in Scotland, including the latest plans to modernise and restructure the Army. I was pleased that the review included plans for the Army to expand its footprint in Scotland; it is going from six to seven units, and Scotland will have a greater proportion of the Army than today.

While I have the opportunity, I would also like to thank our fantastic British armed forces who are currently supporting the booster programme in Scotland. The Secretary of State for Defence announced yesterday that a further 100 military personnel will support the vital booster campaign, and today the MOD has announced that another 80 medics are going to three NHS boards in Scotland. That means that over 400 military personnel are supporting Scotland’s health services.

**Scott Benton:** Does the Secretary of State agree that the “Future Soldier” paper shows just how important defence is to Scotland and Scotland is to the defence of the UK and our allies, and does he share my enthusiasm that it delivers £355 million-worth of investment in the Army estate in Scotland?

**Mr Jack:** Absolutely. Scotland plays a vital role in the defence of the UK. The Army’s future soldier restructuring programme is great news for Scotland. Not only will it deliver £355 million of investment in the Army’s Scottish estate, as my hon. Friend pointed out, but Scotland will gain a major unit and, as I said, we will see a greater proportion of the British Army in Scotland.

**Tom Randall:** Soldiers from Scotland have had a central role in the armed forces over many centuries, from the charge of the Scots Greys at Waterloo, to the western front, to helping roll out our vaccine programme. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that that proud central role will continue as strongly as ever in Scotland following any restructuring?

**Mr Jack:** Under the future soldier review, the Army’s footprint in Scotland will be stronger than ever, recognising the immense contribution that Scottish servicemen and women make to the British Army. I am pleased that Scottish troops will continue the tradition, and they will lead the new Ranger Regiment, deploying alongside partner forces to counter extremist organisations and hostile state threats.

### Scottish Economy: Support

7. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent steps the Government have taken to help support the Scottish economy. [904692]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** The Budget and the spending review provide the largest annual block grant to the devolved Administration in Scotland since the Scotland Act 1998. Throughout the pandemic we have provided significant support, including through our furlough and self-employment schemes and additional support to businesses, on top of an extra £14.5 billion for the Scottish Government. We are also investing in new local infrastructure and regeneration projects through the levelling-up fund and community ownership fund, alongside the existing £1.5 billion investment in Scottish city and growth deals.

**Chris Elmore:** The Scottish Budget last week should have marked the start of an ambitious recovery plan for Scotland, but instead it is a missed opportunity that will not deliver the recovery Scotland needs. Similarly, the UK Government's Budget offered tax cuts for bankers on business class flights but nowhere near enough for hard-working families across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Does the Secretary of State accept that both the Scottish and UK Governments must go further so we can get the economy firing on all cylinders?

**Mr Jack:** I accept that both Governments need to work together—the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that—but the UK Government are doing their bit, with a block grant of £41.3 billion, £4.6 billion higher than last year and the highest since devolution began; £14.5 billion of covid funding since the pandemic began; a furlough scheme supporting over 900,000 jobs in Scotland, and grants and loans to businesses totalling over £4 billion. The UK Government are doing exactly what they need to do to support the Scottish economy.

### Tidal Power

8. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of support for the Scottish tidal power sector. [904693]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart):** I am delighted that the Government recently announced a new £20 million ringfenced allocation for tidal stream technology as part of the new contracts for difference round. That will enable Scotland to take advantage of the huge potential that exists to develop tidal stream technology.

**Sally-Ann Hart:** The Scottish Affairs Committee visited Orkney a few months ago when collating evidence for its report on renewable energy. We were so impressed with the tidal stream technology, which is less expensive than tidal lagoon barrage technology. I am delighted that the renewable energy auction will include for the first time a ring fence for tidal stream power. How will that turbocharge the potential for this type of renewable energy in Scotland?

**Iain Stewart:** I am very glad that my hon. Friend and her colleagues on the Committee had the opportunity to visit Orkney. I also visited Orkney in August and was hugely impressed by the innovation that is going on

there. The principle behind contracts for difference is that it gives the renewables sector the confidence to invest in these long-term technologies. I believe Scotland as a whole, and Orkney in particular, will be at the forefront of that.

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on [parliamentlive.tv](http://parliamentlive.tv).

### PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

#### Engagements

Q1. [904804] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 December.

**The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson):** I am sure the whole House will want to join me in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and all members of staff—and indeed all Members—a merry Christmas and a happy new year. Members from across the House will also want to join me in sending our warmest wishes to all our armed forces, all members of the emergency services and all health and care workers, especially those who will be working over Christmas, not least on our national mission to get boosted now.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Nick Smith:** I congratulate the Prime Minister and his wife on the birth of their baby daughter. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Last week was crime week. Was it a success for you, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Yes, it was, because last week we showed that we are not only the party that is putting in the resources to fight crime, with 10,000 more police already recruited, but the party that is finally getting tough on the drugs gangs that blight the lives of children and communities up and down this country. We will not tolerate middle-class drug use any more than any other kind of drug use.

Q5. [904809] **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): May I start by wishing the Prime Minister and his family a happy Christmas? Last Christmas, I joined the charity Sewa Day in wrapping Christmas presents at Durga Bhawan Temple. I delivered a small number of the thousands of gifts the Hindu community had donated for children and adults across Sandwell. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Sewa Day, Deepak, Madhu and Reena, who I will be joining again this Friday at West Bromwich Shree Krishna Mandir?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising the work of Sewa Day and all the people of the West Bromwich Hindu community, who make an incredible contribution to this country. I am delighted that the charity is again distributing donated gifts. Thank you to everyone involved, particularly my hon. Friend for her efforts.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Can I also wish you, Mr Speaker, everybody who works in this House and all Members a merry Christmas and a happy new year? Can I also send my congratulations to the Prime Minister and his wife on the birth of their daughter, and join the Prime Minister in supporting our armed forces and all those on the front line?

There were 200,000 omicron infections on Monday. That is doubling every two or three days and the NHS could be overwhelmed, so I want to start by encouraging everyone listening to this session to get their jabs and boosters. It is the best way to protect themselves, the NHS and their loved ones. Given the seriousness of the situation, does the Prime Minister agree that the 100 Conservative Members who voted against plan B measures last night, voted against steps that are necessary to protect the NHS and to protect lives?

**The Prime Minister:** The Government are taking a balanced and proportionate approach to dealing with the pandemic. The House voted through plan B with Conservative votes and we will continue with the massive booster roll-out, to which the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a late convert. Since Friday, when I decided that we had to accelerate the booster programme in view of the data about omicron, we have cut the timetable in half. Monday was the biggest vaccination Monday in the history of this country, and yesterday was the second biggest vaccination achievement by the NHS ever. More than 500,000 jabs were delivered and the campaign continues to grow. I thank absolutely everybody involved and I thank all the British public for coming forward to get boosted now.

**Keir Starmer:** We all hope that, combined with the booster programme, plan B will be sufficient to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. Nobody wants to see further restrictions, but the Prime Minister has rightly not ruled anything out, so can I take this opportunity to make it clear to him that, if further votes are needed to save lives and protect the NHS, Labour MPs will follow my leadership and we will always put the national interest first? Can I ask the Prime Minister to get his house in order so he can say the same about the Members behind him?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, if further measures are needed, as the House will understand—if further regulation is needed—of course this House will have a further say. As for hon. Members following the right hon. and learned Gentleman's leadership, they wobble-wobbled over plan B, they wobble-wobbled over quarantine, and if we had listened to him, we would not even have the vaccine roll-out because we would have remained in the European Medicines Agency—[*Interruption.*] It is true. And we would not have opened up on 19 July; we would have remained in lockdown. That is the reality.

**Keir Starmer:** Let me put that straight back in its box: the Labour party showed the leadership yesterday that the Prime Minister lacks. If it was not for Labour votes, his Government would not have been able to introduce the vital health measures we need to save lives and protect the NHS—so weak is his leadership. His own MPs were wrong to vote against basic public health measures, but I can understand why they are angry with him. After all, the Health Secretary said this

summer that relaxations of restrictions were “irreversible”. They were not. [*Interruption.*] Only last week—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have been tempted by both hon. Members who are interrupting a little too much. It is Christmas—that is the only reason you are going to remain here.

**Keir Starmer:** Only last week, the Government were saying that plan B measures were not required. They are. Just like “the rail revolution for the north”, “no one will have to sell their homes for social care” and “no tax rises”, it is overpromise after overpromise until reality catches up. Does the Prime Minister understand why his own MPs no longer trust him?

**The Prime Minister:** There he goes again—the right hon. and learned Gentleman comes to this House pompously claiming that he wants to rise above party politics and support the efforts of the nation in delivering the vaccine roll-out, and then he talks endlessly about party politics and plays political games. What the people of this country can see is that, as a result of what this Government have done, with the tough decisions that we have taken—which he ducked—to deliver the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe and now the fastest booster roll-out, we have the fastest growing economy in the G7 and 500,000 more jobs today than there were when the pandemic began. That is Conservative Government in action. We deliver—they complain.

**Keir Starmer:** The only person undermining public confidence is sitting right there opposite me. Here is the problem: his MPs are wrong to vote against basic public health measures, but they are not wrong to distrust him. Last week, the Conservative right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) asked:

“Why should people at home, listening to the Prime Minister...do things that people working in...Downing Street are not prepared to do?”—

a Tory MP. The Conservative hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) last week asked:

“Will he give me any reason at all why I should not tell my constituents to treat these new rules...the same way that...Downing Street treated last year's rules?”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 499-500.]

The Prime Minister has had a week to come up with a good answer. Has he done so?

**The Prime Minister:** The answer is very, very clear. It is there in what the public are doing, because they can see that the Government are getting on with delivering on their priorities, not just on the economy, but above all on delivering the fastest booster roll-out in Europe. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is fond of these European comparisons, but we have done almost double the percentage of any other European country. We have boosted 86% of the over-80s in this country and 91% of those aged 75 to 79. That is an astonishing achievement. I think that that is what the people of this country are focused on, rather than the partisan trivia that he continually raises when frankly he has a case to answer himself.

**Keir Starmer:** I think that is a no: the Prime Minister has not come up with a good answer. For weeks, he has claimed that no rules were broken. He claims that he did not know what was happening in his own house last

Christmas. I do not believe him, his MPs do not believe him and nor do the British public. He is taking the public for fools and it is becoming dangerous, because from today, anyone who tests positive for coronavirus faces a second Christmas in isolation. It will be heartbreaking for families across the country.

The message from the Government has to be “We know that following the rules won’t be easy this Christmas, but it is necessary.” Can the Prime Minister not see that he has no hope of regaining the moral authority to deliver that difficult message if he cannot be straight with the British public about the rule breaking in Downing Street last Christmas?

**The Prime Minister:** I have repeatedly answered that question before. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, a report is being delivered to me by the Cabinet Secretary into exactly what went on. The right hon. and learned Gentleman might explain why there are pictures of him quaffing beer—we have not heard him do so.

I think that what the British public want us all to do, frankly, is focus on the matter in hand and continue to deliver the vaccine roll-out in the way that we are doing. I think that it is an absolutely fantastic thing that people are now coming forward in the way that they are: 45% of people over 18 have now had a vaccine. I thank our amazing staff, I thank the NHS, I thank all the GPs—

**Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** Give them a pay rise, then.

**The Prime Minister:** Well, you blocked the investment in them. Labour Members wouldn’t vote for investment in our NHS—they wouldn’t do it.

I thank NHS staff for what they are doing. I can tell the House that we are now speeding things up by allowing people to avoid the 15-minute delay after they have been vaccinated, which I hope will encourage even more people to come forward.

**Keir Starmer:** The virus is spreading once again, and lives and livelihoods are at risk. The British public are looking for a Prime Minister with the trust and the authority to lead Britain through the crisis. Instead, we are burdened with the worst possible Prime Minister at the worst possible time. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members are shouting now. Where were they in the Lobby last night?

The Prime Minister’s own MPs have had enough. They will not defend him, they will not turn up to support him, and they will not vote for basic public health measures if he proposes them. At this time of national effort, the Labour party has stood up, shown the leadership that the Prime Minister cannot show, and put the health and security of the British people first. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is silly, because I cannot hear the question. I will hear the question. *[Interruption.]* I do not think that we need any more help from the Government Front Bench. I am dealing with this corner first.

I understand that this is the last PMQs and we will not be back till the new year, but I need to hear the question. It may take a long time, but I will hear it. So, please: I want to get through questions and I want you all to get away for Christmas. At this rate, you won’t.

**Keir Starmer:** The Prime Minister is so weak that, without Labour votes last night, vital public health measures would not have got through—

**The Prime Minister:** Not true.

**Keir Starmer:** The Prime Minister says it is not true—he is so socially distanced from the truth that he thinks that is not true. I do not know where to start. We had better press on. We cannot go on with a Prime Minister who is too weak to lead. Will he take time this Christmas to look in the mirror and ask himself whether he has the trust and authority lead this country?

**The Prime Minister:** We won that vote last night with Conservative votes, as I have told the House. I respect the feelings and anxieties that colleagues have, of course I do. I respect and understand the legitimate anxieties they have about restrictions on their liberty and the liberty of people, but I believe the approach that we are taking is balanced and proportionate and right for this country.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about leadership. Let me tell the House about some of the tough decisions that I have had to take. I had to decide to stay out of the European ventilator scheme so that we had our own ventilator channels, which he then ridiculously attacked. I decided to go ahead with the vaccine roll-out, ahead of the rest of Europe, which would have been impossible if we had listened to him. I decided to go ahead with opening up our society and our economy on 19 July, which he opposed.

Never forget that if we had listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman we would not now have the fastest economic growth of the G7. It is because we took those courageous steps that we now have 500,000 more people in work than there were when the pandemic began, and yesterday I saw 1.2 million job vacancies. That is what Conservative Governments do. They create employment and they create business opportunities. Above all, we vaccinate, they vacillate. They jabber, we jab. They play party politics, and we get on with the job.

**Hon. Members:** More! More!

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am absolutely amazed that some of you wanted to catch my eye. Obviously you do not now. Thanks for that—it is making my life easier. Do not be shocked when I do not call you to put that special question today.

Let us come to the man of the moment, Dr Liam Fox.

**Q6. [904810] Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con):** As we look forward to 2022, one of the dates that stands out for me is 21 March, which will be World Down Syndrome Day. In thanking the Government, and indeed all parties in the House, for their support for the Down Syndrome Bill, may I ask the Prime Minister if he will give his personal commitment to ensuring that we get that Bill on to the statute book before World Down Syndrome Day, so that we can be the first country in the world to do so? We talk about global Britain, but that cannot just be about trade and diplomacy; it must also be about values. Would that not be a great place for Britain to start?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is a wonderful campaigner on this issue, and he is completely right about Down's syndrome people. They can have poorer health outcomes, but I know that the Bill aims to improve life outcomes for people with Down's syndrome. We are pleased to support it and we will do whatever we can to ensure the prompt progress of this Bill.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I wish you, all your staff and all Members of the House a merry Christmas and a guid new year when it comes. I also send my thanks to those on the frontline in the emergency services and armed forces for everything they have done to get us through this year.

The public understand the threat that omicron poses to all our people and to our NHS. As we saw from last night's vote, the Tories might be privileged enough to live in denial about this danger, but the rest of us have a responsibility to live in the real world. That means increasing public health measures and increasing financial support for businesses and workers.

The Scottish Government are delivering £100 million from our fixed budget to support businesses, but we all know that more is needed. Yesterday, the UK Government put out a press release saying that new financial support was coming, but last night the Treasury U-turned, saying that no new money was available. So, Prime Minister, which is it? Is there any new money to support businesses or was it all just smoke and mirrors once again?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I share some of the views he expressed about the importance of being vigilant about omicron. It is good that he set that out. I think it important that we continue to work with the Scottish Administration, as we do, to help everybody through this.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there is more money through Barnett consequentials, and there are also further powers under the existing devolutionary settlement for the Scottish Administration to raise money if they choose to—they have that option—but we will of course continue our discussions with them.

**Ian Blackford:** That simply was not an answer, and it just confirms that it is all smoke and mirrors. There was no new money for Scotland. Once again, the Prime Minister cannot trust a word that this Prime Minister says—[*Interruption.*] Dodgy dealings on renovations and his distant relationship with the truth—all of it has left him weak.

Last night, this UK Government struggled to get measures through the House that Scotland has had for months. A Prime Minister who cannot do what is needed to protect the public is no Prime Minister at all. No one wants further restrictions, but Scotland cannot afford to be hamstrung if the Prime Minister cannot act because he has 99 problems sitting behind him. Will he give the devolved Governments the powers and the financial support that we need to protect our people?

**The Prime Minister:** I think we are going to need a bigger waistcoat to contain the synthetic indignation of the right hon. Gentleman, quite frankly. I can tell him that the Scottish Administration have the powers, and, moreover, that we have delivered a record settlement for Scotland of £41 billion. But let me also say, in all

friendship with the right hon. Gentleman—with whom I am actually quite cordial behind the scenes—that we will work with the Scottish Government to make sure that we get through this thing together.

Q7. [904812] **Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Stroke is the leading cause of adult disability in the United Kingdom. It is the fourth largest killer. We have made much progress but regrettably, in the last couple of years, key treatments such as thrombectomy, thrombolysis and timely interventions in hospital have stalled and gone backwards. In particular, most stroke survivors receive less than half the recommended levels of rehabilitation. As the Prime Minister knows, that is something that my own family have experienced. Can we urgently look towards upgrading the very good national stroke plan to a fully fledged national strategy for stroke, with a Minister responsible for it and a dedicated team of officials in the Department to roll it out?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He and I have discussed before his own personal reasons for caring so much about this issue, and I understand and sympathise deeply with what he has said. That is one the reasons why I want to make sure that we do invest enough in this. There are 20 integrated stroke networks in England already, but we want to increase their capacity about tenfold.

I shall be happy to ensure that my hon. Friend has the right meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss the matter. This is why it is so important that we invest now in our NHS in the way that we are—and what a pity that that essential measure could not be supported by the Labour party.

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): The Prime Minister's actions over the last number of months have absolutely eroded public confidence at the worst possible time, during a public health crisis. Excusing rule-breaking by his own MPs, ignoring rule-breaking in his own house—he cannot even lead Tory MPs to vote for his public health guidance, so how can he expect to lead anybody else? Surely it is now time for him to do the right thing, the only thing left to him to restore public confidence, and resign.

**The Prime Minister:** No, Mr Speaker, I am going to get on with protecting the public of this country, making sure that we get through this pandemic together as one United Kingdom, and making sure that we protect trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the way that I know the hon. Gentleman would want it protected.

Q9. [904814] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): In East Anglia, there are, on the one hand, tremendous opportunities in such sectors as low-carbon energy and sustainable fishing, and yet, on the other hand, significant challenges with deep pockets of deprivation, particularly in coastal communities. I acknowledge the investment that has been made, but there is a concern locally that the Government are yet to comprehend the scale of the opportunity that our region has to be a global exemplar in new and revitalised industries, and in doing so to bring transformative and long-term benefits to local people. Will my right hon. Friend meet

me and other East Anglian MPs so that together we can put in place a strategy to realise the full potential of the east of England?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, but I also want to say that I understand completely the massive opportunity and the potential that exists in those coastal communities. That is why we are already investing £120 million in five new town deals, including for Lowestoft. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up will want to be taking my hon. Friend's points on board as we bring forward the levelling up White Paper in the new year.

Q2. [904805] **Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister believe that it is the damage being caused by Brexit, his litany of broken promises, his condoning of Conservative party corruption, or just simply his complicity in lockdown-busting Christmas parties and quizzes that has caused the public to so dramatically, so rapidly, lose faith in his leadership?

**The Prime Minister:** What I observe is that actually it was our freedom from the rules of the European Union that enabled us to deliver the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe and that has enabled us to have the fastest economic growth in the G7. That is of massive benefit to each and every one of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, and I think he should acknowledge that point.

Q10. [904815] **Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): One of the significant achievements of this Government is the work they have done with local authorities to tackle rough sleeping. Five years ago, 36 people were sleeping rough in the Newbury area; this Christmas, West Berkshire Council has reduced that to zero. But it can only sustain that success with the help of additional support services to tackle the complex causes of homelessness. What action will the Government take through their new 10-year drugs strategy to intercept the link between addiction and life on the streets?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is completely right to draw the link between drug addiction and rough sleeping. That is why our drugs strategy is so absolutely vital for tackling this problem. I also want to thank local councils and everybody involved in the Everyone In campaign. Homelessness and rough sleeping are a blight and a disgrace—a shame for our society. I am proud to say that our rough sleeping snapshot shows that levels have fallen by 43% since 2017, although clearly, as we come out of the pandemic in the next year or so, we must make sure that we continue to reduce rough sleeping. It remains an absolute priority for this Government.

Q3. [904806] **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): With the emergence of the omicron variant and the rising number of covid infections, more and more people are being asked to self-isolate or stay at home to look after isolating children. I have been contacted by people in Ceredigion who have been excluded from isolation support payments as they are not in receipt of benefits or are above the weekly earnings threshold. Will the Prime Minister act urgently to increase statutory sick pay, which currently stands at a mere £96.35 a week, so

that people in this position do not have to choose between following public health regulations and putting food on the table?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. I understand the difficulty that some families will find themselves in. We want to look after everybody throughout the pandemic. That is why we have done things like lifting the living wage in the way we have and increasing the funds available for childcare, but also making sure that councils have an extra hardship fund of half a billion pounds to help families of the kind that he describes through this winter.

Q12. [904817] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Following confirmation of the Crewe to Manchester leg of High Speed 2, the Alstom factory in Crewe winning an HS2 rolling stock contract and Crewe's long history at the heart of our railway industry, does the Prime Minister agree that Crewe is a strong contender for the headquarters of Great British Railways? Can he tell me when the process to choose a location for the new HQ will start?

**The Prime Minister:** My brief says I should be very careful of what I say. I have no doubt that Crewe is a strong contender, but further details of the competition will be announced in the coming weeks. Expressions of interest from places such as Crewe will be very welcome.

Q4. [904808] **Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): After inquest verdicts that the 97 people who died in the Hillsborough disaster were unlawfully killed, the right hon. Gentleman stood for election to this House on a manifesto that included legislating to introduce a public advocate. Why, then, have his Government repeatedly blocked my Public Advocate Bill, which has cross-party support and would prevent families bereaved by public disasters from ever again having to endure what the Hillsborough families have had to cope with over the past 32 years? Is it an oversight or yet another broken promise?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Lady and, no, we do recognise the importance of putting the bereaved, such as the bereaved of Hillsborough, at the heart of investigations. In certain circumstances funding may be available for representation of the bereaved at a public inquiry or interest. We are considering what steps should be taken, and I will ensure she has a meeting with the relevant Home Office Minister as soon as possible.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): As we see Russian forces massing on the Ukrainian border, can we be reminded that Russia is also continuing to carry out cyber-attacks, to attempt assassinations, to use gas as a political weapon, to illegally hold territory in Crimea and Georgia, to intimidate the west and to attempt to interfere in western elections? How much do the Government understand that President Putin is conducting a hybrid war against the west, and how are they responding?

**The Prime Minister:** I am afraid my hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says. He is right to stress the particular urgency of the situation, and he is right in what he says about hybrid warfare and all the other interventions. We face a particular crisis on the border

with Ukraine, where Russian troops have been massing for some time, as the House knows. I told President Putin on Monday that I think everybody in the G7 and more widely is agreed that, if Russia were so rash and mad as to engage in an invasion of the sovereign territory of Ukraine, an extremely tough package of economic sanctions would be mounted by the UK and our friends around the world. Of course, there would also be support for Ukraine, and there would inevitably be a build-up of NATO forces in the periphery regions. As I told President Putin, I believe any such action would be catastrophic not just for Russia and Ukraine but for the world.

Q8. [904813] **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): The Prime Minister made an address to the nation on Sunday about covid booster jabs, and he said that every eligible adult

“will have the chance to get their booster before the New Year.”

That is roughly two weeks away. However, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and our national health leaders have said otherwise. We know that those who deliver our health service were not adequately consulted and that the infrastructure to deliver it was not prepared. Will this be yet another broken promise, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, this is a massive national effort and, yes, it will be incredibly hard to achieve, but do I believe that our NHS, our GPs and our volunteers can do it? Yes, I do. That is the spirit in which the hon. Lady and the whole House should approach it. Rather than talking down our approach, I advise all Labour Members and all colleagues in this House to tell our constituents to get boosted now.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), with its emphasis on global Britain and partnership in standing up to autocracies. Does he therefore share my concern about reports that I have just got from the Foreign Office of a staff cut of 10% across the board? How is that compatible with global Britain?

**The Prime Minister:** We are investing massively in overseas aid—this country is spending £10 billion a year on overseas aid. I think that if you look at what we are doing on aid, on the Foreign Office and on Defence, we are, at £54 billion, the biggest spender on overseas activities of any country in Europe. My hon. Friend is an expert on foreign affairs, but I am assured by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary that the information that has recently trickled into his ears is fake news.

Q11. [904816] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Transport for London faces serious financial difficulties solely due to the pandemic causing a collapse in fares income. Emergency covid funding to TfL expires the day after tomorrow. Prior to the pandemic, the Mayor of London spent four years improving TfL's finances after—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There will be a nightmare in a moment. Can I just say that we want to get through the questions? I was hoping to get some extra people in, and you are not helping me do so. Come on in, Ruth Cadbury.

**Ruth Cadbury:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Prior to the pandemic, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, spent four years improving TfL's finances after his predecessor inexplicably bargained away TfL's £700 million annual Government grant. By failing to meet the Mayor on extending the emergency covid grant, the Government are putting the city's economy and environment at risk. Rail companies have had additional support. Will the Prime Minister instruct silent Shapps to meet the Mayor immediately so that buses and tubes can continue to keep London moving from Friday?

**The Prime Minister:** This happens to be one of the subjects that I know more about than probably anybody else in the House. When I was Mayor and chairman of Transport for London, we had our finances in balance because I ran a responsible fares policy. When I left the mayoralty, we had Crossrail in surplus and our reserves in surplus. Actually, what happened was that the Labour Mayor of London embarked on a reckless, unfunded fares policy, cutting fares recklessly so as to leave a huge black hole in Transport for London's finances. Yes, we have the greatest capital—[*Interruption.*] We will of course help the stricken Labour Mayor in any way that we can, but the blame lies fairly and squarely with City Hall.

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): I wish all our constituents across the country a merry Christmas and a safe 2022. What matters to my Sedgefield constituents is jobs, jobs, jobs. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Hitachi and Alstom on securing the HS2 rolling stock contract? It is a tremendous vote of confidence in the people of Newton Aycliffe and Sedgefield. Will he encourage the Secretary of State for Transport to confirm that the feasibility study for Ferryhill station will be approved at his earliest convenience so that we can get on with levelling up and building back better for Ferryhill, Bishop Middleham, Sedgefield and the Cornforths?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is a great advocate for Sedgefield, his constituents and levelling up. I congratulate Hitachi and Alstom on securing the HS2 stock order and the proponents of Ferryhill station for completing the initial business case for the scheme. That is part of the £96 billion investment that we are making in our railway infrastructure, which is the biggest in 100 years, dwarfing anything that the Labour party has ever embarked on. We will get on with uniting and levelling up across our country.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister would like to thank me, as he was kept in the dark about last year's festivities, for my assistance in lighting the Christmas tree in Downing Street this year. Unlike the Prime Minister, I am not in the dark about what my staff are doing this year: we are serving and delivering over 1,000 hampers and gifts to families across Swansea to ensure that they get a Christmas. Will he join me in congratulating and thanking everyone involved in Everyone Deserves a Christmas? If he would like to come and light a tree in my constituency, I will ensure there is one available for him.

**The Prime Minister:** That is one of the nicest things somebody has said to me from the Opposition Benches for a long time. I do want to thank and congratulate

everybody in the hon. Lady's constituency who is helping to bring hampers to those who need them this Christmas. It is a wonderful thing.

**Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** My thoughts and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with those who loved Star Hobson, who was brutally murdered in Keighley by a monster while Star's evil mother allowed it to happen. The court heard that numerous referrals were made to Bradford Council children's services months in advance of Star's murder, but they were not taken seriously—in fact, the case was closed. The Prime Minister will be aware that this is the latest in a long list of failings at Bradford Council children's services, where political correctness appears to have been put before the welfare of children. I have no confidence in Bradford Council's leadership to deliver children's services. Since the death of Star, I am pleased that the Government have sent in a commissioner—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Sorry, but I am very bothered that we are going into sub judice, which applies till sentencing is finalised. It is very serious and I do not

want to cause a real problem. I would ask the Prime Minister to answer without giving any further details. I think we have gone a little bit too far into what the case is at the moment.

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful for your direction, Mr Speaker. I just want to say that I think the whole House will once again be filled with incredulity at the cruelty of people who could perpetrate a child killing such as this, but also sadness and bewilderment that it could not have been prevented. As my hon. Friend knows, we will appoint a commissioner to assess the capability and capacity of the relevant council, Bradford, to improve on its handling, and they will report in January. That will also feed in to the report we have commissioned on the death of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. I say to those who are responsible in the authorities concerned that we will not hesitate to remove service control if that is what is necessary to drive the improvements we need to see.

**Mr Speaker:** That brings us to the end; we will go on to urgent questions. I wish everybody a wonderful Christmas, and let us have a peaceful new year.

## School Openings: January 2022

12.43 pm

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on preparations for school openings in January.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart)**: I am very grateful to you for granting this urgent question on a day when the Schools Minister is out of town, Mr Speaker.

The Government are committed to ensuring that schools open in January as normal. The classroom is the very best place for children's and young people's development, and we are incredibly grateful to teachers and all education staff for all they have done to maintain face-to-face learning. Protecting education continues to be our absolute priority.

The Government have taken action to help manage the omicron variant, and the Prime Minister has already announced that we are turbocharging our covid-19 booster programme to offer every adult in England a vaccine by the end of the year to protect people from it. We have set out clear plans for school openings in January, including on-site lateral flow testing for secondary school students on return; continued regular testing at home for the education and childcare sectors; and a comprehensive contingency framework to manage outbreaks.

As of 1 December, more than 95.2 million tests have been completed across all education settings, and the Government have made more than £100 million of funding available to education settings to support costs. Schools and education settings have a range of measures in place to manage covid and to reduce transmission, including regular testing, additional hygiene practices, increasing ventilation, and procedures for managing confirmed cases.

From Tuesday 14 December, a new national daily testing of covid contacts policy was introduced. That means that young people and fully vaccinated adults who are identified as a close contact of someone with covid may take an NHS rapid lateral flow test every day for seven days and continue to attend their setting as normal unless they have a positive result.

We also recommend that older students and staff wear face coverings in communal areas and we have supported education settings to improve ventilation. The Government committed to delivering 300,000 carbon dioxide monitors by the end of this term; we have already delivered more than 329,000, with more than 99% of eligible settings having received monitors.

Every child aged 12 and over is eligible to receive the vaccine. We encourage all children and parents to take up that offer as soon as possible, if they have not already. It is vital, though, that all of us, including parents, carers, teachers and everyone working in education, goes out as soon as they possibly can to get their booster jab to protect the NHS, our way of life and education.

**Robert Halfon**: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Despite the heroic efforts of teachers and support staff in Harlow and around the country who have worked tirelessly to keep students learning, the four horsemen of the education apocalypse have been galloping towards our young people in the form of a widening attainment gap, an epidemic of mental health problems, a rise in safeguarding hazards and a loss of life chances. We know that the attainment gap between rich and poor students is getting worse, and that the number of children being referred to mental health support services has increased by 62%. We know the damage that school closures bring, and 100,000 ghost children are missing almost entirely from the school roll. Yesterday, the Department for Education released new figures showing that more than 230,000 children were not in school because of covid-related incidents.

The Government have stated that they want to keep schools open, but what is the plan in order to do so? What measures are being taken to ensure that, should education staff be required to isolate, there is a network of supply teachers ready to step in? Is additional funding being made available to provide adequate ventilation in schools?

The Health Secretary is right to say that we should protect the NHS, but why can the Department for Education not say that we have to protect our children's futures? Why do we not have advertisements about that? What mental health support is being given to our young people affected by the pandemic? What assessment is being made of the impact of lost learning on students in critical exam years?

There is a nationwide campaign for an army of NHS volunteers, but not for education. Why is a similar army of retired teachers or Ofsted inspectors not being recruited to support schools struggling to cope with staffing requirements? Can we not have the same vision, the same passion and the same resource provision for the education service as we do for the national health service?

Despite the Government's assurances, it seems to me that, sadly, we are moving towards de facto school closures. I urge Ministers to prove otherwise.

**Alex Burghart**: I thank my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, for his question. I know how much the subject means to him, and I am sure he recognises how much it matters to everyone in the Department for Education. We are absolutely clear that the best place for schoolchildren is in school, that the best thing for schoolchildren is to have face-to-face teaching and that, as the Secretary of State said at the weekend, he will do everything in his power to ensure that that continues.

We have a range of work under way in response to this fast-moving situation. Currently, I believe that there are 14 hospitalisations from omicron and that the rate of the doubling of cases is about every two days. At the weekend, the Secretary of State was on "The Andrew Marr Show", where he said that he thought that about a third of cases in London were omicron. That number is already now over 50%, so to deal with this we have set about four things: testing, vaccination, ventilation and hygiene. Those are the ways in which we will absolutely back schools to make sure that in-classroom teaching can continue. We are recommending that all secondary school pupils will be tested right at the start of next

term. We are offering a small amount of flexibility on the time at which schools can go back in order to make sure that this testing can take place, and we are offering additional funding to make sure that this testing is available. I reassure the House that schools have and will have all the testing facilities they require.

On vaccination, six out of 10 of those aged 16 and 17 have already been jabbed, and more than 80% of everybody in the population aged 12 and over has received at least two jabs. That remarkable achievement has been made possible by our world-leading vaccine procurement and roll-out. As I mentioned, 99% of schools have received the carbon dioxide monitor, and schools are running comprehensive and advanced hygiene programmes. The key to our success in the battle against omicron will be the booster programme. This is a national mission of the utmost importance and severity. The Government are throwing the kitchen sink at making sure that before schools get back all adults will have had the chance to have their booster. That is the way forward; it is how we maximise our chances of making sure that our children get the world-class education they deserve.

**Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): First, let me thank school staff, governors, parents and pupils across the country for their dedication and hard work during a year of unrivalled difficulties. However, the Government's complacency means that we are now in a race against time to protect children's health and education as the omicron variant spreads. Yesterday's absence figures showed that 235,000 children are now out of school because of covid, which is an increase of 13% in the past fortnight. An average of 175,000 children have been out of school every day this term. This ongoing disruption to education comes on top of pupils missing an average of 115 days of in-person school between March 2020 and July 2021. The Government have serious questions to answer about why further steps have not been taken to reduce the spread of covid among pupils.

We know that vaccination and ventilation are vital to these efforts, but Ministers are falling short on both. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies first highlighted the importance of ventilation in schools in May 2020, but 19 months on the Government have failed to act on its advice. This is literally a problem the Government could have fixed while the sun was shining, but instead their failure to get measures in place is pushing schools to open windows, despite plummeting temperatures and while school energy bills rocket. Therefore, will the Minister immediately publish interim findings of the Bradford pilot of air purifiers and work with all schools to implement recommendations from that?

On vaccinations, we find that nationally less than half of 12 to 15-year-olds have had a vaccine. Ministers missed their own target to offer everyone in that age group a jab by October, and they have not set a new one yet. Perhaps most concerning, the weekly number of jabs administered to 12 to 15-year-olds has dropped by 80% since half term. Will the Minister commit to deliver a vaccine guarantee so that all young people can get their jab by the end of the Christmas holidays? Will he also set out what steps he will take to rapidly ramp up the roll-out? Will he adopt Labour's calls for a clear, targeted communications campaign to parents on the benefits of the vaccination, access to pop-up and walk-in clinics, and the mobilisation of volunteers and retired

clinicians? Staff, children and parents are now entering their third school year of disruption. Time and time again, this Government's failure to plan ahead has left children bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Ministers must stop treating them as an afterthought and act now to avoid chaos next term.

**Alex Burghart:** I join the hon. Gentleman in his remarks about schools and school staff. We understand that they have worked enormously hard to do the best for children in extremely difficult conditions over the past 18 months. It is important to recognise that the work that they have done throughout has meant that we are now in a position where we have good and improving vaccination rates, good ventilation, good hygiene and good testing in schools. As I made clear in my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), that is the key recipe to ensure that schools are in the best possible position, but the national solution to the omicron variant must be—and can only be—boosters, which is why in the next few weeks we need as many people as possible to come forward and take up the Government's invitation.

We are making an enormous effort to ensure that vaccine centres are available near people, that there are walk-ins, and that people can step forward and take the protection that they, their families and their communities need, and that will mean that we have the best chance for a normal school term in January.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am reassured to hear the determination of my hon. Friend to keep schools open, but does he agree that the disgraceful campaign of intimidation waged by National Education Union managers to close down schools earlier this year wreaked huge chaos across schools that will take many years to overcome, including the one in six school-age children who now have mental health problems; the chaos caused to the examination system; the academic catch-up; and the problems from a lack of physical exercise? Will he welcome the measures being proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Select Committee, and will he agree that, given the extraordinarily heroic efforts of our headteachers and teachers through difficult circumstances, ultimately the decision on safety and keeping schools open should be left to individual heads?

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Busted should resign.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We do not need any extra comments, Mr Gullis. You were hoping to catch my eye and I was thinking about coming to you next, but you obviously do not want me to.

**Alex Burghart:** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), the former Children's Minister, for his remarks. We are absolutely determined to do everything that we can to keep schools open. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow asked how we are going to maintain the workforce. I remind the House that during the surge of the delta variant, the Department created the workforce fund, which enabled the vast majority of schools to stay open, even in the teeth of that variant. We still have the workforce fund, and intend to say more about it in the next few days.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Minister to take very seriously the morale out there in schools. We spend a lot of time, quite rightly, thanking NHS staff as frontliners, but teachers and the whole school community are also wonderful, hard-working people, so let us look carefully to morale and to the health of our children, which is paramount. Will he also look at early years and nursery provision, which is essential to people who want to go to work and have their children looked after properly? Will he please talk to the people at the National Day Nurseries Association, which is based in Huddersfield, because they are the experts?

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Gentleman obviously has enormous expertise in this field, as former Chair of the Education Committee. I reassure him that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the Children's Minister, is in regular contact with the group that he mentions. Education being open is vital to the national effort. It is education settings being open—particularly for key workers, as they were at all stages throughout the pandemic—that means that the NHS can function, that people who are seriously ill can get treatment, and that the rest of the economy, where possible, can keep functioning. I absolutely understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to the headteachers, teachers and all the staff at schools in the Forest of Dean for the huge effort that they have made both during the period when they were closed and delivering remote learning, and since they have had children back at school?

Once again, there are rumours—only rumours at this point—that the Prime Minister is intending to hold another press conference today. Will the Minister confirm whether that is indeed the case, and, if it is, that there will be a statement in this House setting out whatever measures are to be announced?

**Alex Burghart:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is an experienced Member of this House and he will know that Under-Secretaries of State are not always informed of what is happening right at the very centre, but I am sure that the powers that be will have heard his question.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): The Prime Minister has been very clear that Christmas concerts and nativity plays should go ahead, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has said exactly that to me from the Dispatch Box, and we have heard what the Minister has said today, yet Zoom has never heard more “Silent Night” and we have state schools already closed for Christmas and teaching unions calling for a staged return in January. I have heard what the excellent Minister has said and it is very welcome, so I do not require the list again, but what are the Government actually going to do, legally, to see that their will is enforced and that schools are back, as they should be—as they need to be—in January? Where on earth are the Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs? What could be more important than this?

**Alex Burghart:** In answer to my hon. Friend's second question, I think it is clear that they are off on their holidays. In answer to his first question, we absolutely

want and expect education settings to be open, we want and expect children to be taught in person, and we want and expect school life to go ahead.

**Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Our children cannot afford for schools to close again or to miss more face-to-face teaching through absence. As has been mentioned previously, evidence shows that ventilation equipment in schools reduces the airborne risk of coronavirus by up to 70%. Other countries have already rolled out ventilation equipment to their schools and are seeing the benefits. When can we expect the results of the Bradford pilot scheme to be published, and when can schools expect ventilation equipment to be delivered? It is needed now.

**Alex Burghart:** As the hon. Lady will have heard me say already, we take ventilation and the quality of air extremely seriously. That is why we have achieved our public commitment of delivering 300,000 carbon dioxide monitors over the autumn term; in fact, we have excelled on our target. We are absolutely clear that ventilation is one of the four pillars that will help us best maintain school in person.

**Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): May I put on the record my thanks to the hard-working teachers and heads in East Surrey for keeping the schools open during the delta variant? During that time, one teacher told me that they were more worried about the fear that was spreading in children than they were fearful of the variant itself. I have never been more ashamed of the Labour party than in its inability to stand up to the unions when they were muddling the story of safety in schools. Will the Minister please reassure us that he will be able to try to maintain confidence in schools and keep them open? That is the best thing for the future of our children.

**Alex Burghart:** My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. Like her, I have been extremely impressed at how calm a head the education settings I have visited and spoken to have managed to keep in the midst of a crisis, despite the quite unnecessary pressure that certain groups have put on them.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive answers. Does he agree that for some children, Christmas at home is not a time of joy, and that the mental health and wellbeing of pupils must be weighed as a concern? Will he outline what discussions have been had with the Northern Ireland Education Minister to share information in an attempt to see that every region of the United Kingdom implements the right strategy in terms of health and education?

**Alex Burghart:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that, at official level, we are in constant dialogue with our friends and partners in Northern Ireland. There is a great deal that we can learn from each other and that we continue to learn from each other.

**Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): This week, for the second year in a row, I am delivering nearly 7,000 Christmas books—one to every primary school child in my constituency—to spread a bit of cheer after another difficult year. Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to remind the militant unions that a majority of teachers and heads share his desire to keep all

children in school at all costs? Will he commit again to doing all he can to support the hard-working teachers and heads across the Workington constituency who share the desire to keep their schools open in the face of pressure from a loud minority?

**Alex Burghart:** I have always considered my hon. Friend to be a spreader of good cheer, and I now have a wonderful image of him traipsing around his constituency with a large sack upon his back. I can only echo his remarks; the headteachers and school leaders I meet share his and the Department's determination to do the best for their children.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): May I take this opportunity to thank all the teachers and school staff in Meon Valley for their amazing work during the pandemic? May I ask my hon. Friend to give schools and headteachers plenty of warning—hopefully not at weekends—if there are to be any changes to the system?

**Alex Burghart:** I fully hear what my hon. Friend says. As of this morning, all our guidance is up to date. We maintain a very good conversation with school leaders in what is obviously a very fast-moving situation.

**Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): I would like my hon. Friend to thank all the school teams and college teams in and around Great Grimsby, as well as the employers who are offering placements to our students.

An issue that we have in Great Grimsby is literacy and numeracy. Our primary schools have told me that their in-school additional tutoring is making the biggest difference, so we need to make sure that parents understand that it is important for their children to be at school and not to be afraid. Will my hon. Friend make sure that we now get the message out to parents: "School is safe, and school is the best thing for your children"?

**Alex Burghart:** I am very happy to echo my hon. Friend's remarks about Great Grimsby. I look forward to telling education leaders myself when I visit in the new year. Absolutely, the message goes out: we know what is best for children and we are trying our very best to make sure that it happens.

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Testing for school pupils has become something of a regular occurrence for households across the country, including my own. Can my hon. Friend confirm that covid-19 tests will continue to be distributed to schools and pupils so that we can monitor the incidence of outbreaks of the virus?

**Alex Burghart:** Absolutely. I am very happy to confirm that schools have and will have the testing capacity that they need.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): It was fantastic to be out last week in primary schools in Ipswich handing out certificates for Christmas card entries. The artistic future of Ipswich is looking very bright indeed.

When I visit schools in Ipswich, learning loss is often a concern but not the main concern, which is the impact of lack of socialisation and the mental health implications.

Will the Minister confirm that if there is a big struggle with teaching unions that do not put enough value on children's education, he will stand up not just for learning, but for the mental health and social development of all our young people?

**Alex Burghart:** Absolutely. We have been very keen to make sure that we invest in the mental health of children and young people, following what has been an extremely difficult 18 months. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in praising the primary school children of Ipswich and their artistic prowess.

**Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): School closures have been a welfare catastrophe for millions of vulnerable children. During the pandemic, there has been a 77% increase in self-generated sexual images of children online, and referrals have doubled for paediatric eating disorders. Some 2.2 million children in England live in households affected by addiction and abuse, yet in the first lockdown just 6% of vulnerable children attended school. What will my hon. Friend do, and what can we do as parliamentarians to support him, to make sure that this tragedy never again happens to our vulnerable children?

**Alex Burghart:** My hon. Friend is a very powerful advocate for the cause that she raises. Those are shocking statistics.

We kept education settings open throughout the pandemic for the most vulnerable children. Where pupils who are self-isolating are within our definition of "vulnerable", it is very important that we have systems in place to keep in contact with them, particularly if they have a social worker.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate headteachers and staff across Harrow, who have kept schools open during very difficult and challenging times. I am a very strong supporter of the vaccine programme and testing, but many of our children will be mixing over Christmas with people from across the country and may inadvertently and regrettably catch covid. Will my hon. Friend and the Department issue guidance telling children and families that they should be tested before they go to school, not when they get to school? Inadvertently, they could spread covid once they are in school being tested.

**Alex Burghart:** We encourage everybody to test regularly. To do our very best to ensure the next term starts well, we will be encouraging all secondary school pupils to be tested right at the start of term and we are introducing a degree of flexibility on start dates to achieve that. Schools are now very experienced in making sure they take precautions so that infection is not spread when children are together and preparing to be tested.

**Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): I welcome the Minister's words about keeping educational settings open as a priority, but will he go further and guarantee that primary schools will be kept open? We know that children that young cannot learn properly online, and that the damage to their education and wellbeing is immense. It is unthinkable that we will not keep them open to all children, whatever happens.

**Alex Burghart:** I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. She is a very powerful advocate for the position she has just set out. I repeat what the Secretary of State said at the weekend: he is doing everything in his power to ensure that schools will stay open.

**Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con):** I would like to put on record my thanks to Stroud schools and the fact that I have registered with the Department concerns about additional costs arising from tackling covid. On the rumours of lockdowns or further lockdowns, I have spoken to many Stroud parents throughout the pandemic who are incredibly worried about the welfare of their children due to school closures. With the cruel and devastating deaths of young Arthur and Star keeping us up at night, many Stroud parents are worried not only about their own children but about hidden children, and teachers feel the same. Will my hon. Friend confirm that in all discussions with unions, scientific advisers and medical advisers, he refers constantly to the fact that we now know that lockdowns hide evil and damage children's health?

**Alex Burghart:** I know my hon. Friend understands these issues extremely well. We very much want to keep schools open. We think schools are the best place for children in the midst of a pandemic, particularly vulnerable children who are in care or on the edge of care. We are determined that social work contact should continue, so that we can ensure those children will be protected.

**Jonathan Gullis:** I take this opportunity to thank teachers, lecturers, support staff and other educationalists across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke for their fantastic efforts. I spent eight and a half wonderful years working as a secondary school teacher in London and Birmingham, and it is absolutely essential that schools are kept open. I do not want to hear from the Minister that we are going to do everything we can; I want to hear simply that they will stay open. More than ever, secondary school teachers want assurances that exam plans for summer 2022 will go ahead as normal. The Labour party is stuck in the vice grip of the National Union of Teachers, so we need to ensure that we do not listen to them but to teachers who know that exams are always the best way forward.

**Alex Burghart:** It is always a pleasure to answer questions from my hon. Friend, who is an extraordinarily

passionate advocate for children and education. He will have heard what I said. We want schools to stay open. We want exams to go ahead. We are working to that end.

**Mr Harper:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You heard me ask the Minister, in the urgent question, whether there were plans for a press conference today. No. 10 has now confirmed that the Prime Minister and the chief medical officer will be carrying out a press conference. No. 10 has briefed the media that new information and the latest data on omicron will be provided. I understand that the chief medical officer was scheduled to give evidence to a Select Committee this afternoon. That has now been postponed until tomorrow, so it looks like the new information, instead of being provided first to Members, will be provided to the media. Have you had any notice of an intention of a Minister to come to the House at the end of business today to update Members on the booster roll-out and the latest information about omicron so that we can ask questions on behalf of our constituents?

**Mr Speaker:** Nobody has been to see me about a statement, but of course my office door is open, and I hope that those on the Front Bench will be listening to me say that I would welcome that statement. Once again, I say that Members of Parliament are elected to this House to hear things in this Chamber, not on the media. I hope the message goes back that new information should be shared with Members of Parliament. I would like to believe that somebody will be knocking on my door very shortly to say, "Can we have a statement later?", and of course I would welcome that statement.

**Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) asked where were the Lib Dem MPs at this very important urgent question. I may be new to the House, but I point out that I am a Liberal Democrat and I asked my question right after the hon. Gentleman, who is no longer in his place. I am sure it was an oversight and that all can be forgiven, but can I please ask that he withdraws that comment for the record?

**Mr Speaker:** The good news is that you have corrected the record, and yes, we can all see that you are here.

## **Asylum Seeker Accommodation: RAF Manston**

1.16 pm

**Sir Roger Gale** (North Thanet) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister to tell the House of his proposals to accommodate asylum seekers at the former RAF Manston barracks.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove)**: As the House knows, there has been an unacceptable rise in the number of small boat crossings. It is absolutely right that the Government take all necessary steps in response to what is an ongoing challenge. A new triage facility is being established on part of the Ministry of Defence site at Manston in Kent. It will provide safe and secure accommodation for migrants while the Government carry out the necessary checks. Used alongside existing reception arrangements at the port of Dover, the site will enable the processing of large numbers of arrivals simultaneously. We take the welfare of migrants seriously and will ensure that they receive basic welfare provisions, including hot food, fresh clothing, and, where necessary, medical care.

In the new year, we intend to expand activity at the Manston site to conduct more detailed security and initial asylum screening in parallel before people are dispersed. Arrivals will be expected to remain on-site for a maximum of five days while the security and initial asylum processing checks are undertaken, until they leave to go into further, appropriate accommodation. Our aim is to make our processes more efficient and to reduce pressure on the overall asylum system.

However, this is only one part of a wider process. The Government remain committed to bringing an end to dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings. We are overhauling our asylum system to ensure that people-smugglers cannot profit from human misery. The tragic deaths in the channel last month underlined in horrific fashion just how dangerous these journeys are. Our new plan for immigration will reform the system and build one that is fair on those who play by the rules and firm on those who do not. It will reduce pull factors by making it more difficult for migrants to remain here where they have no lawful right to do so. The British people want to see change, and the Government are firmly committed to delivering that change.

**Sir Roger Gale**: The former RAF barracks at Manston is about to be released by the Ministry of Defence and is required, once the site has been cleared, by local people for housing. It lies adjacent to Manston airport, which we hope to see reopened in the near future as an airfield once the long-awaited development consent order has been determined. This is not an appropriate site for the proposed purpose.

On Friday 10 December, I received an email from the executive officer of Kent Wing informing me that 2433 Air Training Unit had been given until today, 15 December, to vacate premises at the former RAF barracks and fire training school

“in order that an Immigration Centre could be established there”.

This was described as

“not for us to debate; it is an order to us”.

That was the first that I had heard of this Home Office-instigated proposal. There had been no consultation with me, as the Member of Parliament, with the leader of the county council, with the leader of Thanet District Council, or, I believe, with the county constabulary. I spoke to the Minister of State on that day and was promised a full briefing, with civil servants present.

The leader of Thanet District Council was called by Home Office officials at 5 pm on Monday, two days ago, and the leader of Kent County Council at 6 pm. Again, there was no consultation, and to date, Kent's senior health officer has not been consulted or even informed officially that the Home Office, which has known of the developing cross-channel people trafficking issue for months, and of the developing crisis for weeks, was proposing to create a screening and processing centre at the unsuitable Manston Road site. Neither were proposals for a phase 2 transfer and triage facility from Tug Haven to Manston discussed; nor was a further proposal for a phase 3 expansion of facilities, to handle the still-to-be-determined number of migrants over an unspecified length of time, consulted on. All we were told by the civil servant leading the project who, as I understand, was working from home and has not visited the site, is that the Home Office is establishing a processing centre—not might be, is establishing—before Christmas.

When I met the Minister of State yesterday, I asked that a stop be put on the project and that proper consultation be facilitated, with a degree of courtesy that from the Home Office has been signally lacking to date. From reports of phone calls made last night, it is clear that officials have ignored that request and are blundering on—hence my request for an urgent question, Mr Speaker. It appears to me that the Home Secretary and Minister of State have been blindsided by officials into yet another knee-jerk reaction to a problem that ought to have been foreseen, and should have been avoided.

As it stands, the current dog-whistle proposal appears to transfer arrivals securely from Tug Haven to Manston barracks, where they will be accommodated, in mid-winter, in marquees, and detained securely while they are being processed. There is no indication as to how the site will accommodate those human beings, how they will be made secure, or what facilities will be made available, other than statutory on-the-site medical services. These are real people who have been subjected to great misery as a result of circumstances that we may discuss on another occasion. As a result of the lack of foresight and preparation, it is now proposed that people should be processed under largely unsuitable conditions, simply to satisfy a perceived demand that can, and should, be met by other means.

I have identified at least one clean, comfortable, and secure operational vessel that can, if commissioned, meet the immediate and longer term need, and I am advised that others are available. I would be grateful if the Minister would now instruct the team to do as I have already requested, put this unacceptable and unworkable proposal on hold, and properly, thoroughly, and swiftly examine the viable alternatives. Perhaps while doing so he could conduct the consultations that ought to have been held weeks ago. Trying to railroad a bad idea through the shelter of the Christmas recess can only have unfortunate and undesirable consequences for the communities and people affected, and for the Government.

**Mr Speaker:** I gave some leeway to the right hon. Member for North Thanet, because I knew how important it was—in case people are wondering why I allowed the urgent question to go beyond its normal time.

**Tom Pursglove:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his tone in raising this issue on behalf of his constituents, and I fully appreciate the sensitivities he has expressed. I know, not least because he chaired the Nationality and Borders Bill Committee, that he understands and appreciates the pressures that the Department and Government are currently experiencing in relation to the small boat challenge.

I appreciate that the current pressures are real and challenging for our staff on the ground, and we must be responsive to the issues and challenges they face in going about their work. Of course, this issue has come about directly in response to the high numbers of crossings we have seen, which have been so vivid, and about which I know people across our country are concerned. Safety is very much at the forefront of our consideration, not just for the arrivals, but for our staff in the way I have alluded.

My right hon. Friend has raised a number of points that I want to pick up in responding. It is fair to say that consultation is ongoing—I make the point again that we are having to respond to these challenges at pace—including with local authorities, the NHS, him as the constituency Member of Parliament and the police, for example. We have had to move at pace, and the most recent inspection confirms how important it is that we take the steps we are proposing. As I say, my officials spoke about our plans with local political leaders, their officials and the local police at the first opportunity, and they will continue to do so. I welcome their constructive engagement so far.

My right hon. Friend asked when activities at this facility will start. We are planning to have potential overspill facilities in place over the next few days. In terms of volumes, we will keep that under review. At the moment, we are assessing the capacity and capabilities of the site and what is appropriate to it, and there will of course be times when the site is empty, when crossings are not happening. He asked who will go there. This is an overspill site for Tug Haven and initial processing. We would expect men, women and children to go there as necessary, but for a maximum of five days. We will manage unaccompanied asylum-seeking children separately under the existing arrangements with social services.

My right hon. Friend asked whether this is a permanent arrangement. We will keep our use of the Manston site under review, but we expect to continue to use it for some time. He has suggested some alternatives. If he would like to share those details with me, I would be happy to take that away and look at what he is suggesting, but I go back to the key point in all of this, which is that the Government's objective is to end these channel crossings. That is the objective we continue to work towards, and it is what the British people expect. We have a comprehensive plan of action—I have set it out many times in this House—for how we achieve that. Of course, getting that right means that there would not then be the need for facilities such as the one he has concerns about.

**Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab):** I have listened carefully to what the Minister has had to say, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for having secured this important urgent question. Tomorrow will be a year to the day that the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) secured an urgent question in this Chamber on the Government's rule changes, which gave the Home Office the powers to deem asylum claims inadmissible. We described the proposals as unworkable then. Here we are, a year on, and people are becoming trapped in our asylum system by the Home Office, having had their claims deemed inadmissible, but without any functioning agreements in place to move anyone through and out of the system. The Minister has said that 4,561 notices of intent have been served, yet only five people have been returned.

The Minister has said that this site is an attempt to improve the efficiency of the system, so can he explain to the House why the Government passed these inadmissibility rules when the consequences are that thousands of people have endured longer stays in the asylum system than necessary? That is to the detriment of a person's wellbeing and makes no sense for the Home Office at all. The initial asylum decisions taken by the Home Office have dropped from 28,623 in 2015 to 14,758 now, which is contributing to the backlog. Some 64% of those waiting for a decision on their asylum claims are waiting longer than the six-month target, so the backlogs in processing times are crippling the system. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain why progress on the rates of decision making has collapsed.

The Minister says that RAF Manston barracks will be used more as a reception centre than long-term accommodation, but we know that public health and fire safety advice was ignored by the Home Office prior to Napier and Penally barracks opening as asylum accommodation. We have heard once again about how consultation with local agencies has sadly been absent.

Given what we know about the new variant, dormitory-style accommodation must be avoided if we are to protect those accommodated there, staff and the wider community. Can the Minister confirm whether RAF Manston barracks will have an advisory committee? Can he rule out that children will be held there, and can he provide assurances that this is a temporary measure?

Given that this Government have promised the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, why has the scheme still not been established, and why has eligibility for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme been tightened overnight? I would be incredibly grateful for some insight on that decision.

Finally, in September 2020, the Home Office was by the inspectorate about the inadequate facilities at Tug Haven for dealing with vulnerable people, especially children, who may have experienced dangerous journeys. What assurances can the Minister give us that Manston barracks would be a significant improvement on the current situation?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am very grateful to the shadow Minister for her various questions and of course the assiduous way in which she always goes about these matters. We spent quite a lot of time together debating the Nationality and Borders Bill in the Committee that

considered it in great detail. The point that I would make initially is that what we are talking about here is a very considerable number of arrivals. Of course, it is right and proper that we have appropriate and safe facilities in place to process those arrivals in a manner that is fitting and of course has safety at the forefront. We believe that the steps I have set out today are necessary to achieve that and to make sure that we have the capacity, with the ultimate aim of course of stopping these crossings from happening in the first place, which is something that we are continuing to work towards.

On the point about inadmissibility, as I have explained several times in different settings in this House, that is very much about our future policy and where we are hoping to get to. We believe very strongly, and I know that Opposition Members have different views on this, that people should seek asylum or claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach. That is of course the quickest route to safety. The shadow Minister will also know that we are continuing to look at what more we can do on the issue of returns along those inadmissibility lines, and upholding that very long established principle under successive Governments of both sides that people should claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach. Those negotiations and discussions are ongoing, as she would expect.

On asylum processing, of course one thing that I very much want to see, as do my ministerial colleagues, is cases decided more quickly. We want to provide sanctuary to those who need it as quickly as possible and to return those with no right to be here without needless delays. That is what our Nationality and Borders Bill and the new plan for immigration are all about. We are getting on: that Bill is passing through the House, and we will operationalise the measures in it as quickly as possible on Royal Assent. I think that is what the British people want to see. It is the right and responsible thing to do, and that underpins the entirety of our policy.

On Napier specifically, we have been responsive. Again, we have set out many times the improvements that have been made to that site. It is right that, for example, when the inspectorates come in, look at these sites and offer recommendations, those are considered properly and thoroughly, and acted on as appropriate. That is why we respond formally to those reports and set out the steps that we intend to take to address any of the issues raised.

On the point about Afghanistan, what I will do—if I may, given that today we are debating the issue of Manston specifically and the triaging facility—is ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Afghan Resettlement to provide an update to the shadow Minister.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): How many hotels have now been contracted to deal with illegal migrants and with asylum seekers under Government contract, what is the current year's budget for all this work and will the Minister promise that, in future, MPs in any constituency where new facilities are going to be procured will be consulted first?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. Of course, as is standard practice, budgets are agreed formally with the Treasury in the usual way. I think it is fair to say that, as Ministers, our door is always open to talk to colleagues about concerns they have about particular circumstances in their own

constituencies. I think it is fair to say we are facing very considerable pressures at the moment in this space and it is important that all parts of the country do their bit to help to address some of these challenges. I would encourage local authorities that are not currently assisting with that work to look at how they can help, particularly along the lines of the dispersal model. But to be clear to the House, we want to get away from this reliance on hotel accommodation. We are working towards that objective and that is the right approach.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing this urgent question. His point about the lack of consultation with himself, the local authority and health services is frankly appalling. I want to ask the Minister a number of questions. A cross-party report on the all-party parliamentary group on immigration detention called on the Government to end this military-style accommodation for asylum seekers, which it described as “fundamentally unsuitable” for survivors of war, torture or serious violence. So why is the Home Office ignoring these warnings from parliamentary colleagues? The Home Office previously ignored warnings on the use of Napier barracks from the Red Cross and Public Health England, with the inevitable result of a covid outbreak among those being held there. With the pandemic now entering another dangerous phase, will the Government commit to listening to the experts this time and to following their own health guidance?

Can the Minister confirm that parts of the Manston estate are currently condemned as a result of asbestos being found on the site? We know that there has been very little consultation—in fact, none at all—with the local authority and other key partners such as the health services. Will he tell us what consultations have taken place with the non-governmental organisations that work with torture survivors and victims of trafficking and other trauma? Or is there, as with Napier, a lack of proper planning processes? Finally, the Minister mentioned illegal migrants. When will the Department commit to ending this dog-whistle language? There is no such thing as an illegal migrant. Seeking asylum is not illegal, so when will the Government put an end to this language and to pandering to the lowest common denominator?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for his questions. I do not consider that we are ignoring the concerns that are raised. As I have set out to the House, we have consistently been responsive to the reports of the inspectors, for example, and when they make recommendations, we consider them and act appropriately. He will recognise that there is a need for accommodation, and that the system is under acute pressure at the moment, given the number of arrivals. He will also recognise that we are seeking to reform the system. We are bringing forward the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is all about driving reform, processing cases more quickly, providing sanctuary to those who require it and removing those with no right to be here. That is a firm but fair system, and one that I would argue is right.

In response to the hon. Member's point about there being no consultation with local partners, that is simply not true. As I have described to the House, that engagement is ongoing. He also asked about areas of the site having asbestos. We will of course act entirely appropriately

[Tom Pursglove]

with safety at the forefront. I have made that point several times. Assessments are ongoing in various parts of the site, and it is right that we always act with safety at the forefront of our minds.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): We should always remember that it is criminal gangs that are ruthlessly exploiting vulnerable people and bringing them to this country. Can the Minister clarify some issues relating to the site? Will it be used for new arrivals straight after they arrive? He said earlier that they would be there for no more than five days. Following the questions from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), there was a question about how they would be accommodated. Will they be in marquees, in tents, or in barracks accommodation with proper facilities during this, the coldest period of the year?

**Tom Pursglove:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the criminal gangs responsible for these crossings are evil, and I would like to think that the whole House would share in that message. As I have said, the intention is for this to be an overspill site for Tug Haven. Work is ongoing on site to assess which areas are appropriate to be used for accommodation, and there will of course be appropriate accommodation on site that is safe and that meets our legal obligations.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): The people who are going to be taken into this facility are desperate people arriving from Afghanistan, Kurdistan and many other places, and suffering from the most intense trauma. Everything that the Minister has said, and everything that the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) asked, sounds awfully like a repeat of the appalling behaviour of the Home Office over Napier barracks. Can the Minister assure us that people are not going to be kept there at all, and that some better, more suitable accommodation will be found—at the end of the five days, where are they supposed to go? Has the Minister consulted? Many local people in Kent are welcoming asylum seekers and are prepared to support them. Has the Minister discussed the matter with local non-governmental organisations, or is this just some immediate reaction to get through a problem for the moment, never mind the appalling conditions that these poor desperate people are going to be forced into?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his various questions. This is an overspill site for Tug Haven. At the end of the period spent there in the processing phase, people would enter the dispersal and initial accommodation phase, and would of course be appropriately accommodated.

I have said this to the right hon. Gentleman before, but I will say it again: no one has cause to get into a small boat in order to seek safety. People should seek asylum in the first safe country that they reach.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Several hundred asylum seekers are currently being housed in a completely inappropriate location in central Blackpool. The Minister will be aware of my concerns about this placement. Does he agree with the people of Blackpool that the plans for an offshore processing centre for asylum seekers simply cannot come soon enough?

**Tom Pursglove:** As my hon. Friend knows, in the Nationality and Borders Bill we reserve the right to enter into an offshore processing arrangement. I hear the point that he makes on behalf of his constituents about how strongly they feel about this, and of course we want to operationalise the Bill as quickly as possible.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): We have heard a great deal about the pressure on accommodation, but surely that pressure could be relieved if the Home Office were to act more quickly and fairly in processing claims. Will the Minister tell us what action has been taken to ensure that that can happen?

**Tom Pursglove:** Perhaps the hon. Lady could help us in Edinburgh: perhaps her assistance would enable the dispersal process to take place more readily. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), would be keen to have that conversation with her. Let me also reiterate that our firm objective is to increase and improve the processing of cases in the way that I have described.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent is the fifth largest contributor to the asylum dispersal scheme. We have heard from my hon. Friend about the strain on the system caused by hundreds of thousands of illegal economic migrants crossing the English channel from France. Does he agree that the pressure on the system could be relieved if more local authorities, such as Labour-run Islington Council or the 31 out of 33 Scottish authorities, stepped up and played their part in the national effort?

**Tom Pursglove:** My hon. Friend has been a passionate advocate for the work that his local authority has been doing in this regard. I want to place on record my thanks and appreciation to them for everything they have been doing. I think it fair to say that many local authorities around the country could learn a lot from Stoke.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers, and I commend the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for his spirited account of the situation at RAF Manston. As others have said, this is about more than secure accommodation. Can the Minister outline further what measures are in place to deliver education and training for the refugees and their families at Manston and across the United Kingdom so that they can assimilate well into local communities?

**Tom Pursglove:** As this is about short-term processing, we would not necessarily expect facilities of that kind on site, but of course they will be a key consideration when it comes to dispersal and initial accommodation.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): I must say I have some sympathy with the need to act quickly bearing in mind the scale of the problem, so I do not really have concerns about the lack of consultation. Does the Minister agree with me, though, that if individuals are concerned about the quality of the accommodation, the simple answer to that is to not come over here illegally and actually apply for asylum in the safe European country in which they are present? They are not from Afghanistan; they are in France. It is hardly surprising that the

Opposition opposes this—I know you would like them all to be in four and five-star hotels; you have made that quite clear—but will the Minister promise me that offshore processing is being looked into seriously?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The hon. Gentleman must not refer across the Chamber to the shadow Minister as “you”. I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows by now that when he uses that phraseology he is referring to the Chair, so I ask him to observe the conventions. I call the Minister.

**Tom Pursglove:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The point I make in response is that nobody should be getting in a small boat to find safety—nobody has any cause to do that. That is why we are so committed to safe and legal routes, for the very reasons he outlines: when people come through such routes, we can provide proper accommodation, support and services to support those individuals.

**Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the Minister suggested that there was a good level of consultation with local authorities in Scotland. That is not consistent with the view from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which, I understand, is told after asylum seekers are accommodated—there is no engagement in advance. I wonder whether the Minister might reflect on the comments he made.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the point of order, which is more like a continuation of the urgent question. [*Interruption.*] I see that the Minister wishes to make a response.

**Tom Pursglove:** For the benefit of the House, I would just confirm that I was talking about Kent.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I hope that is helpful. As I say, this is really not a matter for the Chair, but I hope we have had some clarification.

## Ajax Noise and Vibration Review

1.46 pm

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement to update the House on Ajax, which is an important capability and a vital step-change in the way the British Army will operate on the future battlefield. It will provide ground-mounted reconnaissance, allowing the Army to understand the battlefield in all weathers, 24 hours a day.

As part of our £41 billion investment in Army equipment and support over the next 10 years, this modernisation is critical to address future threats. This is a vital investment, and the Defence Secretary and I have been deeply concerned about progress on this troubled project, which has been running for over 11 years since its commencement in March 2010. That is why we have been thoroughly focused on the project, why I insisted earlier this year that no declaration of initial operating capability would be made without ministerial involvement and why we asked the permanent secretary to commission a report from the Ministry of Defence’s director of health, safety and environmental protection on the health and safety concerns raised by noise and vibration. I am today publishing that report, and placing a copy in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office.

Over the past 35 years, there have been some 13 formal reports on defence procurement; we know the foundations that can build success. Openness, good communication and collaboration within Defence and the ability to act as an informed and challenging customer are vital. This health and safety report has highlighted shortcomings that need to be addressed, not just in health and safety, but more broadly. The review finds serious failings in the processes followed. The result was that personnel worked on a vehicle that had the potential to cause harm. The review finds that the failure was complex and systemic; that a culture exists of not treating safety as equally important as cost and time in the acquisition process; and that, from a cultural perspective, the Army did not believe it was potentially causing harm to people, especially from vibration, as it was tacitly expected that soldiers can and should endure such issues.

As I informed the House on 18 October, we have contacted all personnel identified as having worked on Ajax. Forty declined to be assessed for hearing but I am pleased to report that the vast majority of the remainder have returned to duty with no health impact. As of 9 December, 17 individuals remain under specialist out-patient care for their hearing, some of whom are again expected to return to duty with no health impact. Eleven individuals have had long-term restrictions on noise exposure recommended, potentially requiring a limitation in their military duties. Seven of them had pre-existing hearing issues prior to working on Ajax, but four did not.

In addition, four individuals who worked on Ajax have been discharged on health grounds, in some cases for reasons wholly unrelated to hearing loss. Although we cannot yet establish a definitive causal link, it is possible that Ajax may have contributed to the current hearing loss in a small number of individuals. It remains the case that no individuals have had long-term restrictions or been discharged as a result of vibration. However,

[Jeremy Quin]

assessment for both hand-transmitted and whole-body vibration takes time and requires specialist assessment, and these continue.

I will set out the key points from the review. General Dynamics UK is responsible for the design and build of the Ajax vehicles. The vehicles that it delivered for use in the trials had levels of noise and vibration that were higher than usually expected in tracked vehicles and have been proven to be above the statutory limit. That exposed our personnel to potential harm.

That exposure was not prevented by the Ministry of Defence due to a series of failures to act when concerns were raised by expert advisers and by soldiers operating in the vehicles. For example, an MOD safety notice in December 2018 said that design upgrades were required to reduce vibration, but this was not acted upon. MOD safety cases and safety management used GDUK calculations that were not independently assured, despite experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory advising that the calculations should not be relied on.

A report from the Defence Safety Authority in May 2020 identifying some of these issues and entitled "Serious Safety Concerns on Ajax" was retracted and not pursued, either by the DSA or by the project team in Defence Equipment and Support. Multiple warnings from the DSTL and from the Armoured Trials and Development Unit, which was running the trials, were not actioned, even when the ATDU commanding officer questioned the approach as having the potential to expose soldiers to a known hazard, which he stated was not a defensible position.

Overall, the report makes 20 recommendations. The MOD accepts all those relating specifically to armoured vehicle procurements, the regulation of safety for land equipment and the broader approach to safety in defence. Recommendation 9 relates to avoiding the concurrent running of the demonstration and manufacture stages in future projects. That recommendation needs to be considered carefully to ensure that we capture the safety imperatives while not preventing sensible spiral development or, for example, the parallel construction of classes of warship. I will update the House on that, alongside recommendations 12 and 14, which also need consideration of how to best implement them, building on existing work on approvals and senior responsible owners.

I will also update the House on the project more broadly. We have a robust, firm price contract for the delivery of 589 vehicles at a cost of £5.5 billion. We are ensuring that we protect our commercial position under the contract and will not accept a vehicle that is not fit for purpose. It remains impossible to share with the House 100% confidence that the programme will succeed or, if it does, the timing of achieving full operating capability. However, we are working closely with General Dynamics on noise and vibration and it is showing great commitment to resolving these issues. This very advanced fighting vehicle project employs 4,100 in south Wales and across the UK. We all want it to succeed and deliver what the British Army requires.

The Millbrook trials to baseline the vehicle's characteristics have completed and we expect to receive the conclusions shortly. In parallel, General Dynamics has been developing its theories and trialling design modifications to address vibration. We expect to receive

its analysis in the new year, following which we will, if appropriate, undertake thorough testing of its proposed modifications to satisfy ourselves on their efficacy.

Part of our analysis is also looking at the performance of the headset used in Ajax. Although the noise profile on Ajax is noticeably different from that of other armoured vehicles, following tests on in-service headsets we took in November a precautionary measure to limit temporarily the amount of time personnel operate while using them in other armoured fighting vehicles. Acoustic testing of our in-service headsets is under way at test facilities in the UK and overseas. We are also testing other headsets to establish whether they will meet our requirements and provide additional attenuation. Once this analysis is complete, we expect to be able to relax the temporary restrictions or implement appropriate mitigations. In the meantime, we remain able to maintain our operational commitments.

The work on Ajax has also highlighted the significant number of personnel across defence whose exposure to noise results in short or long-term restrictions to their military duties. I have therefore asked the MOD permanent secretary to look further at that issue to ensure that we are doing all we can to prevent avoidable hearing loss in our people.

In conclusion, the Ajax health and safety report makes for very difficult reading. It lays bare a deep malaise, which is cultural and results in systemic failures across our organisations. I am grateful to David King and his team for their work and grateful for the candour of many who contributed to the review. There are many working tirelessly to get Ajax back on track. We need to build on that candour and dedication and encourage all those involved in procurement programmes to speak up, identify problems and make clear where those responsible are failing. A culture in which individuals are encouraged not to elevate problems but only solutions through the chain of command may be admirable in other circumstances, but rarely in procurement. We need to support our people by resolving underlying cultural issues that risk making it harder to deliver the capabilities needed by our armed forces.

To take that forward, we are commissioning a senior legal figure to look more deeply at Ajax and to examine not just health and safety, but the cultural and process flaws that it has highlighted. We will leave no stone unturned to learn those lessons. I encourage people to participate in the further review and will ensure they have the space to do so. Of course, if the review uncovers evidence of gross misconduct, those concerned will be held to account, but the primary purpose of this inquiry is to ensure that we address significant cultural failings. The terms of reference will be agreed with the reviewer and I will make them available to the House.

In summary, while we should not forget that General Dynamics UK is responsible for delivering a safe and effective vehicle, it is clear from the report that the customs and practices of the Army, Defence Equipment & Support, Defence Digital and the wider MOD resulted in a culture that prevented issues from being addressed at an earlier point. We are committed to ensuring that measures are put in place to deliver these very complex programmes in a way that minimises the risk to our people while delivering the capability needed by the armed forces. I commend this statement to the House.

1.56 pm

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I start by thanking the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for publishing this Ajax noise and vibration report. I pay tribute to his determination to get to the reasons why this Ajax procurement has gone so badly wrong and his commitment to updating the House openly on progress. This is vital to the UK's warfighting capabilities and our frontline troops, so all sides of the House and beyond want to strengthen his hand in undertaking this work.

However, since the Minister commissioned this report, things have gone from bad to worse on Ajax. The Comptroller and Auditor General has confirmed to me that he has launched the urgent National Audit Office investigation into Ajax that I and the Defence Committee requested. The Public Accounts Committee has described the Ajax programme as a "catastrophe" and the MOD's procurement system as "broken".

This is a £5.5 billion programme that has been running for the past 10 years, has only delivered a couple of dozen vehicles and still has no definite date for completion. It is the biggest Defence procurement failure of the past decade. It is failing British taxpayers and failing British troops.

The first concern for any Minister or commander is rightly the safety of our own forces men and women, so this is an important report. It confirms that 17 individuals who worked on Ajax are still receiving specialist treatment for hearing loss, 11 have long-term limitations on their military duties and four have been medically discharged from service. What, if any, compensation have they received?

The Minister also refers to

"the significant number of personnel across defence whose exposure to noise results in short or long-term restrictions to their military duties."

How many is that significant number, and when will the permanent secretary report on the wider problems?

More serious is what the Minister has described as the

"series of failures to act"

when concerns were raised about health and safety risks: the 2018 MOD safety notice that was not acted on, the 2020 Defence Safety Authority report that was retracted and the multiple warnings, including from the commanding officer in charge of the trials unit, that were not actioned. The Defence Secretary declared in this House last month that,

"it is really important...that we fundamentally learn the lessons and people carry the can for...their decisions."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2021; Vol. 704, c. 492.]

Has anyone been fired for the failings? Has anyone been demoted? I hesitate to ask this, but has anyone responsible been promoted since they worked on Ajax?

Fundamentally, there is a Defence Secretary-shaped hole in this report. There is no mention of his role or his misjudgments in this Ajax disaster. When exactly did the Defence Secretary first know about the flaws in Ajax? What action did he take then to investigate and fix the problems? The Ajax vibration problem has been known in the MOD since at least 2018, so why, when the Defence Secretary published his defence White Paper this year, did he double down on Ajax, scrapping Warrior

and scaling back Challenger at the same time? Finally, neither this report nor the MOD's continuing Millbrook trials were ready last month, so why did the Defence Secretary press ahead to confirm in "Future Soldier" that

"capabilities will be built around...Ajax",

with other systems?

It is deeply unsatisfactory that the action following this review is to launch another review. It is also deeply unsatisfactory that Ajax is still in limbo, beset by suspicions that it is simply too big to be allowed to fail. Will the Minister now answer the remaining fundamental questions? What are the causes of the noise and vibration problems? Will the Defence Secretary scrap or stick with Ajax? What is the MOD's cost for the additional trials and testing? What contingency plans are in place for the Army to have full reconnaissance and force-protection capabilities while Ajax is delayed or, indeed, deleted? Has the Minister discussed with the Welsh Government a plan to support jobs if Ajax is cancelled? What impact does this continuing delay to decisions on Ajax have on the Army's ability to deploy the planned strike brigade?

The Defence Secretary's rapid further cuts in Army numbers is directly linked to more advanced technology based on Ajax. Will Ministers now halt their Army cuts, at least until they have fixed this fundamentally failing procurement?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for welcoming the transparency that this report represents from the Ministry of Defence. He is absolutely right that its commissioning and publication have sent shock waves through Defence. That is valuable and important. Everyone needs to be aware of the important imperatives—people need to answer for them and ensure that they are on track—and, even by commissioning and publishing this report, we have sent an important and salutary message, as well as learning a lot of detailed facts. He was generous in that respect, but he was most ungenerous and wrong regarding the Secretary of State.

As set out in the report, we first knew of this issue in November 2020. Ministers acted promptly. I am concerned that at the time it was described to me as a late discovery item, and that was mentioned in the report, and a culture of optimism bias continued. That is why I insisted that no IOC would be declared without ministerial involvement. That is why we were, and have been, very focused on ensuring that we got to grips with this programme, which we have, and on ensuring that we had this report not only commissioned, but published.

The report has laid bare a host of very difficult issues inside Defence, across a whole series of organisations. That is what the Defence Secretary and I are absolutely focused on getting to grips with, and what we are doing. The purpose of the report was not to apportion blame, but to discover the facts. That is the normal process in industrial companies where there are issues of concern—to establish the facts and to set out recommendations. That has been done.

We want to have a second report—I have referred to that previously in the House—to dig deeper and to make certain that the lessons are learned and that the recommendations are appropriate. As I have said, if there are examples of gross misconduct, they will be acted on.

[Jeremy Quin]

What the report revealed, however, is a deep cultural malaise: across Defence, horizontally, parts of it are not speaking to each other as they should be on a programme of this nature. Concerns are not being elevated as they should be, vertically up through the system. That is a problem, a failing, and it needs to be addressed. If we want to have proper procurement, we cannot have a culture in which people take the view that they want to hear only solutions and not problems. It is necessary to have a proper airing of concerns and for them to be taken up and dealt with.

The shadow Secretary of State raised a number of other points. A large number of hulls have been delivered to Merthyr and are being worked on. Of course, there has been a succession of capability drops in the project, so hulls will have to be enhanced and improved over time.

The right hon. Gentleman may believe that things have got worse. That is not my experience. On the contrary, we are in a far, far better position than we were last year and in a far better position than we were six months ago. Detailed work has been undertaken and conclusions from Millbrook will be with us before Christmas. GD has growing confidence in the design modifications that it believes can be effected. I will have no position on them until we have tested them, gone through them and made certain that they work, that they are efficacious and that they give us the kick that we require. There is a lot of work still to be done on headsets, but I have seen the benefit of having a full-time focused SRO and with ministerial focus on the project, driving it forward. We are in a far better place to take decisions on Ajax than we were. The project is in a healthier state than a year ago, as should be the case. It is an important capability that we need for our operational requirements, and we will continue the hard work to ensure that it is delivered.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con):** I commend the focus that the Minister brings to the situation, which is very refreshing indeed. However, he speaks of a troubled programme with cultural and systematic failures and of commissioning a senior legal figure to investigate. The project is a complete mess. Indeed, our whole land warfare programme is now operationally suboptimal as we cut our tank numbers, all our armoured fighting vehicles and our recce vehicles and introduce Boxer—a wheeled vehicle but with no substantial firepower—and Ajax. As we have discussed, it is a £5 billion project that was expected in 2017, but only a dozen vehicles have arrived, and people are being sent to hospital because of the vibration problems. The MOD is fortunate that the west—sadly, this includes the UK—is now so risk-averse as we would struggle today to send appropriate hardware into Ukraine in a move that, in my view, would deter Putin from invading.

The real scandal is the cover-up and dishonesty that led to the integrated review hiding those very problems with Ajax that the Minister spoke about so that it would not be axed. I spoke to a number of four-star generals, and nobody expected it to survive the integrated review. It makes it difficult for me to call for defence spending to be increased to 3% to improve our defence posture

because of the threats coming over the horizon when money is spent so poorly. I call on him to set a date in February when, if the procurement issues are not resolved, the project will finally be closed down.

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the Chair of the Defence Committee for his comments. Last year, his Committee produced a helpful report on armoured vehicles that made absolutely clear the requirement to invest more in that part of our defence. The Committee was right to do that and to highlight those concerns, and it should be reassured by the investment that we are putting into Boxer and Challenger. A £41 billion programme of investment in equipment and support is going into the Army in the next 10 years, and £8 billion of that is new. We differ, however, on the requirement for a recce vehicle of this nature. We need such a 24-hour vehicle that can operate in all weathers and all conditions to provide that critical ground reconnaissance, and that is what we are procuring via Ajax.

We must make certain that we have all the facts, because decisions are best made with all the facts. The root cause analysis on noise and vibration is in process, and we are doing that at pace. I am determined to drive answers on that. My right hon. Friend is right to ask searching questions, but, as I said, we are in a far better position than we were six months ago to understand what is going on. I hope that, early next year, we will know far more and be able to say, “Yes, this is a capacity that we can bring in and will work.” I am hopeful that we will get there, but it depends on the analysis that we do.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This is a sorry tale, but more importantly, it is a strategically very important equipment failure that leaves a very serious capability gap. I, for one, am clear that the Minister’s statement does not satisfactorily address the issues.

The health, safety and environmental protection review gets to the heart of the failures. It provides helpful definition and sources for the catastrophic failures—numerous as they are—in the management control issues, which have come to define the literally incredible £5.5 billion defence procurement fiasco. I am sure that others will detail the chronic operational consequences of those failures for the ability of UK forces to fight and defend, so I will concentrate on technical details.

I said in this Chamber some months ago that the problem was

“not...MTU V8 diesels or the Renk transmissions”—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 494],

which were tried and tested assets in other platforms. So it has come to pass.

The review highlights the failure of the

“Track, suspension and running gear, in particular the tension and sprocket design/track interface”,

which are unique to Ajax. The engine, good as it is, is a proven engine poorly mounted in a badly designed vehicle. We also learned today that, as the review sets out, there were

“Quality issues associated with...inconsistent routing of cabling, lack of...weld quality...insecure components”.

That does not sound to me like a £6 million vehicle. The shoddy design and appalling quality management represent engineering management from a truly different era.

There is no shortage of concerns about the programme, but one of them is about the tone of the report: “This was all very difficult, and we’ve taken a look back to see where things went wrong.” Two elements are missing from that rather lightweight mea culpa routine: who is carrying the can, and what is the future of the programme? Can the Minister identify who will take responsibility for this almost limitless failure?

Currently, GD UK management are clearly letting down the workers at Merthyr and Oakdale. What discussions has the Minister had with GD US about their future? When will he make a final decision on the future of the programme?

**Jeremy Quin:** I am impressed with the hon. Gentleman’s attention to detail, but technical issues are not really within the scope of the health and safety report. Mr King would not claim to be the person who can put the House’s mind at rest on technical issues, but there is a huge amount of ongoing work on the matter. The Millbrook trials have concluded, as I say, and we are waiting for the conclusions to arrive before Christmas, and they will be analysed. That will get to the heart of the issues with root cause analysis of noise and vibration, which I know the hon. Gentleman will look forward to with eager anticipation. I will update the House on what the answers turn out to be; I would rather not prejudge that technical analysis.

The hon. Gentleman refers to General Dynamics. One of the positives in the programme since the issues came to light is that we have had a complete transformation in the relationship with General Dynamics, which has been taken up at a very senior level: I speak to the global chief executive, and she has been in direct communication with the head of DE&S. That has helped to drive real performance through General Dynamics, all the way through the system. We are seeing a complete transformation in how it views the programme, in its determination to succeed and in its willingness to embrace the problems, which are clear. It has its own theories about them and is developing design mitigations and design resolutions. We have yet to see whether or not they can absolutely succeed; clearly we will wish to test that independently.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call John Spellar—*[Interruption]*—Sir John Redwood.

**John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister says that there is a robust fixed-price contract, which is great news. Is he guaranteeing to the House that the very considerable remedial costs will not fall to taxpayers in any way?

**Jeremy Quin:** To confuse the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is not a mistake that I would dare to make, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My right hon. Friend is right: this is a £5.5 billion firm-priced contract. I am very clear that we have a contract that says that 589 vehicles will be delivered that will meet our requirements for a price of £5.5 billion. That contract is very, very clear. I see no reason why this

House or the taxpayer should pay more money to General Dynamics to produce 589 vehicles, when we have a contract for it to produce 589 vehicles to our requirements for £5.5 billion.

**John Spellar (Warley) (Lab):** The Minister is to be congratulated on honestly identifying departmental failings. We all welcome that. It therefore seems almost churlish to criticise, but we have to, because the report skirts the core issue. Its conclusion admits that the vehicle “is not fit for purpose”,

but nowhere that I can see does it state the deadline for deciding whether the project can ever succeed; if it cannot, whether the Department has to terminate the contract; and if so, what contingency plans it has. Or will the project just limp on, burning cash and putting our troops at risk with a dangerous capability gap?

**Jeremy Quin:** The right hon. Gentleman raises good questions, but I hope that I can reassure him in part. The conclusion does say that the vehicle is not fit for purpose. Of course it is not fit for purpose now, because anything that does not meet our requirements is not fit for purpose. We cannot put personnel at risk, so absolutely it is not a vehicle that we can take on now, and we are not prepared to. We will only take into service a vehicle that actually works for our purposes and meets our requirements.

There is work to be done, but the decision point on whether that can be achieved with this vehicle is not now. A huge amount of work is being done. The time to take those decisions is after the root cause analysis has been concluded. As I said, GD has its own theories and has done its own work, and it believes that it has design modifications that could well fit the bill, but I am not going to take a decision on that until we have examined them and it is more confident of their grounds.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** The Ajax programme wins the competition, from a very long list, to be the poster boy of defence procurement disasters. My admiration for my hon. Friend the Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence cannot disguise the fact that the report is truly shocking. It points towards an institution that does not bake in human factors in the design of our kit and appears to ignore health and safety, to the great detriment of the men and women of our armed forces, including my constituents. It is not good enough.

What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure that people are truly held to account for this? If we have to go to a plan B in the new year, what contingency does he have for mounting stand-off radar, for example, on Wildcat and Watchkeeper, for rolling out the capability on our Boxer and Jackal fleets, and for using unmanned aerial vehicles? Otherwise, thanks to this tin can on tracks, we are going to have a walloping great hole in our defence capability.

**Jeremy Quin:** There are two halves to my right hon. Friend’s question. Given his background, I would expect nothing less from him than to be truly shocked by what this report reveals, and so am I. I was horrified when I read the report for the first time, and I am still horrified now. There were clearly flaws deep in the heart of defence, and people were not thinking through the consequences of actions and their implications for some

[Jeremy Quin]

of our personnel. I think a lot of that was due to failures by one person to speak to another, a lack of communication horizontally, and a failure to elevate problems or for them to be heard properly as they went up the chain of command. But none of this is excusable, and it is outrageous that we have ended up in this situation. We are deeply shocked by what the report reveals.

As I say, there is an ongoing process, but the key thing is to understand what has gone wrong. My right hon. Friend has referred to this particular procurement among others. I am afraid to say that I suspect a similar tale could be told about many procurements of the past. The fact is that on this procurement, we commissioned and published a report and, as I said, it sent shockwaves through the organisations, with people asking themselves, "Have I been doing this right? Am I doing this appropriately?" That is the way to start to implement a change in culture.

I can confirm that we are absolutely in a position to meet our operational requirements. We will always have fall-back positions. My right hon. Friend mentioned Watchkeeper. As he will recognise, there are huge benefits in having ground-mounted reconnaissance, and Ajax can provide a useful tool. We are committed to making certain that it works, but if it would not, for any reason, there will be alternatives to be brought forward.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his tenaciousness in providing the report. The opening paragraph of the conclusion states:

"Nothing in this Review detracts from the fact that GDUK has designed and built what MOD maintains is thus far a vehicle which is not fit for purpose and does not meet the contracted specification."

In effect, we have a vehicle that does not work and has damaged our people, and GDUK has burnt something like £4 billion of UK taxpayers' money so far. What the report does not actually outline, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, is a timescale for when decisions have to be taken. When will the decision on whether we are going to can this project altogether be taken? If it is canned, may I pick up on an issue raised by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), which is the exposure of the taxpayer? There is a big difference between GDUK and GD globally. Is the global company legally liable for the liabilities of the programme?

**Jeremy Quin:** Those are good questions from the right hon. Gentleman. The key point from the quote he read out is the words "thus far". Our focus with GD is getting a vehicle that meets the requirements and specifications of the Army, and which we can bring into service. As I say, GD has done a lot of work over the past six months. There are design modifications which it believes can help significantly. We are yet to test that—we are yet to hear definitive reports and we are yet to see its analysis—but progress is being made. So, first of all, we are not writing off Ajax, far from it. My hope is that it can still come into service as an absolute first-in-class vehicle. The capabilities are extraordinary if we can ensure that what are in many cases Newtonian problems of noise and vibration can be solved.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that £3.165 billion has so far been paid under the contract to GD. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), this is a £5.5 billion contract. It is clear under the contract that we have 589 vehicles plus other things that will come through as a result of it. There is a parent guarantee in place between GDUK, the subsidiary, and the parent company.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Yet again, complacency when it comes to health and safety sees ordinary working people pay the price. Given that service personnel have been medically downgraded and some discharged due to their exposure to the noise and vibrations of Ajax, what measures will be put in place to protect their livelihoods and careers?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the hon. Lady. The passion with which she addresses that point is at the heart of why we undertook the report. I have to be slightly careful about what I say. Four individuals have been discharged and 11 downgraded. There is no definitive causal link established with Ajax, but it is certainly possible that Ajax was a contributory factor to hearing loss. Either way, it is deeply concerning.

The one thing I would say to reassure the hon. Lady is that I am absolutely confident that the same issues could not arise again. The reason I say that with such confidence is that I have seen the safety panels that have been created and the work they now do. There is no longer a situation where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. There is a single repository for knowledge. We have learned, I am pleased to say, from a situation in which all valid information raising difficult questions was spread in different parts of our organisation, and was not being brought forward and focused. I think I can speak with confidence to say that exactly the same problems could not, I believe, re-emerge, but there is more work to do in terms of culture to ensure that that is deeply embedded.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. These are indeed very serious concerns being discussed today and, as other Members have said, they need to be addressed urgently. Alongside that, the committed and loyal staff at General Dynamics in my constituency are very concerned and worried about the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds. I appreciate what the Minister said, but can I press him to give further details on the timescale for the outcome of the review, and a further commitment to ensure that staff, trade unions and the company are fully involved in the discussions, to ensure that the workforce at Merthyr Tydfil are kept in the loop as much as they possibly can be?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his input on this issue. He, like me, knows Merthyr. I visited the factory and the people working there. It is a great set-up and they are very proud of what they do. As I said in my statement, we should not forget that there are many people working tirelessly to deliver Ajax for the British Army. They are very proud of what they are doing and are bringing all their skills to bear to ensure we get that kit and get it as soon as we can. To be clear, there is no review into General Dynamics. We are working with General Dynamics

and we intend to bring this vehicle forward. I cannot give a 100% guarantee, because one never can on a defence procurement programme, but we are a long way down the road on this programme—as we should be, given the number of years that it has taken to get us this far. We have invested heavily in it. It has a great capability. We will continue to invest in it. We will continue to work with GD, which is showing great commitment. I sincerely hope that during the course of next year we will be able to give dates on initial operating capability, full operating capacity and the like. I am looking at this with optimism but with my eyes wide open.

## **Postmasters with Overturned Convictions: Settlement Funds**

### **Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):**

Before this statement, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. Mr Speaker has been advised that there are active legal proceedings in the Court of Appeal in respect of the quashing of convictions of postmasters that relied on evidence from the Post Office Horizon IT system. Mr Speaker is exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters sub judice to allow full reference to those proceedings as they concern issues of national importance.

2.26 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the latest steps that the Government are taking to ensure that swift and fair compensation is made available to postmasters whose Horizon-related convictions are quashed.

The House is very well aware of the terrible impact felt by the many postmasters affected by issues with the Post Office's Horizon IT system. These distressing consequences have been widely documented both in the courts, in the 2019 group litigation order judgments, and in the more recent Court of Appeal judgments, as well as in the media. I have met postmasters personally to hear how their lives and the lives of their families have been affected by these events. No one who has heard these stories could fail to be moved by the impact that these events have had on individual postmasters' lives and their fight for justice over a number of years. I pay tribute to colleagues on both sides of the House who have supported postmasters in their efforts to expose the truth and see justice done.

Today I would like to take the opportunity to update the House on the latest steps the Government are taking to ensure that fair compensation is paid to postmasters with convictions that have been quashed due to Horizon evidence being essential to their prosecution. In the first instance, we worked with the Post Office to deliver interim payments of up to £100,000 for each eligible postmaster. I informed the House of the Government's decision to provide funding for these interim payments last July. Government funding was necessary because the Post Office does not have the necessary funds to deliver the appropriate compensation. That is why it turned to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as its 100% shareholder, for funding of these interim payments.

I am pleased to report to the House that the interim payments are progressing well. The Post Office has received 66 applications for interim payments. Of these, 62 offers have been made, and of those, 50 have been accepted and payments made. Payments made to date have all been for the maximum interim amount of £100,000. I am pleased that these interim payments have helped to deliver an early down payment on the compensation due to affected postmasters in advance of full and final compensation packages being agreed. But that is only the first step. It is right that the focus now shifts to the agreement of full and final settlements. That is why the Government have been working with the Post Office to agree funding to facilitate the Post

[Paul Scully]

Office making final compensation payments to postmasters. As I announced in a written ministerial statement to the House yesterday, the Government have now agreed to provide funding for that purpose. We are working with the Post Office to enable the final settlement negotiations to begin as soon as possible.

To be clear, the Post Office is not proposing a new compensation scheme to deliver full and final settlements. The Post Office is instead proposing to follow a process of alternative dispute resolution in which it will aim to agree an appropriate level of compensation with each postmaster, recognising the individual circumstances of each case. The Government support the Post Office in its aim of reaching fair settlements with postmasters via alternative dispute resolution, as we believe that this will lead to speedier delivery of compensation for postmasters.

I am not in a position to give significant detail today about this process, as the final detailed approach to these negotiations will need to be discussed and agreed between Post Office Ltd and individual postmasters and their representatives. I am sure that colleagues will agree that it is important that the Post Office listens to postmasters' views and that these are taken into account in how these negotiations proceed.

While it will be for the Post Office to negotiate settlements directly with claimants and their representatives, the Government will work closely with the Post Office to ensure that fair compensation is delivered. Given the impacts on so many individual lives, it is right that the Government stand behind the Post Office and provide this funding to ensure that fair compensation can be made to individuals who were wrongly prosecuted and convicted on the basis of unreliable Horizon evidence. While compensation cannot change what is past, it can provide a degree of recompense for past wrongs.

In addition to providing compensation, it is important that we learn lessons so that something similar can never happen again. That is why the Government have set up the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry and put it on a statutory footing to ensure that it has all the powers it needs to investigate what happened, establish the facts and make recommendations for the future. The inquiry has recently set out the full list of issues that it is investigating, and core participants have started to share key documents with the chair, Sir Wyn Williams, and his team. We will co-operate fully with the inquiry to ensure that the facts of what happened are established and lessons learned. I commend this statement to the House.

2.30 pm

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for providing advance sight of it before he came to the Chamber.

I believe we are in unanimous agreement across the House that the Horizon scandal has been a shocking injustice. In fact, I believe it is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the greatest scandals of modern times. It is a scandal that has blighted the lives of hundreds of sub-postmasters, but also their families and those who have worked with them. I join the Minister in paying tribute to those postmasters who have been relentless in their quest for justice, as well as all those in this House,

including my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), and, in the other place, Lord Arbuthnot, for their work in this area.

Given that forensic accountants first went in to discover the truth in 2010, the Minister will appreciate how frustrating it has been for many people to see how protracted this fight for justice has been. Innocent hard-working people wrongly spending time behind bars is simply unconscionable, but to add insult to injustice, the Post Office then attempted to cover up its mistakes by shredding documents and then attempting to bury those seeking justice in endless legal battles. There is, frankly, no condemnation strong enough for such behaviour.

The Government are right to make this announcement. However, I think we must be clear that the Government are not paying this compensation out of the goodness of their heart, but quite simply because there is no other choice to take, given the unambiguous position and the finding in the Court of Appeal. Although we welcome the announcement, I want to press the Government on some key matters that I think need resolving to ensure that all those affected receive the compensation they deserve and that nothing like this can ever happen again.

First, will the Minister confirm that compensation is for everyone, including those who had civil as opposed to criminal processes against them? Surely the Government accept that justice must be available to all affected, not just those who faced criminal prosecution. Further, how many settlements does the Minister envisage being made in totality?

Secondly, will the Minister confirm that the compensation will not affect the Post Office's core funding, day-to-day operations or viability in any way, given the vital role it performs in all our communities?

Thirdly, the Government must acknowledge that all those involved in the initial mistakes and subsequent failures must also bear some responsibility, so will the Minister confirm that none of those involved have been rewarded with top senior jobs elsewhere?

Fourthly, as the Minister referenced the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry, what information can he give the House on the likely timescales that we can expect for further information as to its findings and report?

The shattering reality of this scandal will be felt in families and communities for years to come. The Government have made and taken the right step today, but I believe it will be one of many if we are ever to make amends for this most insidious injustice.

**Paul Scully:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. He is right that we are not making the funding available from the goodness of our heart; we are doing so because it is the right thing to do. I do not think anybody—as well as being a Government Minister, I am a constituency MP and a human being—can read these cases and listen to those involved, and fail to be moved by what has happened over the last 20 years. The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions, so let me try to go through those.

A number of schemes are available, including the historical shortfall scheme, which the Post Office made public and wrote to a number of people about. About 2,500 people came forward, which was more than the Post Office thought would. That scheme is going through

its process at the moment, and the Government are ensuring that it is pushed forward as quickly as possible. The Post Office has also written to 640 postmasters whose prosecution is believed to have had Horizon as a primary part; we will see what happens in terms of people coming back from that. The Court of Appeal will work through those appeals and the Post Office will go through the compensation process.

On the 555 who pioneered this work, I have said in my conversations with them and in correspondence that the settlement was full and final. However, I recognise what they have done and that none of this would have been possible without their work, and I will continue to work with them to see what we can do.

On the core funding that the hon. Gentleman talked about, this money is from government—it is from taxpayers—and it is separate. We have not paid for the Post Office's litigation costs. Compensation will not come from core funding.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the time of the inquiry, and I would expect Sir Wyn Williams to give an update on that as soon as possible. Clearly, we want it to go through as quickly as possible, but we want to make sure it is thorough. There is a lot of documentation and complexity after two decades, as the hon. Gentleman can imagine.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his statement. Will he reflect on the fact that this extraordinary miscarriage of justice has been made worse by the fact that the Post Office could use public money to overwhelm these honest and decent postmasters and postmistresses, so that their legitimate recompense is all, or at least partly, gobbled up by massive legal fees? On behalf of the Government, the Minister will want to reflect on why it has taken so long for them to acknowledge and accept what Members on both sides of the House have been calling for, for years and years—none more so than our former colleague the right hon. Lord Arbuthnot. Will the Minister say a little more about what will be done to hold to account those who so shamefully led the Post Office, and so grievously let down the honest men and women who worked for them?

**Paul Scully**: I thank my right hon. Friend. As I said, the 555 sub-postmasters who were part of the High Court case performed a massive public service by exposing the wrongdoings within the Post Office, and I recognise the deep frustration at the fact that because they agreed that the settlement with the Post Office would be a full and final one, they do not qualify for these compensation schemes. I have met some of those people and, as I said, I will continue to work on what more we can do.

On the people who may be found liable, it is important that Sir Wyn Williams does his work, in an independent inquiry. I may have my own views, but it is not right for me, from this place, to be directing in one way or in one shape or form. I am hoping that he will get his work done quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I begin by paying tribute to all those hard-working people who have been fighting for justice. I welcome the announcement from the Minister, but we must be clear that the Department will ensure that losses made by the Post Office as a

result of former postmasters' class action over the Horizon accounting software will not affect decisions on postmaster pay. I welcome his comments on that. The Horizon case has spanned decades, under consecutive Labour, Liberal and Tory Ministers, and is a stain on the Post Office. Given the issue of postmaster remuneration, with postmasters on less than the minimum wage at times, repayments to postmasters must not, after benefiting shareholders, hurt the postmasters themselves.

We in the Scottish National party were at the forefront of calls for a statutory judge-led inquiry, and Scots postmasters have also subsequently called for an inquiry. The Post Office attempted to appeal its loss in the first trial, which covered the contractual relationship between the Post Office and sub-postmasters. Judge Fraser found that there was a culture of secrecy and confidentiality generally in the Post Office, but particularly in respect of the Horizon accounting and retail system, which sub-postmasters used to run branches. This scandal has been widely reported for more than a decade. It is hard to understand how, in a company entirely held by the BEIS Secretary, this was allowed to continue for so long, and how the Post Office justified refusing to give information on those they were prosecuting in disclosure for fear that it would help the defence. What steps have Ministers from this Administration or previous Administrations taken to question the continuation of these prosecutions? What support will be given to those who continue this campaign?

Hundreds of postmasters running their local community businesses have been affected by this scandal. Many have lost their businesses. There must be full compensation, but can the Minister assure the House that the costs will be paid entirely by the UK Government, so that this is not used as another excuse to make cuts impacting postmasters, who have had to deal with this issue for years? Lastly, can the Minister confirm that all those responsible for the multitude of failings will be held to account?

**Paul Scully**: I fully expect the first and third of the hon. Lady's questions to be dealt with by the statutory inquiry led by Sir Wyn Williams. It is important that he has the space, without my breathing down his neck, to look at this independently and objectively. We can agree that this scandal needs to be righted, and it must never happen again. In terms of the costs, the point of this statement and my previous statement about interim payments is that the Government will be supporting the compensation schemes financially. It is important, given its social value, that the Post Office has a real future, but it will only have a future if we sort out the past.

**Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the work he has done in getting to this stage. I also thank the Prime Minister, who has been engaged in this as well. The people who orchestrated this miscarriage of justice have paid no price. A series of Ministers who came to this place, read out their script, looked the other way and did not ask any questions contributed to the suffering, too, and we should all acknowledge that. I do not include the current Minister in that category.

The 555 sub-postmasters who so bravely took on the Post Office through the group litigation, paid for Mr Justice Fraser's judgment. Surely they should be allowed to be compensated on an equal footing, because it is they

[Lucy Allan]

who exposed the wrongdoing. We should be thanking them and ensuring that they are compensated equally. Does the Minister agree?

**Paul Scully:** What I have said is that everyone who has been wronged by this should have full and fair justice and full and fair compensation, and I absolutely acknowledge the role of the 555 in pioneering to get us to this position. I will continue to work to see what more we can do to work with the 555 to ensure that they are fully included in what I have just said about justice and compensation.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for wiping me out of the campaign, or not recognising my contribution to the campaign over the past few years. I first got involved in this campaign 10 years ago. My constituent Tom Brown was accused of stealing £84,000, which he paid back. After two years, the Post Office dropped the case having bankrupted the individual. He was one of the 555, and without them and the discovery that went along with that, the deceit, the cover-up and the downright lies would not have been exposed. He will now only get £20,000. The Minister has moved this on more than his predecessors, but these people need access to that justice. They only settled because the Post Office used £100 million of public money to force them to the negotiating table. They cannot be left high and dry; they were the people who got to the truth around this. They need fully compensating, even if they just get back what they paid back. In Tom's case, that is £84,000 that the Post Office has that was never missing and is still in their coffers.

**Paul Scully:** I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's work over the past 10 years and the conversations we have had on this. I just let him know that I very much hear exactly what he is saying. I totally empathise with what he is saying, and I will continue to work to that end.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for changing the policy. I have been a long-standing critic of past Governments and Ministers for not telling the Post Office to apologise and pay up, and I encourage him today to ensure that the Post Office apologises properly, and pays up quickly and generously.

**Paul Scully:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will ensure that we lean into the Post Office to ensure that they deliver all compensation schemes quickly and equitably so that we can get this issue sorted out. The Post Office has acknowledged that it has done wrong, but the inquiry will detail the questions that it needs to answer over the next few months.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I pay tribute to the fortitude and persistence of Della Ryan, the former sub-postmistress at Dukinfield? Sub-postmasters and mistresses were ostracised, persecuted and prosecuted by the state. They lost their businesses, their mental health and physical health deteriorated, and some lost relationships. Compensation is a drop in the ocean compared to the decade of hell that they have

been through, but how many people does the Minister expect to receive compensation? Some 555 took part in the litigation, but he said that only 66 had so far made applications for compensation. Why is there such a big gap?

**Paul Scully:** The 66 people who have applied are those who had been convicted. There is clearly a wider group who have lost money, as we heard earlier from the constituent of the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). There are various compensation schemes for people who have had shortfalls and for those who have had convictions overturned—the 66 people I mentioned. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) is absolutely right that we need to acknowledge not just the financial losses—as bad as they are—but the impact on mental health, the strains, people's ostracisation from communities, and, in some cases, the deaths.

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I have listened to some of the harrowing tales about what has gone on in this situation, and I am sure that the issue will come back to the Committee at a later point.

One of the biggest failings was the attitude of the Post Office throughout, including the culture of denial. Will the Minister assure us that the Post Office itself has been challenged to ensure that that culture changes and we do not see such a situation again? As has been said, the sooner that we can get payments to these people, the better. We cannot let it drag on forever; it must be as quick and prompt as possible.

**Paul Scully:** I look forward to coming to my hon. Friend's Select Committee next month to discuss the issue further. The Post Office has acknowledged that there have been wrongs in the past. There still remain issues that we discuss, but discussions can become too legalistic, when what the wronged postmasters actually want is more empathy; we will continue to work to that end. As my hon. Friend says, we want to ensure that we bring this matter to a swift and fair end.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Postmasters were criminalised by a culture that assumed that technology could not fail and workers were dishonest, so will the Minister tell us what steps the Government are taking to ensure that a scandal like this cannot happen again?

**Paul Scully:** These questions have been addressed not just in the original Justice Fraser report, which talked about the technology and the Horizon software; Sir Wyn Williams also has technical advisers to his independent inquiry to give him advice on the recommendations that he may want to make. We will indeed ensure that the software, which has been improved—there have been iterations since the last of the prosecutions—continues to improve. Indeed, I would expect it to be replaced at some point.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Horizon scandal obviously ruined many hundreds of lives, and the whole House will welcome the Government stepping in to meet the bill for compensation. However, the involvement of the Treasury in previous compensation schemes—Equitable Life comes to mind, but others too—has not always been wholly beneficial. Does my

hon. Friend agree that we must not allow arbitrary Treasury rules to limit the compensation paid to these postmasters, whose lives have often been completely ruined by the process—not simply the financial process, but the emotional and social damage?

**Paul Scully:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Clearly the Treasury has these rules to make sure it gets the best value for taxpayers' money but, none the less, some things go beyond that. We have talked about the human cost now and umpteen times over the past 20 years, and it is important we get this right.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On the watch of the former Post Office managing director Mr Alan Cook, now the very well-paid chair of Liverpool Victoria, I understand more than 160 sub-postmasters were prosecuted and almost 60 went to prison. I hope the Minister is able to say how many of those sub-postmasters will be compensated and whether Mr Cook has been invited to give evidence to Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry.

Specifically, does the Minister share my view that, for that record as well as his ill-judged effort to demutualise LV=, there are questions as to whether Mr Cook is any longer a fit and proper person to run a major business?

**Paul Scully:** I will not comment on Alan Cook, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, but I recognise what he says about this statement, previous statements and Liverpool Victoria. Such issues will be a matter for Sir Wyn's inquiry.

On the convictions, the Post Office has received 66 claims for interim payments and has made 62 offers, of which 50 have been accepted. There are people with convictions that they believe to be unsafe, and the Post Office has contacted 640 people. The Criminal Cases Review Commission has said those people can go directly to the Court of Appeal to seek the overturning of those convictions. We will see how many come forward, but it is difficult for me to give an exact figure.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): I have been contacted by a constituent who was among the 555 litigants in the civil proceedings brought against Post Office Ltd back in 2018-19. Of course, as we have heard, those litigants are excluded from the current compensation schemes. What redress, support and compensation does the Minister think my constituent and the other original litigants actually deserve?

**Paul Scully:** I have said that the majority of them are pioneers, and I need to do more work with them. I say "the majority" because some of the 555 were convicted themselves and will potentially have unsafe convictions, so they will be eligible for the interim payment of £100,000 and will move on to the wider compensation that we are discussing today.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The Horizon scandal is one of the worst we have seen, and the wider Government—not just the Post Office—particularly need to learn the lessons on how to treat IT evidence. I welcome the statement and the approval of these funds, but does the Minister agree that the Post Office must now make significant cultural and organisational changes to repair the relationship with postmasters and to make sure that such a situation can never be repeated?

**Paul Scully:** I appreciate my hon. Friend's words and, yes, the Post Office must do that, and it is. Nick Read, the chief executive, has come a long way to give the Post Office that future by resetting the relationship with postmasters and sub-postmasters. There is clearly more to do, but we will best provide that future by giving sub-postmasters the confidence and trust they need by righting the wrongs of the past.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): In a Select Committee evidence session in 2019 we heard from postmasters affected by the Horizon debacle, and we heard harrowing accounts of small family enterprises—often a husband and wife—working through the night to go through the books to find losses that did not exist because the computer system did not work. I welcome the interim compensation payments that the Minister has announced today. Will he say a bit more about the Government's role? In their response to the Committee's report, the Government acknowledged their own responsibility

"to have visibility of and challenge Post Office Ltd's major operational and strategic decisions to ensure the sustainability of the network is maintained and that good corporate governance and financial stewardship practices are upheld."

On that basis, does he believe the Government should have grasped the situation earlier and acted more decisively? What improvements are being made to make certain that postmasters are never again placed in this position?

**Paul Scully:** First, I believe we now have robust monitoring not just of the compensation schemes but of the future relationship with the Post Office and postmasters. That is exactly what Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is there to find out—not just the Post Office's role, but the Government's role. If we have fallen short of expectations, I expect to put my hands up and say we got it wrong.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): As a former postmaster—I think probably the only one in the House—I really welcome this statement. It ought to be placed on the record that the Minister has done more than anyone else in his position to doggedly pursue this issue, and many, many people out there who are affected will be very grateful for this news.

I want to touch on two aspects. On the £100,000 that has been paid to those who have had their convictions quashed, will there be a cap on the amount paid out as compensation? Can he give any further reassurance on when the full and final settlements will be made?

**Paul Scully:** I appreciate my hon. Friend's kind words. The £100,000 has gone out as interim compensation. The full and final compensation will not be capped but will be worked out on an individual basis, because everybody is an individual and we have heard so many different examples of that.

As for people in different types of compensation schemes, we want to get this done as quickly as possible. I hope and expect that the historical shortfall scheme will be done by the end of next year. I will continue to work with everybody on this matter, because it is so important. I know that they want this sorted out tomorrow; there are complications, but people continue to suffer and I will do everything I can. My new year's resolution—I will make it early—is that I will get this sorted out as soon as I can.

**Jonathan Reynolds:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** As long as it is related to the previous statement.

**Jonathan Reynolds:** It is. My hon. Friend for North Durham—

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Right honourable Friend.

**Jonathan Reynolds:** My right hon. Friend—it has been a busy week—did, of course, play a major role in the postmasters' campaign. He was quite right to object to my failure to mention him, and I would like to apologise to him for that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That is not entirely a point of order or a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman has put his thanks and his apology on the record.

## Speaker's Statement

2.57 pm

**Mr Speaker:** I would like to announce the result of today's ballot to elect the new Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. Three hundred and fifteen votes were cast with no spoilt ballot papers. The counting went for two rounds. There were 286 valid votes in the second round, excluding the ballot papers where the preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 144 votes, and Dame Diana Johnson was elected Chair with 154 votes. She will take up her post immediately, and I would like to congratulate her. The result of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and will be published online—congratulations, Dame Diana Johnson.

## Child Criminal Exploitation

*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.58 pm

**Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make involvement in child criminal exploitation an aggravating factor in sentencing for drug supply, drug production, drug importation and money laundering offences; to make being a victim of child criminal exploitation a mitigating factor in sentencing for such offences; to establish reviews of sentencing guidelines in relation to the prevention of child criminal exploitation and criminal liability in relation to child criminal exploitation for organised criminal offenders; to amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to include a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation; to create a register of child criminal exploitation offenders; to place duties on public bodies to make plans to prevent, and collaborate in preventing, child criminal exploitation; to make provision about the reporting of the scale of child criminal exploitation and the inclusion of such exploitation in child, domestic, and offensive weapons homicide reviews; to require criminal justice agencies to publish information on their responses to child criminal exploitation; to make provision about the training of professionals in responding to child criminal exploitation; to make provision about the content and national oversight of local serious violence strategies in relation to child criminal exploitation; and for connected purposes.

In Newham, we have experienced dreadful damage to our communities done by those who have criminally exploited our children. Between January 2017 and March 2018, we lost no less than nine young lives in West Ham alone. Many of those murders related to the use of children by drug gangs, colloquially known as “county lines”. Organised crime has always done harm, especially in impoverished communities, but this is a fresh horror, as this business model is relatively new. The exploitation of children is not inevitable if we have a strategy to stop it now, and stop it for good.

Isaac Donkoh groomed two 14-year-old and two 16-year-old boys until they were willing to help to kidnap and torture another 16-year-old child in 2018. He recorded that brutality on his phone. That child abuser got 12 years and will be out in 2024, but the horror of that crime did not stop there. Two of the children he groomed were responsible for murdering Santino Dymiter just one year later. They are now serving life sentences, but the person actually responsible for destroying all these lives is Isaac Donkoh, and he and his wider drug-dealing network, sadly, are getting off lightly.

I ask hon. Members to imagine what it is like to be caught up in this as a child, like one of my constituents who was groomed by his neighbour. Three days before Christmas, he did not come home. He called mum the next night, frantic, whispering into his phone, telling her some men had him and he did not know where he was or what he could do. He was frightened for his life and he just wanted his mum. As that child, we gain an understanding that those who gave us gifts and respect now have us trapped—but how do we get out? These older men are brutal, they have real power over us, and we have heard terrible stories of what happens to those who speak to the police.

The truth is that often there is no support to get out. Frankly, even when I am involved and asking for help for families personally, the support is not quick enough or good enough to save a child, to move them and their

family out of harm’s way. Local GPs tell me they have children presenting to them with post-traumatic stress disorder because of what they have seen. Dozens of families are grieving children torn away from them, murdered or turned into murderers.

From West Ham, that death toll includes David Gomoh and Sami Sidhom, both targeted at random. Ahmed Deen-Jah was murdered and his younger brother Junior murdered four years later. Fares Maatou and CJ Davis were just 14 years old when they were murdered, and let us also remember Jaden Moody, 14 years old, the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). There are too many dead.

Those exploiting our children are doing it repeatedly. It is a cheap way of making loads of money. So what is being done to ensure the risk is tracked and children protected? How will we prevent Isaac Donkoh from abusing children again? I know there are slavery and trafficking prevention orders available, but I want the Government to look at creating a register of criminal child exploiters, taking this risk as seriously as that of other child abuse perpetrators, because these people who abuse children for profit are frankly the lowest of the low.

However, we know that registers will not be enough. More than anything, we need criminal laws that work to destroy the business model of county lines. The police are working hard locally and the response, with the National County Lines Coordination Centre, has improved massively since I first raised these issues four years ago, but the business model continues to flourish and children are dying. Our response is simply not at the level needed to wipe out this form of child abuse.

The Met has told me that it has had 10 convictions to date, since the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was implemented five and a half years ago. I asked the Government how many convictions for modern slavery offences there have been nationally, but they do not know. They have not known answers to many questions I have asked. Moreover, the 10-year drugs strategy launched last week barely even mentioned the criminal exploitation of children.

We need a commitment and a strategy to end the abuse of children through the drugs trade completely within the next few years. To do that, we need all public agencies joined up, we need information, we need resources, and we need to change the law. We need dedicated offences for modern slavery, and they have to do the job. What about where it is someone’s role to groom children to be criminally exploited by others? Currently it can be hard to fit that into the framework of existing offences, and we should deal with that.

We need to understand that this is about the business model that incentivises drug gangs to exploit children again and again across the country. When drug offenders are sentenced, child exploitation must be an aggravating factor and carry a really big penalty. It has to become too costly for the exploiters, the groomers and the gang leaders to use children in that way, or to tolerate it from those they work with. We need to destroy the economic model of this crime.

We have to go further. Organised drug crimes are complex, and there are often many layers and, sometimes, little proof of a direct link of knowledge between the children being exploited on the street and those who are living in luxury in gated communities, profiting at a distance from their misery.

[Ms Lyn Brown]

I have urged the Government to go after those at the top for many years but, despite the best efforts of my police service and despite serious innovations in cracking phones and using the data gleaned to secure prosecutions, there is simply not enough direct proof in many cases to make those at the top accountable for the method of distribution at street level. So, I want us to consider what we could almost see as a corporate liability approach.

No one proven to be leading a drug supply operation that profits from child abuse should be able to escape a massively higher sentence by pleading ignorance of the practices further down the supply chain. It should be enough for us to prove that they facilitated the actions of the exploiters—by laundering money, by supplying drugs or weapons, or in any other criminal way. Nor should we be requiring a victim to testify, not for crimes where violence is rife. That would not be fair.

We need to give the most powerful people in the criminal underworld a huge incentive to clean house and stamp out county lines for good. If they do not, and if a street gang that they are supplying is grooming children and traumatising communities, they will pay a heavy price on top of the sentence for their direct offending. Put simply, those who do criminal business with child abusers like Isaac Donkoh should be held responsible for the consequences—for the lives lost, for the lives destroyed, and for the fear and the grief that my constituents endure.

We must take concerted, sustained and strategic action to end the child exploitation business model for good. I believe that this Bill takes us some way to doing just that. I humbly request that the Bill be given due consideration and passed into law.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Ms Lyn Brown, Florence Eshalomi, Robert Halfon, Catherine McKinnell, Charlotte Nichols, Janet Daby, Stephen Timms, Kate Osamor, Sir Mike Penning, Ms Karen Buck, Marsha De Cordova and Stella Creasy present the Bill.

Ms Lyn Brown accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 January 2022, and to be printed (Bill 220).*

## Professional Qualifications Bill [Lords]

*Second Reading*

3.8 pm

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Services are a critical part of our economy, our trade and our lives. UK-qualified professionals in sectors including architecture, law and medicine, among many others, are at the forefront of their fields globally. It is a testament to their success that the UK is today the second largest exporter of services in the entire world. Good regulation is essential in providing the confidence that the market needs to grow. Good regulation is essential in providing the confidence that the market needs to grow. The Bill supports that endeavour so that services can not only thrive but provide excellent jobs in the future.

**Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab):** The British Dental Association has warned that the Bill could water down the standards required to practise. What are the Secretary of State's thoughts on that? What assurance can he give the House that standards will be maintained?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I assure the hon. Lady that many such issues were rightly addressed and debated at great length in the other place. I have seen the concerns of some of our professional bodies. I feel that the Bill gives a measure of support, and I feel strongly that it is proportionate. It is on that basis that I am introducing the Bill and begging leave for it to be read a Second time.

I turn to the Bill's elements—perhaps through these remarks the hon. Lady may get some reassurance. First, the Bill will revoke the current EU-based approach, temporarily retained from the end of the transition period, which often gives unreciprocated preferential access to holders of European economic area and Swiss qualifications, and put in place a new system that is global in outlook and can be tailored to the UK's needs. The Bill is not a rejection of the valuable skills offered by EU professionals. On the contrary, it will ensure fairness and put them on an even footing with applicants from around the world. Professionals who have already had their qualifications recognised and work in the UK can continue to do so provided that they meet any ongoing practice requirements.

The Bill will also enable the Government and devolved Administrations to act promptly where shortages in services may occur and where consumers may well face unreasonable delays and charges. That is particularly important for regulated professions in the public sector. For example, in a 10-year period, just under a quarter of all UK recognition decisions were for secondary school teachers alone. Let me be clear, however, that the Bill is intended to complement, and not simply to replace, the Government's ambitious domestic skills agenda.

The Bill will also support our trade agenda and boost UK businesses exporting services all over the world—in short, it will help spread our skills, innovation and expertise abroad. It will ensure that the UK can implement professional qualification provisions in the future trade deals that we all anticipate with enthusiasm. It will also ensure that UK regulators can be empowered to strike

deals on recognition with their overseas counterparts while taking full advantage of provisions in such future trade deals. Finally, it will help professionals, both at home and from overseas, to access global markets.

We are working collaboratively with the devolved Administrations and devolved regulators, and I very much hope that we will come to a resolution on legislative consent by the time that the Bill leaves the House. Of course, our regulators' expertise underpins all our professions, and that is the very reason why the Bill has the protection of regulator autonomy at its very heart. Regulators agree that that is the right approach, and in general they have voiced hearty support for the Bill.

This Bill is about ensuring that the regulation of professional qualifications works for the whole of the country's interests. It is about fairness, ensuring that wherever professionals may come from, they have an equal opportunity to practise their professions; and it is about making access to professions more transparent, as well as supporting our own UK trade agenda. On that basis, I commend it to the House.

3.15 pm

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Having the skilled workforce that our employers need is essential for the economic success of our country. The shortages of lorry drivers, carers, nurses, doctors and vets, and the shortages in hospitality and in farming, are well documented. Some are covered by this legislation, which, as the Secretary of State said, replaces EU law and allows the recognition of qualifications in other countries, so that workers can come here and fill the gaps in our economy. The requirements for our future economic success include the need for mutual recognition of qualifications to the benefit of our domestic businesses, public and voluntary sectors. Our success as we recover from covid will depend on the boosting of our prospects for trade internationally, for instance through the ability of UK professionals to apply their expertise abroad.

Regulators must remain independent, and it would undermine them and the high British standards they uphold were the Government to force them to accept professional qualifications awarded overseas which were of a lower standard. I shall return to that point, and explain how the Bill has been amended in the House of Lords.

The public will expect high standards of health, public safety and consumer protection to be maintained. We need to address shortages of key skilled staff, but the overseas qualifications that have been recognised in the UK by professional bodies need to have been accredited by the regulators themselves on the basis that they meet or exceed our standards, and not because the regulators are pressured into lowering standards by the Government as a consequence of poorly conceived international agreements. The Conservative peer Lord Bourne said that these were far from unreasonable fears, and I therefore hope that this issue will be explicitly addressed. The Government have made promises that standards will be maintained, and those promises need to be kept.

Most of the changes for which the Bill provides are designed to be implemented through secondary legislation. The use of statutory instruments has become the

Government's favourite method of legislating, and it is essential that all changes made through secondary legislation can be scrutinised in full.

Attracting talent to the UK is essential for public services and the wider economy, but we are currently facing a skills shortage. The recognition of overseas qualifications is not a silver bullet to end that shortage; nor is it a long-term answer. A neglect of skills by this Government has seen further education funding halved and 200,000 apprenticeships lost since 2016. The Government must invest in skills at home and must do so in a strategic way, with a long term view. Indeed, a national and ambitious strategy would be very welcome, and is surely a part of any serious levelling-up agenda—if the said agenda is to become more than a slogan.

The shortage of intermediate and advanced-level technical skills has been highlighted for many years by business, trade unions and the Labour party. The need for overseas skilled workers, at least in the short to medium term, is one result, and when there are regulatory difficulties in recruiting from overseas, the scale of the problem becomes apparent. The most recent NHS figures reveal that there are about 39,000 vacancies for registered nurses in England. The president of the British Veterinary Association, James Russell, has said that between 400 and 500 vets working part time will be needed to fill in additional export health certificates for meat and fish products—from sausages to salmon—shipped to Northern Ireland alone, with many more needed owing to other increases in demand. The occupations of nurses and vets are among the 205 covered in the Bill.

Labour would seek regulatory equivalence for financial services and mutual recognition of professional qualifications, because we absolutely recognise the importance of looking after our world-class financial and professional service businesses. Our ability to trade internationally, not least to maximise our trade in services, is essential to our long-term economic prospects, to the creation of good jobs at home and to the prosperity of people and communities across the UK.

The initial version of the Bill did not stand up to scrutiny. The *Financial Times* reported the way in which the Government introduced it as a

“chaotic handling of a post-Brexit regime for recognising the qualifications of foreign professionals”,

in contrast to the Government's claim that it would help to make Britain

“the best place in the world to work”.

I want Britain to be the best place in the world to work. I want us to buy more, make more and sell more in Britain, but serious concerns have been raised about the Government's mismanagement of such an important piece of legislation. One concern was that the Bill as originally presented was not going to give British employers what they needed to ensure that our economy and our people could thrive.

Remarkably, the Government admitted introducing the Bill to Parliament without knowing which professions were in scope of the legislation. Labour argued in the Lords that we had to know who and what was in the scope of the Bill. It stands to reason that the relevant regulators and professions need to be aware of these changes. That was why we tabled amendments in the Lords to ensure that this information was made public. But the disarray continued. Having initially listed

[Bill Esterson]

160 professions and 50 regulators affected by the legislation, the Government twice published a revised list, ultimately increasing the numbers to 205 professions and 80 regulators. Due to the increased number of regulators in scope of the legislation, the Government also had to publish an updated impact assessment, with the total cost to regulators increasing by nearly £2 million. That is hardly the way to inspire confidence that the legislation will help businesses or skilled workers.

The Government were criticised from all sides in the Lords, including by those on their own Back Benches. Conservative peer Baroness Noakes said that

“it has all the hallmarks of being a Bill conceived and executed by officials with little or no ministerial policy direction or oversight...we learn that the Bill was drafted with a far-from-perfect understanding of the territory that it purports to cover. This is no way to legislate.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 June 2021; Vol. 813, c. 149.]

My Labour colleague Baroness Hayter said of the list:

“I understand that it has taken BEIS a little time to get it right. I think we have had two updates of the list, with some regulators added and some gone. I see that the pig farmers have gone from the latest list and the aircraft engineers have also disappeared, as have analytical chemists. However, we have in their place chicken farmers, schoolteachers and waste managers—so it seems that the Government can turn flying pigs into chickens.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 November 2021; Vol. 815, c. 1696.]

Given the shambolic way in which the Bill was introduced, it would have come as no surprise if someone had accused Ministers of making a right pig’s ear of the legislation. It is little wonder, then, that with wonderful understatement the Government spokesman, Lord Grimstone said—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State might want to hear this from his own Minister in the Lords. Lord Grimstone said that the errors and various revisions had made him feel “uncomfortable”, and that he had listened to the criticism with “a certain lack of enjoyment.” To the credit of Lord Grimstone, he had the grace to confess his embarrassment at the mistakes made by the Government.

I return to the matter of regulatory autonomy. Consistent arguments were made by peers that this legislation must not undermine the autonomy and independence of regulators. Independence is essential to protect domestic standards and consumers. Labour’s amendment in the Lords sought to guarantee regulator autonomy, and our amendment was supported by the Conservatives Lord Lansley and Baroness Noakes, and indeed across the parties. As a result, the Government amended the Bill to provide statutory protection for regulator autonomy. I was hoping that that was where the Secretary of State was going to go in his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), but he did not go quite that far.

We are told by the Government that their changes to the Bill should protect domestic standards across 205 regulated professions and ensure that regulators are not obliged to reduce standards due to provisions included by the Government in free trade agreements. The change made to the Bill was welcomed by regulators and stakeholders. The Bill has been improved, thanks in large part to my Labour colleagues in the Lords. However, there remain outstanding concerns, including about how the Government will consult and seek the consent of devolved Administrations. We believe that the Bill should be amended to ensure that the devolved

Administrations have a proper voice when the powers in it are used. We will press these points in Committee, as we did in the Lords.

We as a country have serious shortages of skilled workers. Some, such as those related to heavy goods vehicle drivers, are well documented, but there are many others. To give just one other example, the most recent NHS figures reveal that there are about 39,000 vacancies for registered nurses in England, with many unfilled posts. The number of nurses from the European economic area joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council register has fallen by more than 90%, from 9,389 in the year to 31 March 2016 to just 810 in the year to 31 March 2021. Thousands of nursing shifts each week cannot be filled because of staff shortages, according to hospital safe staffing reports. That is unacceptable.

Of course, this is an area that requires attention from other Departments if it is to be addressed, but given the severity of the situation and the fact that the shortages were often predictable and predicted, it is essential that the Bill gets it right and ensures that our country has the skills it needs today and in the future. The Government’s approach to the Bill so far does not inspire confidence that it will play its part in addressing the shortage of nurses or, indeed, care staff, many grades of whom are also covered by the Bill.

The Bill provides a framework to allow mutual recognition of professional qualifications between regulators and professional bodies in the UK and the equivalent organisations overseas. The provisions in clauses 3 and 4 will allow for the implementation of regulator-to-regulator mutual recognition agreements and of the recognition arrangements in new international trade agreements. Importantly, the Law Society advises that the Bill will enable the mutual recognition agreement provisions in the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement to be implemented, but it raises concerns about the arrangements. It says that the provisions for mutual recognition agreements in the TCA are largely based on the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement, but no mutual recognition agreements have been signed between the EU and Canada in the three years since CETA came into force.

The concern that the Law Society raises is that the fact that no mutual recognition agreements have been signed using similar provisions may mean that the arrangements in the TCA are not sufficient for setting up such new agreements as are needed to encourage professionals to make up the shortages of nurses or vets, or those in 203 other professions. The Law Society therefore wants assurances from the Government—we will pursue the same point in Committee—that additional support, co-ordination and guidance will be available, if needed, on how to make the most of the provisions in the trade and co-operation agreement, not least in case they are to form the benchmark for future free trade agreements. I trust that the Minister, in winding up the debate, will address the very real concern about how to ensure that mutual recognition agreements are put in place in a timely fashion.

As it was the Law Society that carried out the analysis about the need for additional attention to be paid to how mutual recognition agreements will be negotiated, let us remember that legal services in the UK contribute £4.29 billion to our international trade each year. We are a global legal centre, and solicitors in England and Wales are respected the world over. The Minister with

responsibility for professional services—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley)—is not here, but perhaps his colleague who is responding to the debate can tell us, on his behalf, what assurances the Government can offer the Law Society, which wants legal qualifications to be recognised abroad and needs mutual recognition agreements to be secured but fears that, without additional Government impetus, none will be.

There is much still to do with this Bill. Lord Grimstone had the decency to accept its shortcomings and some of the changes needed, with Labour’s help, on regulator autonomy, but there is more to do in Committee and on Report in this House. On consultation with the devolved Administrations, we need the Government to come back to us. On the maintenance of high standards of health, public safety and consumer protection, on keeping promises that regulators will not be pressured by the Government into lowering standards, and on scrutiny of changes made through secondary legislation, we need assurances. On being able to attract professionals and fill the holes in our labour market, the Government need to do much better now, while putting in place a plan to address skills shortages in the long term.

The Labour party will address the concerns of employers, to support our economy, professional workers in this country and those who wish to work abroad. This is in our national interest. I hope that the Government will engage with us in that spirit and address the concerns raised in the Lords, by the professional organisations that need this legislation to be effective and by the devolved Administrations. I also hope that Ministers will address the shortcomings that we have identified in a way that delivers a system of mutual recognition of professional qualifications that is fit for purpose.

3.30 pm

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): May I start by outlining that although the Scottish National party is not against the principles of the Bill, we cannot support it as it stands? I am not looking to divide the House at this stage, because I hear from the Secretary of State that constructive engagement is taking place. We will be happy to look at what we can agree as the Bill progresses through Committee and its remaining stages, but it is certainly worth putting it on the record that there are concerns in the Scottish Government and in elements of Scottish civil society—I do not think that anyone is in any doubt about that.

The Bill’s intention is to facilitate the cross-border recognition and regulation of professional qualifications so that we can ensure an integrated system for the transfer of professionals. It is certainly welcome that the Government are addressing the issue; the regulation and recognition of qualifications from abroad is particularly significant to smaller countries such as Scotland that seek to attract incredible skills and expertise from our neighbours. As an example, the world-leading Scottish food and drink industry, and indeed that of the whole UK, has traditionally been very heavily reliant on the services of EU-qualified vets, who were able to bring their skills to Scotland under the terms of EU rules on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who bring their qualifications and skills to contribute to our industries, which is precisely why it is so crucial to recognise consistency in qualifications to support working across countries. SNP Members’ preferred solution, of course, would be to recognise Scotland’s democratic vote in 2016 and rejoin the European Union, but it might be pushing it a bit to persuade Government Members to do that. In the meantime, it is important that we have legislation in place to ensure that skills and experience are not lost in any steps that we take.

The SNP supports the key principles that the Bill seeks to address, but there are technicalities. Technicalities often matter a great deal more than principle, and unfortunately the Bill is another example of the Government using technicalities to undermine devolution and hoping that no one will notice. I will come back to that point shortly, but it is worth running through some of the Bill’s devolved implications more generally.

The whole Bill applies to Scotland. Certain professions and qualifications are reserved to this place, but plenty are not, including teaching, the legal profession and some social care professions. The Bill does not make separate provision for devolved and reserved professions; it applies to all regulated professions active in Scotland, whether they are reserved or devolved. I appreciate that the Government recognise that point to a degree and are seeking legislative consent from the devolved legislatures to clauses 1 to 10 and 15, as they should. However, there are other clauses that evidently fall within devolved competence but for which the Government are not seeking permission from the devolved Administrations.

Clause 13(1) provides that a power to make regulations under the Bill

“includes power...to make consequential...or saving provision.”

That the UK Government can consider a clause relating to consequential as outwith the Scottish Parliament’s competence is a bit surprising, to say the least.

Clause 16 is really the devolution buster. When the Bill was originally introduced, it defined “appropriate national authority” as

“the Secretary of State or the Lord Chancellor”,

forgetting that Ministers of a devolved Government are also appropriate national authorities for provisions that fall within devolved competence. As the Law Society of Scotland notes:

“The Scottish Ministers are also an ‘appropriate national authority’ in relation to regulations under the bill which contain only provision which are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.”

Clause 16(3) helpfully remembers that Scottish Ministers are also a relevant authority. That is encouraging—it is progress—but there is still no provision requiring consent from a UK Minister to act in those areas.

In practice that means that any power conferred on the appropriate national authority in devolved areas can be exercised by UK Ministers. There is no requirement for UK Ministers to seek consent from the Scottish or Welsh Governments when exercising those powers. When the Secretary of State makes regulations under those powers, they would be subject to procedures in this place instead of the Scottish Parliament. The Bill alters the Executive competence of Scottish Ministers by enabling the Secretary of State to act in devolved areas without the requirement for consent. It is not the first time that that has happened, and for as long as Scotland remains part of the Union, I am sure it will not be the last.

[Owen Thompson]

The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which was passed in this place despite the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd's refusal of consent, treats devolution as an inconvenience to get around, rather than as a backbone of our constitution. Through that Act, the Government have given themselves power to subject

"healthcare services provided in hospitals"

in Scotland to market access principles, without needing the Scottish Parliament's consent. It creates an external Westminster body that is responsible for testing whether a Bill in Holyrood would affect the UK internal market. Power has been taken from Scotland's elected Parliament and placed in the hands of unelected bureaucrats—I am sure that sounds familiar from somewhere.

The Bill falls into a pattern of power grabs. As I say, we do not seek to oppose it at this stage, but I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to take those points on board. When the devolved nations raise concerns about consent being ignored or not required, the response we have tended to get time and again from the UK Government is that they do not intend to use those powers without consent. However, we need more than pinky promises when it comes to what does or does not require consent. In that way, the Government avoid clashing with the devolved nations and are forced to keep their promises. Indeed, the only possible reason they would not do it is that they do in fact intend to meddle with devolution without consent. If that is not the case, I look forward to amendments being tabled to make that case solidly, and I say to the Government: prove me wrong.

In conclusion, I urge the Government to take these simple steps. Our asks on the Bill are relatively straightforward. The Scottish Government are currently recommending that the Scottish Parliament does not give its consent to the Bill. Its provisions are only required because we are leaving the EU—something Scotland voted against—and it adds insult to injury by trampling on devolution, which Scotland overwhelmingly did vote for. The Government do not have to be hellbent on making the Bill controversial and unconstitutional, and I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to table amendments to bring it into line with devolution.

3.38 pm

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I will not detain the House for long, but I put on record that I think the brevity of this afternoon's debate more reflects concern about the rise of the omicron variant than it does a lack of interest in this important subject. Professional qualifications are a key part of many sectors of our economy and public realm. They are significant factors in the protection of service users, from consumers to covid patients. The Bill promotes mutual recognition and professional qualifications. It increases opportunities for many, including nurses and lawyers, to work here and abroad.

Many Members of the House will have constituents who could be impacted by the Bill. Newcastle has many professionals who may benefit from the recognition of their qualifications, and many businesses that might look to recruit international talent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) emphasised,

it is essential that we maintain our high standards and recognise that qualification recognition, although important to our public services and economy, will not solve our skills shortage. The Government must invest in skills and also give our regions the power to do so. I emphasise that because Labour wants Britain to be the best place in the world to live and to work. The Bill started in the other place and my Labour colleagues' work on it certainly reflects that. Their scrutiny and amendments have significantly improved the Bill by securing statutory protections for regulator autonomy and statutory consultations with regulators. Regulating key professions is not a market option; it is essential to protect service users and professionals.

Unfortunately, it remains the case that far too much of the actual content of the Bill will be passed as secondary legislation. That is unacceptable. In addition, as emphasised by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), the devolved Administrations are not adequately consulted and must have a voice. The Government have a duty, indeed, to consult them and to seek the consent of devolved Administrations as the Bill passes through the House.

The Government's handling of the Bill has been chaotic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) said, they introduced the Bill without knowing which professions were in its scope. We have a weak Prime Minister without the support of his own Back Benchers. But it is absolutely essential that we protect our regulators' autonomy to ensure that our standards are fit for purpose and that we protect the professional standards that British citizens have come to rely on. Labour is therefore demanding that the Government amend the Bill to ensure that Parliament is given the opportunity to scrutinise secondary legislation appropriately and that the devolved Administrations are included in the regulation-making process. I look forward to the Government recognising the validity of our concerns as the Bill passes through this House.

3.42 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). I thank everybody who has spoken during the debate. [Interruption.] Yes, all the people in this extensive debate.

This Bill will support trade through allowing regulations to implement trade agreements and allowing our own professionals to enter new markets. It will also support our work to meet domestic need, such as addressing national shortages, while ensuring that professional standards are maintained and regulator autonomy is protected.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly noted the relevance of the Bill to supporting international trade for our world-leading services sectors. Provisions on the recognition of professional qualifications can make it easier for UK professionals to provide services overseas—for example, by making it easier for regulators to agree recognition agreements with overseas counterparts. With trade partners, the Government would look to agree provisions that could require regulators to operate routes to recognition. Our deals with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, for example, include this type of measure. But I can reassure the House that in any

agreement regulators' existing autonomy to set standards and assess them against these deals would be maintained. Regulators are not obligated to enter into recognition agreements with counterpart regulators overseas.

Turning specifically to the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement, this secures continued market access across a broad range of key services sectors, including professional and business services. It also includes the framework to agree professional-specific arrangements on the recognition of professional qualifications. BEIS has established a recognitions arrangement team that provides advice and support to regulators if they pursue these arrangements. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) talked about legal services, in particular. The TCA with the EU secures continued market access across a broad range of key services sectors, but on legal services we negotiated unprecedented provisions for UK lawyers to practise in the EU using their UK title in both UK and international law.

The UK proposed ambitious arrangements on professional qualifications with the TCA, but regrettably the EU did not engage with them. However, on legal services we do, as I say, have unprecedented provisions. The Bill is also consistent with our other international commitments, including the common travel area with Ireland. The Bill does not alter the Government's determination to uphold our CTA commitments. The Government are also working closely with the Irish Government and regulators to ensure that UK and Irish professions have continued routes to recognition.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central, and others, talked about skills and skills shortages. I thank him for his point on that. However, it is important to be clear about how the Bill fits into the Government's overall skills strategy. The Bill allows regulations to be made requiring a regulator to be able to receive applications, assess individuals' qualifications and experience gained overseas, and decide on whether to treat them as if they had the required UK qualifications or experience. That can be done only where there is a clear unmet demand for the services of a regulated profession.

Separate from the provisions of the Bill, the Government can, when necessary, consider short-term measures to deal with skills shortages, as they have in the case of HGV drivers. The Bill also plays its part in making sure that aspiring and qualified professionals can find the information they need to access professions, including transparency requirements for regulators to have clearer information online, and it provides for an assistance centre to help professionals directly.

But neither the Bill nor such short-term measures take the place of our domestic skills strategy. Our lifetime skills guarantee will enable anybody to acquire the skills to do those jobs wherever they live and whatever the stage of their life. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill currently going through Parliament will set up the country for success by giving people the skills and the education they need for work. It puts employers at the heart of the skills system to make sure that local skill provision meets local needs, so that people can thrive where they live.

I will respond to the points raised by the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on concurrent powers in the Bill and securing legislative consent motions for the devolved Administrations. I want to reassure the House that the Bill has been carefully designed to respect the devolution settlements. The inclusion of

concurrent powers ensures that professions that fall within devolved legislative competence but are regulated on a UK-wide basis can be dealt with efficiently and appropriately under the Bill by the relevant and appropriate national authority.

The UK Government are working hard to seek common ground with the devolved Administrations. The devolved Administrations rejected our previous proposal of a formal duty to consult before regulating in areas of devolved competence, but we have now offered to place on the face of the Bill a stronger duty to consult. The amendment would require the Secretary of State or the Lord Chancellor to consult with devolved Administrations before making regulations under the Bill that contain provisions that could be made by devolved Administrations themselves, and then to publish a report on the consultation to be agreed with those devolved Administrations.

We have also offered to table an amendment to carve the Bill out of schedule 7B of the Government of Wales Act 2006, allowing the Senedd to remove UK Ministers' concurrent powers if they deem that to be necessary. The Welsh Government will still be required to consult with the UK Government on the removal of those powers.

The Government's approach demonstrates our commitment to transparency and scrutiny, and to preserving the balance of the devolution settlement while maintaining a coherent approach across the UK. Let me make it clear: it is not the Government's intention to make regulations in relation to matters on which the devolved Administrations could legislate without seeking their views.

I hope that hon. Members from across the UK can support the Bill. We will continue to work in collaboration with the devolved Administrations and devolved regulators to ensure an approach that works for all parts of the UK. I look forward to discussing the Bill in Committee, and I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).*

## **PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)**

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Professional Qualifications Bill [Lords]:

### *Committal*

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

### *Proceedings in Public Bill Committee*

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 20 January 2022.

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

### *Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading*

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

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

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

#### *Other proceedings*

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—  
(*Andrea Jenkyns.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

*Queen's recommendation signified.*

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Professional Qualifications Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown; and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Andrea Jenkyns.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP (MINIMUM AGE) BILL (MONEY)

*Queen's recommendation signified.*

*Resolved,*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### PRIVATE INTERNATIONAL LAW

That the draft Civil Jurisdiction and Judgments (2005 Hague Convention and 2007 Hague Convention) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 16 November, be approved.—(*Andrea Jenkyns.*)

*Question agreed to.*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Did I see a point of order anywhere in the House? No, I have not as yet seen a point of order, but—

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As there is an opportunity for a point of order, would it be possible to place on the record, on behalf of all colleagues, our best wishes to all the staff of the House for Christmas? We thank them for their tremendous service throughout

the year in looking after us, which I know is appreciated by all colleagues. This is a useful opportunity to put that on the record.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. It is not often that we have time to stop for a moment and think about all the people who work so hard all through the year to help and support us in the work that we do here in the Chamber, in Committees and in other duties around this wonderful Palace of Westminster.

What the people who elect us see is what happens in this Chamber, and it is good to have the opportunity to tell them that that is the tip of the iceberg. In fact, an enormous amount of work goes on to support what happens in this Chamber. Every motion that comes before this House has taken hours and hours of preparation, and every consequence of the decisions made in this Chamber takes days and weeks of implementation.

I would particularly like to thank the Clerks, who keep us on the straight and narrow. No matter what is happening in the outside world and no matter what is happening around the rest of Westminster, we make sure that what happens here in the Chamber is done in good order and properly. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I particularly use this opportunity to thank those who work so hard to help us.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I not only echo your words on that, but emphasise how important it has been that the staff have been able to provide that support, even in the midst of a pandemic? I hope that the staff of the House—together with everyone in the nation—have had the opportunity to get boosted in the midst of this pandemic and of their many duties, for which we are all so very grateful. We wish everyone a happy Christmas and a merry, boosted new year.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Lady very much for her point of order. It is lovely that she, as a senior Opposition Front Bencher, and her colleagues are speaking for all their colleagues in giving those good wishes to everybody here. I echo, again, her thanks.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I add my thanks? I particularly wanted to mention the Clerks, to whom you have referred, and the work that they know will be coming to them as a result of today's Second Reading debate. I thank them for the support they continue to give in making sure that we can bring forward the best possible amendments to legislation.

May I also thank Mr Speaker, yourself and the other Deputy Speakers, who deal with all sorts of situations in the House? Every day seems to create a new unique situation to deal with. I can see that all the tools and tricks in the box have been brought out to help manage this Chamber in the best possible way so that we can continue to have the best possible informed debate and deal with the challenges that face us.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I sincerely thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her kind wishes. I will pass on to Mr Speaker the good wishes that have

echoed around the Chamber. He certainly works extremely hard to keep this ship afloat. I echo the very kind good wishes of the hon. Lady and will make sure that Mr Speaker knows of the good wishes that the entire House is sending to him.

**ADJOURNMENT**

*Resolved*, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrea Jenkyns.*)

3.56 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Wednesday 15 December 2021*

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

## National Food Strategy and Public Health

9.30 am

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in a debate. This is in line with 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 either at the testing centre in the House, or at home. Please give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

**Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the National Food Strategy and public health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am delighted to have secured this debate on such a vital topic. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the national food strategy, I have been examining closely the key themes that we need to address to produce a lasting, holistic solution to food system failures. As the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central, I see the impact that food poverty has on health, education and life chances. Developing long-term solutions to level up our access to healthy food, whether that be through tackling affordability or raising the standards of school food, is as vital to creating a fairer society as investment in major infrastructure projects.

In 2019, the Government recognised the need for a new approach and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs commissioned a review of the food system by Henry Dimbleby to inform a new national food strategy. In 2020, the Government published their obesity strategy, which recognises that tackling obesity and improving our nation's diet require a partnership between consumer and producer. A comprehensive national food strategy will be a positive and universally welcomed step in the right direction. The Government are committed to publishing a White Paper in response to the recommendations of the national food strategy report. May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister when the White Paper is likely to be published?

As we approach Christmas, supermarkets are full of luxury food items and advertising features happy families sitting around bounteous feasts. I do not advocate the "Bah, humbug!" attitude to Christmas celebrations, but we must acknowledge the pressure that our consumer culture puts on low-income families and on our general health. We all know that in the new year we will be deluged with advertising for diet products, fitness videos and gym memberships.

Food is at the heart of community cohesion. Religious festivals in many faiths feature food; and when we share food, it shows we care. Last Saturday, I visited the

volunteers preparing meals for Food For All in the Guru Nanak gurdwara. They deliver hundreds of portions of nutritious food weekly to local hostels. As I ate the tasty dal and rice, I learned of the importance of sharing food in the Sikh community and how their doors are always open to those needing food.

The issue of food security has been highlighted during the pandemic. As community meals, such as at YMCA North Staffordshire in my constituency, had to stop in the spring of last year, across the nation a volunteer army, organised through charities, faith groups, local businesses and local authorities, ensured that the most vulnerable in our communities were able to access food. Schools looked after their pupils with food deliveries during holidays and lockdowns. The already extensive network of food banks expanded and found new ways of operating in order to ensure that no one went hungry during the most difficult time that this nation has experienced in our lifetime. Government played a vital role in funding many of the volunteer organisations, and the success of the distribution depended on a close working partnership across all sectors and sections of our communities.

Access to food is the most basic of human rights, and the challenges around access to a healthy diet are major indicators of inequality. Eating lifts our spirits and gives us energy, but it is also a source of anxiety for those on low incomes. The Government have introduced guidance on what constitutes a healthy diet through Public Health England's "Eatwell Guide", but they have not fully evaluated whether the diet that it recommends is affordable to everyone. A Food Foundation report estimated that the poorest decile of UK households would need to spend 74% of their after-housing disposable income on food to meet the cost of the "Eatwell Guide", compared with just 6% in the richest decile.

In its July 2020 report, "Hungry for change", the Lords Select Committee on Food Poverty, Health and the Environment concluded:

"The UK's food system—the production, manufacture, retail and consumption of food—is failing."

The report, written a year before part 2 of the national food strategy was published, made many of the same recommendations to Government. It concluded that the Government need a unified food policy to ensure that we reduce the production and consumption of processed products and tackle food inequalities so that everyone can access a healthy diet. Only then can we produce food sustainably and protect the health of our planet and its populations. The report added:

"The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need, and provided the opportunity, for the Government to act now with commitment and focus to deliver the improvements to the food system, public health and environmental sustainability that are so urgently required."

I believe that the Minister, in her previous role in the Department of Health and Social Care, agreed with the ambition of the national food strategy. She told the Select Committee:

"We have a teachable moment, and we should seize it."

This Government have shown their commitment to tackling environmental challenges by showing leadership at COP26. They should now consider the national food strategy's recommendations as part of their approach, because our food system is driving climate change and biodiversity loss, which threaten our future food security. Food production is responsible for 34% of global emissions

[Jo Gideon]

and is the leading cause of nature's decline. The current system has driven huge losses in biodiversity, from deforestation in the Amazon to intensive industrial farming in the UK. In the future, climate change threatens to cause crop failures and nature loss, which makes our land less productive. That is a system failure, and not the fault of individual farmers or consumers. The new environmental land management schemes should include payments to farmers to provide public access to nature, which is demonstrably beneficial for mental health. It is essential that the Government hold firm on the transition to an environmentally ambitious ELM.

We have seen this Government's ability to innovate when facing health challenges. They have shown global leadership by investing in world-leading research to develop vaccines to tackle the covid pandemic, and the roll-out of the vaccination programme has been superb. We need the same level of innovation in public health when designing preventive measures to tackle obesity. Billions of pounds are spent each year by the national health service on the treatment of significant but avoidable levels of diet-related obesity and non-communicable disease. By 2035, we will be spending 1.5 times as much to treat type 2 diabetes as we currently spend on all cancer treatments. From a health perspective, we need to resolve this.

Britain has the greatest levels of highly processed food in Europe, with the exception of Malta. Those products—containing unhealthy types of fat or salt, or highly refined carbohydrates, such as sugar—are aggressively marketed and promoted to the consumer. They are more likely to be on promotion, making them appealing to those on tight budgets. Manufacturing, retail and the food sector play central roles in this. The less healthy choice has become the easier, cheaper choice for the consumer, but this is inflicting profound costs on public health and the NHS. The Government have made some inroads into this agenda, by banning junk food advertising on TV before 9 pm, legislating to end the promotion of foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, and restricting “buy one get one free” promotions.

Industry progress against voluntary reformulation targets should be subject to transparent and regular monitoring to highlight where successes and failures occur. The Government should make clear what regulatory action will follow if the industry does not respond comprehensively and swiftly to voluntary targets. Mandatory—that is, fiscal—approaches can work, as evidenced by the soft drinks industry levy. These taxes can also incentivise innovation and reformulation, which can help to build a better food system, such as through the use of potassium chloride, which is less harmful to health than conventional salt. Any measure that encourages innovation and moves the food industry to invest in healthier alternative products is welcome. I ask the Minister whether more work can be done to encourage innovation by incentivising good practice, as well as ensuring that foods that contribute negatively to the nation's health bill share the cost of that bill.

Successive Governments have adopted different approaches to tackling obesity, which until now have relied heavily on encouraging individual behaviour change rather than addressing the structural issues and external factors that shape the food environment. Factors such

as the affordability and accessibility of unhealthy foods help us understand the association between levels of deprivation and rates of obesity. The Government must clarify the vision for a healthy sustainable diet and set out a clear path towards achieving that. We must reward farmers for measures that promote improved public health, and ensure that trade agreements do not allow for the import of cheap food produced according to lower environmental and animal welfare standards than our own.

The Government have pledged to level up our country. Does the Minister agree that underpinning any economic levelling up must be a levelling up of life chances? Health inequalities cannot be tackled without a national food strategy that considers the entire food chain, from field to fork. That requires cross-departmental co-ordination and a dedicated system of oversight to bring about a tangible change in the way we produce, purchase and consume food. The complexity of the challenge requires the establishment of an independent body responsible for the strategic oversight of the implementation of the national food strategy. That independent body should have the power to advise the Government and report to Parliament on progress. Does the Minister agree that the Food Standards Agency might play a greater role in that regard?

Turning to my constituency, I know that people with limited resources often find it hard to access healthy food. Less healthy diets and their adverse consequences are not limited to those in the lowest income groups, but they affect those groups disproportionately. Adults and children in deprived areas are significantly more likely to become obese or suffer diet-related ill health. Research shows that adults on low incomes are more likely to have diets high in sugar and low in fibre, vegetables, fruit and fish. Children from the least well-off 20% of families consume around 29% less fruit and vegetables, 75% less oily fish, and 17% less fibre per day than children from the most well-off 20%. Such inequalities are particularly relevant in Stoke-on-Trent Central. Data shows that 41.4% of adults in Stoke-on-Trent eat the recommended five a day fruit and veg on a usual day—the lowest percentage recorded of any upper-tier local authority in England.

**Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. She talked about young people and food hunger. Does she agree that the curriculum should better prepare students and teach about nutrition and healthy food and cooking?

**Jo Gideon:** I absolutely agree that schools have a key role to play, both in the curriculum and in school food. Unfortunately, I have not been able to cover that, so I hope my right hon. Friend will be able to cover that aspect in his speech. The topic is wide ranging and I want to leave time for colleagues to make their points. However, I absolutely endorse what he has just said.

In the city of Stoke-on-Trent, around 92,000 adults aged 16 or over are not eating the recommended five portions on a daily basis. Data shows that 76.1% of adults in Stoke-on-Trent are overweight or obese, and that is the third highest figure of all local authorities in England. Research shows that people living in local authorities with the highest level of deprivation live closer and have access to almost five times as many fast-food outlets than those in more affluent areas. In

Stoke-on-Trent in 2018, 55.6% of food outlets were classified as fast food outlets compared with 38.4% in the UK. Between 2010 and 2018, the average number of fast food outlets across the city increased from 48.5 per 100,000 to 69.5. An extra 55 takeaways opened in Stoke-on-Trent between 2010 and 2018, and I have yet to find a really healthy takeaway. I hope that someone will rise to the challenge and open one soon or let me know whether there is one.

The difficulties in producing healthier diets are not limited to the price of food. For many people in low-income groups, considerations such as equipment, energy costs, limited space to store purchases, and the cost of travelling to a wider choice of shops are real barriers to consuming healthier diets. In line with the Government's levelling-up agenda, we must urgently help low-income families to eat well. Improving the diets of those with the lowest incomes and the poorest households would have both immediate and long-term benefits not just for those people, who would live longer in better health. It would also increase productivity and improve the economic outlook for the whole country.

The national food strategy report features several recommendations to reduce diet-related inequality that the Government should consider. They include extending the eligibility for free school meals, funding holiday activities and the food programme for the next three years, expanding the healthy start scheme, and initiating a trial "Community Eatwell" programme, thereby supporting those on low incomes to improve their diets. The national food strategy presents a critical opportunity to improve the health of the next generation. Young people spend 190 days of the year in school, and what they eat there is incredibly important. School meals significantly improve educational outcomes, and they provide access to nutritious meals for the millions of children experiencing food insecurity.

Research from Bite Back 2030 suggests that school food standards are routinely not being upheld, healthier options typically cost more, pupils who receive free school meals often experience great injustice, and young people's experiences are vastly different from school to school. I was on a call with young people yesterday and asked them directly about their experiences of school meals. One of them said that they were from the school—Members may remember this crisis—where people had been handing chips through the fence. Another said that the only way for them to get good food would be for the local sandwich shop to move into the school, because that would be the only good alternative. There are really big issues around school food. We must ensure that school pupils have equal access to a good amount of food that is affordable and healthy. Students who both do and do not receive school meals deserve that.

Food policy has an impact on all sectors of our economy, environment and society, and the ability to access a healthy diet has a profound impact on people's health and wellbeing. The most important commitment that the Government could make in the national food strategy would be to acknowledge the importance of this agenda by creating a cross-departmental structure with a specific brief for food, championed at the highest level. While DEFRA may look at environmental challenges in agriculture, there is a role for almost every Government Department in ensuring that a cohesive plan across the food system is delivered, to create a resilient, healthier and more sustainable food system.

The importance of reform is clear, and now is the time for the Government to seize the opportunity to reduce obesity, tackle health inequalities and protect the environment. I am grateful to the Minister for her support on this vital issue, and I ask that the recommendations to transform our food system for the better be embraced fully in the Government's White Paper.

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** There are six Back Benchers seeking to speak. There is no time limit, but each speech should last about eight minutes if we share the time evenly.

9.48 am

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on securing the debate.

Before I start, I pay tribute to Henry Dimpleby, who did an excellent job in producing the national food strategy report, which is a mammoth piece of work. It should be not just our blueprint but our bible, going forward. There is so much in it that we could be debating week on week, and I hope that the Government take it on board and do not reject the proposals. It was very disappointing that when the report was launched the Government's immediate reaction was to respond to misleading tabloid headlines that suggested there would be a sugar tax. The Government just panicked. Actually, as we saw with the soft drink levy, it does not mean that people have to pay more; it means that the industry reformulates the vast majority of its products. It is a very good lever to achieve change without having a disproportionate effect on poorer people.

However, the Government just saw the headlines, went into panic mode and almost immediately said that they were not going to support the recommendations, which must have made Henry think, "What on earth have I been doing for the last couple of years in putting so much work into this?" I hope that we get a more thoughtful response from the Minister today.

What was particularly galling was that that response from the Government came just after the Prime Minister, having recovered from covid and having said that his health issues were related to his weight, had declared war on obesity—but the moment that somebody came up with a mechanism that might have helped us to tackle obesity, the Government just seemed to reject it completely.

I do not know whether it is just political cowardice in the face of the press or capitulation to vested interests, but we have seen this type of thing in the past. I remember that during the coalition Government we had a public health responsibility deal and lots of different partners came on board to work with the Government on tackling public health. Salt was chosen as the first issue to address and I remember asking, "Will you be looking at junk food?" There was a piece of research about the impact of healthier diets on young offenders, which showed that as soon as we took away all this food that is full of additives, sugar and stimulants, quite a lot of the behavioural issues of young offenders dramatically changed. I should have thought that a public health responsibility deal would have looked at the impact of junk food on people's

[Kerry McCarthy]

diets, but they said, “Oh no, we’re not covering everything. We’re looking at salt.” Salt is low-hanging fruit, is it not, and the easy thing to address, because there are not the big vested interests with salt that there are with junk food and sugar.

What eventually happened is that the whole thing collapsed, because, to start with, the charities that were working with the Government on that deal just became entirely frustrated so they left, and we were left with just the fast food manufacturers working with the Government. The whole thing just did not get anywhere, because there was not leadership from the Government.

It has also taken a long time to achieve the limited ban on junk food advertising to children that we have; and it is just a ban on television advertising, when we know that many children will see these adverts online. That is something else where we could have seen far stronger action from the Government.

When it comes to public health, it is not just about the obvious products; it is also about ultra-processed products. Generally speaking, the longer the list of ingredients on a product, the less likely it is to be good for someone’s health. We saw during the horse meat scandal how things that can barely be classed as food—they might be full of calories, but they have very little nutritional value—were still being sold, despite having so many ingredients and having been passed from country to country with different elements being added, at incredibly cheap prices. We need action to tackle that.

One of the levers that the Government have is the procurement process. We know that the Government spend £2.4 billion per year on procuring food. It could make a huge difference if they adopted as a basis either the Eatwell plate model or the reference diet that Henry talks about. That is one of the things that I would like the Minister to answer—will we go down that path of using public procurement in a much stronger way?

We were told a couple of years ago that the Government were looking to review the national school food standards. However, when I asked questions about that, I was told that because of covid that review had been shelved. I would like to know whether it is now back on the agenda.

Those standards are extremely outdated. I will just mention briefly the requirement for schools to serve meat several times a week, which is not based on any clear nutritional evidence and is certainly not in line with what is being said about reducing meat in our diet for environmental reasons. That was another point in the national food strategy—Henry talked about the need to reduce UK meat consumption within 10 years. Again, there was the expected kneejerk response against that recommendation, rather than treating it seriously. Clearly, it is not just Henry saying that about meat; it is being said across the board.

I am conscious of time, so I will be brief. We need to support local food-growing and the work of organisations such as the Urban Agriculture Consortium. In Bristol, the Mayor was re-elected this year on a pledge to have food-growing land in every ward in the city—not just allotments, but bigger pieces of land.

I interviewed the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) when he was Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—he is now Secretary

of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—on stage at the Oxford Real Farming Conference, and he made a clear pledge that a lot more money was going to go into supporting county farms. We have lost half our county farms; he wanted to bring them back.

When I served on the Committee for the Agriculture Act 2020, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), repeatedly said, partly because I kept asking him, that there would be Government support for county farms. That was a clear pledge, but we have not seen any money coming forward. Bristol is an ideal location for peri-urban farming, which would help address the issue of food deserts.

In 2018, a Kellogg’s survey listed the top 100 food deserts in the country, showing access to healthy food. Surprisingly, two wards in Bristol South were in the top five in the country and one in my constituency was in the top 100. We think of Bristol as a foodie place, but it shows that the issue of access to good, healthy food on the doorstep is a real problem. Money going into peri-urban farming could help address that.

Finally, on food poverty, despite what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said, we had an opportunity to back what Henry Dimbleby said about school food, holiday hunger and making sure that kids did not go hungry during the school holidays when they could not get free school meals, and the Government voted it down. There is all this rhetoric about the wonderful national food strategy, but it means nothing unless the Government are actually prepared to support it.

There are some brilliant initiatives. In Bristol we have Feeding Bristol, an umbrella organisation that brings together food banks, food-growing projects, food redistribution networks such as FareShare, and projects such as 91 Ways, which works with refugee communities in the city to teach people about cooking and to help break down cultural divides at the same time. These are brilliant initiatives, but we should not just rely on that big society approach, and we certainly should not be relying on a Premier League footballer for the Government to act on food poverty.

My final question is, are we going to see a food Bill as a result of this strategy? I am hearing rumours that the White Paper will not be the precursor to legislation. I would like to know from the Minister, will this just have been a meaningless exercise or are we going to see legislation?

9.57 am

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon)—friend being the operative word—on all her campaigning on food. She is doing an incredible job, and I congratulate her on securing the debate.

The outbreak of the pandemic posed significant challenges for children and families across the country, especially those just about managing to put food on the table. It has been a very difficult issue for the Government. I was sad to vote against the Government on free school meals last year, but they did a significant amount after that vote, not just with the publication of the food strategy but the extension of the holiday activities programme, with hundreds of millions of pounds to support children and families over the summer.

As I have seen in my constituency, Essex Council does a huge amount to support holiday activities programmes in schools across Harlow and around Essex. It makes a significant difference. I have been to schools where children are doing science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, having mental health and wellbeing support, and taking part in sports activities. I think that should be continued and I welcome the commitment that was made to it in the Budget.

On the provision of school breakfasts, the statistics are clear. We know that children who regularly eat breakfast achieve, on average, two higher GCSE grades than children who do not. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that children in schools with breakfast clubs make two months' additional academic progress. According to Kellogg's, food hunger could cost the English economy at least £5.2 million a year through lost teaching time spent on dealing with the needs of hungry pupils. So, we have to make certain that there is a laser beam of focus continually aimed at prioritising academic catch-up because of food hunger, as well as mental health and wellbeing.

Lockdown and school closures have had a devastating impact on children's learning, especially on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ofsted's latest annual report shows that pupils lost 33 million days of learning. Even before the pandemic, disadvantaged pupils were 18.4 months behind, compared with their better-off peers. I hope very much that schools continue to remain open from January.

The Government are rightly boosting support for schools, with nearly £5 billion of catch-up funding, targeted through the national tutoring programme, but all the extra tuition in the world will not work if children arrive at school without having eaten a nutritious breakfast. Some will argue—and I get it—that that should be the responsibility of parents and carers. In an ideal world it should be, but sadly, that is not happening in too many cases. We cannot let the child suffer because of what might be going on in their family circumstances.

On our side of the House, we should rightly be concerned about public finances and the provision of funding for measures such as guaranteeing breakfast for all disadvantaged pupils. There is an answer that is staring the Government in the face: the co-called Coca-Cola tax or soft drinks industry levy. To be honest, I was not a great fan of that levy when it was first introduced, because I felt it disproportionately affected those on lower incomes who might want to buy a sugary treat for their kids now and then, but it does generate revenue of £340 million each year.

Given that the money was supposed to be hypothecated to fund healthy living initiatives, instead of just being snaffled by the Treasury, why not use it to fund hunger-reduction programmes? That way, no one needs to ask the taxpayer for more money. Currently, the Department for Education's new breakfast provision service reaches just 30% of schools in high levels of disadvantage, and invests just £12 million a year. By comparison, last year taxpayers spent £380 million on free school meal vouchers.

Magic Breakfast is a wonderful organisation, for which I have huge respect. I meet a lot of charities in my job as Chair of the Education Committee and Magic Breakfast is one of the finest. It has calculated that for £75 million more per year, funded by the sugar tax, the Government could ensure that 7,300 of the most

disadvantaged primary and special educational needs schools could provide a free, nutritious breakfast to every pupil who needs it. That would reach an estimated 900,000 pupils throughout the year, targeted at the most disadvantaged.

That could complement other initiatives, such as the £500 million funding for family hubs, championed by my esteemed colleague my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). If support could be made available to businesses feeling the brunt of the pandemic, surely we could provide welfare in the form of breakfast clubs, holiday activities and free school meals to children. In Wales, for example, the Government have recently introduced an extended school day pilot scheme for 14 schools. As part of the enrichment activities that schools will plan, I suggest that free school breakfast clubs should be included in the pilot.

I urge Ministers in the Department for Education to consider implementing a similar pilot scheme in England, especially in areas of high disadvantage. Those pilot schemes should be evaluated to the highest standards in order to better understand the outcomes. It is imperative that civil society groups involved in schemes are held to account in providing the best service possible for these young people. We need to be clear in looking at the success of outcomes.

In conclusion, dealing with child hunger is not a left-wing or right-wing issue. The levelling-up agenda has the potential to heal some significant social injustices in our country and provide every child with a hand up to climb the ladder of opportunity.

Supporting high-quality education and increasing academic attainment in schools is crucial to levelling up, but we cannot expect pupils to succeed on an empty stomach. No one has to ask the taxpayer for more money to do this; it is waiting to be used in Treasury coffers. As we look towards the new year and a new start, let us make free school breakfasts for all disadvantaged pupils a new year's levelling-up resolution.

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** Where would a Westminster Hall debate be without Jim Shannon?

10.5 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Thank you for calling me, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for setting up the debate. She is part of that strong Stoke team. It is nice to see her in her place and to support her as well. I recently took part in a debate in which the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) talked about creating a more resilient food and drink industry for the United Kingdom. This debate aligns closely with that. We look forward to the Minister's and shadow Minister's responses; there are no two more capable people to look after this area. It is a pleasure to be here to again to highlight why our national food strategy is so important to the economy.

The Government's approach to the national food strategy comes in two parts. The first focuses on urgent recommendations to support the country through the turbulent impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central referred to. The second examines good and bad outcomes of the strategy and the economics that deliver them. For us in Northern Ireland, the food and drink sector is so important. The national food strategy is equally important, as is the

[Jim Shannon]

need to address public health issues. As stated in previous debates, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the Northern Ireland economy. Specifically, the economic output of the hospitality sector was atrociously affected, down by 90% in April 2020. That gives an idea of the impact on us in Northern Ireland, and in my constituency, where hospitality is so important and where many derive their living from it. While output improved in August 2020 due to the eat out to help out campaign, it was still below pre-pandemic levels.

While the food strategy aims to address England's economic situation over the next 75 years, I warmly welcome recent work by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister back home, my colleague Edwin Poots, who has done instrumental work over the last few months initiating the Northern Ireland food strategy framework, which has six main priorities. I support the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, as will others, but I will give a Northern Ireland perspective to these debates, which I think will complement the hon. Lady's points. The aim is to publish the strategy in 2022, so I urge the Minister to engage with Minister Poots on it. I have absolutely no doubt that she will. It would be good to share thoughts on how we can perhaps learn from each other.

One of the Government's main principles for the national food strategy is to ensure it is built upon a resilient and sustainable agricultural sector. I often think we forget how important that sector is to our meat and dairy sector. I represent a mostly rural constituency, so I understand that, but we also have some strong urban groups. In 2020, agriculture contributed some 0.59% to the UK's GDP. These figures have fallen in recent years, further emphasising the need to do more to protect farmers through the basic payment scheme, which I know the Minister supports.

In addition, I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for raising the importance of the national food strategy for schools and young people, as did the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who is a real champion—we use that word often in the Chamber, but it is true in his case—of education. I often look to his contributions, as Chair of the Education Committee, and I thank him for that. We need nutritional food in schools. For some pupils, school meals are the main meal of the day, so it is important that we get this right and that all our pupils benefit. Recent statistics show that 37% of schoolchildren do not eat a proper breakfast in the morning, so I agree with the national food strategy aim to help to address malnutrition in schools and protect the physical health of children.

At home, many schools run a breakfast club in recognition of the importance of that meal for concentration, as the first meal of the day. In recognition of the 103,000 children in Northern Ireland living in poverty, the Northern Ireland Minister for Education introduced wraparound care as soon as schools were opened back in Northern Ireland. These clubs are a priority in any and every food strategy document.

Mr Efford, I will briefly run through some statistics—I will not go over my time because I will adhere to your guidelines—to emphasise the importance of having a resilient and sustainable food strategy. Our food system is responsible for a third of local greenhouse gas emissions.

Some 46% of children from black and ethnic minorities are in poverty and 14% of parents who live with their children have experienced food insecurity. Those are the stats, and although stats can sometimes go over people's heads, it is important that we focus on them, because they give us an idea of how the food strategy will address some of the issues. We must also look at whether our rivers and lakes have a good ecological status. Some 25% of children born in 2020 will be obese by the time they are 25. Those are big issues, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central and others have referred to.

To conclude, those figures are the reason why we must do more now to protect our public health and national food strategy, especially after the impacts of the pandemic, Brexit and, one that is crucial to my constituents, the Northern Ireland protocol—not that the Minister is responsible, but it is one of the issues that we have in Northern Ireland to deal with: trade between the mainland and us in Northern Ireland, and vice versa. We in Northern Ireland export, I think, almost 60% of our products to the rest of the world, so it is important for food and the food strategy that we do not have any barriers to that.

The important thing for me in this debate on the national food strategy and public health is—I say this very honestly—public health: the health of our children and of the future. I encourage communication with the devolved nations to ensure that the United Kingdom can move forward collectively, with a public health situation that represents everyone, can benefit everyone, and protects our economy, because we need our economy to be boosted. I must pay tribute to the Minister, and to our Government too, because when it comes to boosting our economy, they have done that and done it well. We need the Government to protect the wellbeing of our constituents, because that is the reason we are all here: because our constituents vote for us.

10.11 am

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I commend my friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this important debate; it is great timing, and she is quite right to talk about what is coming up, with Christmas food and what might happen afterwards.

I also want to pick up on the comments about Henry Dimpleby, who has done a brilliant piece of work, which I commend the Government for commissioning. I, too, commend Henry Dimpleby for the way that he has engaged with parliamentarians in explaining his report. He has come to the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which I serve on, and to other groups that I have an interest in, and carefully explained, in detail, what the strategy includes. It is helpful to get to meet with the person behind a strategy and see all the thinking and intelligence that has gone into it.

I would maybe encourage the hon. Member for Bristol West (Kerry McCarthy) to take the opportunity to meet Henry Dimpleby and ask some of her questions. I believe that she may have—

**Kerry McCarthy:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Derek Thomas:** Certainly, yes.

**Kerry McCarthy:** It is Bristol East. Also, I have met Henry lots of times; we talk all the time.

**Derek Thomas:** That is good to hear, but when we spoke to him about the launch of the strategy and the Government's initial response—in fact, the Prime Minister's response when it was sprung on him, before he had seen the report—Henry's take was very different to what we heard earlier. His comments about meat were also certainly different from what we have heard. I hope to come on to that in a minute.

It is absolutely right that we are having this debate. I want to focus on UK food production. We have heard about the importance of the strategy and of good, nutritious food in our children and right across our population. I want to concentrate on how we actually produce that food and ensure that, in the UK, we produce absolutely as much as we possibly can, because UK food production is critical to achieving all that has been encouraged already.

A successful UK food and farming sector delivers healthy food for our nation. It delivers a reduced carbon footprint and reduced food miles. It is much easier to trace what is in our food and where it comes from when it is produced here, locally. We are much more confident about the standards of animal welfare and of the things that we put on our land to encourage our crops to grow. We are obviously all committed to reducing food miles, so whatever we and the Government can do to support the food and farming sector in the UK can only help to deliver the important things that are in the strategy and have been rehearsed this morning.

Action is needed; I will run through a few points about how it is needed, I believe urgently. Take labour, for example. We have seen in the last couple of years—for various reasons that we do not necessarily need to go into—a real reduction in the individuals to harvest crops, and now to even put them in the ground. That is certainly our experience in Cornwall, and I know it is experienced elsewhere. For the whole of the year, I and others have been encouraging the Government to get on with reintroducing or renewing the seasonal agricultural workers scheme pilot—as it is being at the moment. We have also argued that it be extended to allow for more things to be harvested and sown.

Despite working on this for the whole year, and given that it should start on 1 January, we heard for the first time only yesterday morning at our Select Committee that the Government will continue with the pilot. It sounds as if the Government have listened to what we have said, and they have extended the scheme through to 2024. This gives farmers much more confidence in planning their food production and harvesting. If the Government were really committed to our food and farming sector, they would not leave it right until the end of the year before telling the industry what the arrangements are for the following year—that is not as good as it could be. I encourage the Minister to take the message back, if they have not already heard it, about the importance of moving much more quickly to support farmers and give them clarity about what they need to do and plan for.

I welcome the Minister to her place; I have not had the opportunity to do so since she was moved. I commend her for her work in the Department of Health and Social Care and now the Department for Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs. There is definitely a desire in the UK to move from relying on people from abroad to sow and harvest our food; however, we do not spend much time in schools introducing our children to how their food is produced. In our primary and secondary schools, we need to work with children to get them to understand, not just how important it is to have a healthy and nutritious diet and how that can be put together, but how our food is actually produced.

We need to teach our children that there are opportunities to work in food and farming, and that they can have a successful, satisfying and rewarding career working in that industry. The value of that has been lost over recent generations. I encourage the Minister to comment on how the Department for Education, DEFRA, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Work and Pensions and even the Home Office—bizarrely—are all working together to make sure that we really encourage our own people to see food and farming as a rich and enjoyable career.

With the environmental land management scheme, we will be able to direct, encourage and nurture good food production with Government support. As we know, previously—and still—food and farming was supported through the common agricultural policy, which favoured the size of the asset rather than what was produced. ELMS is much more about how we care for the environment, how we produce the food we need and how we reward public money with public good. I would encourage the Minister to make sure that ELMS delivers as intended—and on time. There is some concern about the delays, and there is encouragement to delay; I absolutely do not agree that we should. I would appreciate it if the Minister took away from this debate the need to get on top of ELMS and ensure that it helps to produce the food that we all need—including our children.

We need to support innovation. On ensuring that we have the food we need, for example, automation is absolutely needed, but we are a long way off from making that work and understanding how it can help us. We can produce so much more with indoor growing systems, but that must be done in a renewable and sustainable way. My first debate in this Chamber in 2016 was on food security. I argued then that we needed a way of clearly demonstrating that food was produced locally and sustainably—some form of British flag or kitemark. At that point, £2.4 billion of public money was spent on procuring food. I do not believe that we have made much progress since on ensuring that as much of the food as possible that goes into our children in schools, into people in hospitals and prisons, and into public sector offices is British-produced. The Government have always indicated that they want to do that. Now that we have left the EU, the Government have a real opportunity to favour British food in all public sector procurement, including schools.

I have supported some work in Cornwall, where food that would otherwise go to waste is made into healthy, nutritious meals and go to those who need it. There is a real demand for it across the country. I understand that food waste alone accounts for about 10% of our carbon emissions. We could address that and provide food for the people who most need it, as the hon. Member for Bristol East rightly stressed, so we should look at how we can ensure that surplus food goes to the right people.

[Derek Thomas]

On free school meals, the arrangement at the time was £15 per child per week, but there was no control over how that £15 was spent. Bizarrely, we have talked about how we want children to have good, nutritious food with low salt and sugar content, but if we just give a family £15 a week per child, there is no way to manage or control that. Delivering healthy and nutritious food boxes to families is far better, and the schools and communities that I worked with preferred that, but I appreciate that it was a bit of an untidy affair. We did not handle it very well, but it is the case that Cornwall Council has received £5 million this winter to help families with food and other support. It is fair to true to say that the families in the most difficult situations today are able to get support and help with nutritious food, if it is organised and managed properly. I encourage all local authorities to ensure that that continues to be a priority.

How do we balance all these things together? Sometimes we talk about the need to tackle climate change as though it is in competition with food production or levelling up, but I believe they can all complement each other. Supporting the British food sector to move towards a more climate-friendly approach, which it is able and willing to do, would help to produce the food that our nation needs.

10.21 am

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a real honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this important debate.

The national food strategy was a real opportunity to take steps to tackle the horrific levels of food insecurity being experienced by upwards of 11 million people in the UK. The report highlighted the deep inequalities in access to nutritious food, and I welcome proposals such as widening the eligibility threshold for free school meals—including for children whose immigration status currently excludes them—a long-term scheme for holiday food provision for children who get free school meals, and an extension of the healthy start scheme. If adopted, they would all bring about real improvements in access to healthy food. The recommendations represent an important step towards the change that is needed.

I place on the record my thanks to Henry Dimbleby, Anna Taylor and the team for their work on the national food strategy and for the time they gave me on this issue. However, I believe that the report can be built on even further and strengthened. We should not be tinkering around the edges; it should have gone further—I want to place that on the record. I was proud to campaign alongside thousands of others for the legal right to food, which should have been included in the recommendations. We will now focus on campaigning for the right to food to be included in the Government's White Paper and good food Bill.

Like austerity, food insecurity is a political choice by Governments, not a predetermined occurrence, and it cannot be fixed without concerted effort by the Government of the day to take clear responsibility. I am sorry, but it is immoral that this country has more food banks than McDonald's outlets in 2021. Let us remember that this is the fifth-richest country in the world.

I want to mention some of the public health impacts that we are seeing as a result of the crisis of food insecurity. Malnutrition has tripled in the UK since the coalition Government came to power in 2010, and cases of scurvy and rickets have more than doubled. This coincides with soaring poverty caused by austerity, the removal of the social safety net and the enormous rise in the use of food banks, as I have outlined. In Liverpool, 32% of adults are food-insecure, whereby food is a source of worry, frustration and stress. That equates to a staggering 160,000 people in my great city. Only 12% of kids in Liverpool aged 11 to 18 have five portions of fruits and vegetables a day—again, that is an appalling statistic.

Around 14% of households in Liverpool experience fuel poverty, which is significantly higher than the average across England. Fuel poverty is a barrier to cooking, as highlighted by Professor Ian Sinha, who is a paediatrician at the fantastic Alder Hey Children's Hospital in my constituency. He says:

“A big issue at the moment is the interplay between food and fuel poverty—eat or heat—in essence babies and infants in the coldest houses will spend their calories trying not to get hypothermia rather than utilising the energy to grow their body systems and lay the foundations for a healthy life course”.

Children's rights are being eroded by this Government, and in international comparisons the UK does badly. The right to food is one of the most basic and fundamental necessities, and one that has often been violated by this Government, through austerity, welfare sanctions, the dismantling of the safety net and public services, and recently the disgraceful cuts to universal credit. The right to food needs to be enshrined in law, and I urge the Minister to consider that.

One of the key asks of the right to food campaign is for universal free school meals, which has been touched on, in essence, throughout the debate. A nutritious, free school breakfast and lunch for every child in compulsory education would build on the recommendations of the national food strategy, and on the evidence of the positive health impact it would have. There will be those who say we cannot afford to do this. I would say, “How can we afford not to do this?”. It is an investment in our country's future. If we accept the universal and compulsory requirement that all children up to the age of 16 be in school, why do we break from that principle of universal care, nurture and protection in relation to children's meals during the school day? We would think it absurd if children were not provided with adequate shelter, heating, drinking water and sanitation while in school, so why take a different approach to the equally essential elements of learning materials and food? The evidence of better concentration, behaviour and learning among properly nourished children is there for all to see, and universal free school meals would, further, avoid the bureaucracy and stigma of means-testing our school-age children. Portugal provides universal free school meals. All children sit down together and have a three-course meal—they break bread together. That is where we should be going, and what we should aim for as a society.

Around the country, the strong backing for the right to food to be enshrined in law is clear. Since we started the campaign 12 months ago, a motion has been passed at the TUC conference in September, with 5.5 million trade union members overwhelmingly voting for the

right to food. Councils up and down the country have declared themselves right-to-food towns and cities: Liverpool, Manchester, Greater Manchester combined authority, Liverpool city region, Rotherham, Brighton and Hove, Haringey, St Helens, Preston, Lancaster, Durham, Newcastle, Portsmouth, Totnes, Coventry, Sheffield and Birmingham. Many more are considering declaring themselves right-to-food towns and cities. That is the strength of feeling across the country.

I hope we can build on the ambitions of the national food strategy. I ask the Minister to consider putting the right to food in a Government White Paper and good food Bill. If this is not achieved, the mantra of levelling up will be an empty slogan for so many currently living in food poverty.

10.28 am

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on bringing this incredibly important debate to us. I know that we have an excellent Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with us, but this morning I have been thinking that, ideally, we would have a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care, and probably the Children's Minister as well. I know that they are very busy in their Departments, and that is not the convention, but we need serious, cross-Government work on this issue to get it right.

This all starts with the soil, and with looking after the soil. If we do not look after our soil, we cannot grow nutrient-rich food, and I am afraid that we have a problem with this globally, as a number of publications have stated. *Scientific American's* April 2011 edition said that

“each successive generation of fast-growing, pest-resistant carrot is truly less good for you than the one before”,

and it has probably only got worse since then. There is also evidence that we need to eat several more tomatoes today to get the same level of nutrients that we would have got from one tomato a few years ago.

Looking after the soil is also good for dealing with climate change. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature, 34% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture. We often think, “Well, agriculture can't be part of the problem. It's all those diesel-belching buses and coal-fired power stations that are the problem.” But food production around the world is responsible for 34% of greenhouse gas emissions. It need not be like that, because the soil can sequester more carbon than all the plants and trees on the whole planet if we look after it. And if we look after it, we get better-quality food and we will all be healthier. We can do that: we can have less pesticide, fertiliser and so on if we grow more legumes, pulses and lentils. That fixes nitrogen in the soil and is actually better for us. One of the best things you can eat, Mr Efford, is lentils. There is a bit of a virtuous circle here, and I congratulate the Government on getting this with the sustainable farming incentive.

I went to the Groundswell farming conference last year. A couple of thousand British farmers are on this journey, because they want to look after their soils and grow nutrient-rich foods so that we have healthy children and healthy adults—they want to do the right thing. We

are on a journey and, as the Second Church Estates Commissioner, I am very proud that on our 92,000 acres of farmland in England, we are going on that journey. I have been pushed on that by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and others and I can tell her that we have signed a compact with the National Trust. The train has left the station and we are going on that journey.

**Jim Shannon:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his contribution. Does he recognise, as others do, that the National Farmers Union and its sister organisation in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Farmers Union, have already committed to net zero carbon by 2050? That shows that the farming community want to do this; they did not have to be pushed to do it, and they are on their way.

**Andrew Selous:** I agree. I, too, am in very close touch with my local farmers, who as a group are one of the heroes of this piece. We need to be on the side of farmers. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said, we need to help them to do the right thing. I think they absolutely want to do the right thing.

I do not think we realise quite how bad the food that we eat is in this country compared with the rest of Europe. It is truly shocking. This is all in the House of Lords Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment Committee's July 2020 report, “Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food”, and it was repeated in the national food strategy. As a country, we are an absolute outlier in the amount of highly processed food that we eat. More than half of all the food that we eat is highly processed. The figure is only 14% in France, 13% in Italy and 10% in Portugal—already cited favourably by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne). We are five times worse than Portugal in the amount of highly processed food that we eat.

Why does that matter? I will tell you why it matters, Mr Efford. In 2018, a scientist called Monteiro did a report across 19 European countries that showed that a 10% increase in the amount of highly processed food we eat leads to a 12% increase in cancers, a 12% increase in cardiovascular disease and a 21% increase in depressive symptoms. Is it any wonder that one in seven people is on antidepressants? I wonder whether that has anything to do with the food we eat. These figures are just appalling, but I think they are quite a closely guarded secret. I do not think people know about them, and it is our job to get them out there and to challenge the food companies so that they do better.

Some food companies are on a journey. For example, the Obesity Health Alliance told me that Tesco—it particularly singled Tesco out—has committed that two thirds of all that it sells will be healthy product. It is not there yet; it is on a journey, but it is starting to get this. There is a supermarket in the Netherlands called Marqt. It is only small; it has about 16 stores, I think. It has a commitment to its customers to sell only healthy food that is good for them, because that is part of its philosophy, and it makes money as well. This is possible. We do not have to be on the treadmill of selling people the wrong things, which are bad for them. Their brains do not develop properly and they cannot achieve the potential from all the God-given talents that they were created with. We really can do better.

[Andrew Selous]

In schools and in so many of our public institutions, we are not doing well enough. I am waiting for a meeting with the Children's Minister—he promised at the Dispatch Box to give me a meeting—on school food standards. The campaigners at Bite Back 2030, Jamie Oliver's foundation, have already been mentioned today. Let me quote what one of its panellists said:

"I'm racking my brain because I don't think my school does a single healthy option".

The campaigners at Bite Back think that the food is not as it should be in about 40% of schools; the Soil Association thinks that the figure is 60%. I do not know whether it is 40% or 60%, but it is far too many.

The mechanisms for effective monitoring of the Government's school food standards are not good enough and they are not being observed. I have been a school governor for 20 years, and we have a lot to do. I have sat with the children and eaten school dinners with them—what I had in Studham Village school was particularly good—but the dinners are not always that good. We need to do better. Why? Because the figures are absolutely appalling. Even before children get to school, the figures are awful, and they have got worse during the pandemic.

The figure for obesity among reception-aged children went from 9.9% in 2019-20 to 14.4% in 2020-21. That is even before children get to school. By the time they leave school, two in five are above a healthy weight and a quarter are living with obesity. Obese children are more likely to become obese adults, with the associated type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart disease and liver disease. This stuff really matters—it is really important, and we really can do better.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central: It is not about being a killjoy; it is not about "Bah, humbug!" We should actually be incredibly positive and upbeat about the business opportunities for British farmers and food manufacturers. Good, healthy food is delicious; it is wonderful. There is so much pleasure and enjoyment to come from it. I am very upbeat and positive, not at all negative, because there are so many better, delicious foods that we could have, and so many opportunities for our farmers.

Fundamentally, this is about making the right, good and proper thing the easy and affordable thing to do. Too often, healthy food is more expensive. It need not be that way—it really need not, and it is not always the case in Europe. There are issues about giving people a little confidence in how to cook and so on. This is a big national effort. I am looking forward to the White Paper. We have a lot to do, because we are not in the right place.

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** I am grateful to the Back Benchers for being disciplined. I would like to bring Jo Gideon back in for a couple of minutes at the end of the debate. I call Daniel Zeichner.

10.37 am

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** It is a huge pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on securing the debate and on her work on the all-party parliamentary group.

I echo the commendations and praise for Henry Dimbleby and his excellent team, and particularly the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). The team put in a huge amount of effort. Of course, it was a long time ago that Henry Dimbleby was asked to carry out this work on behalf of the Government. If Government Members are looking for a present for the Prime Minister, I commend this report. It is a weighty tome. They may feel that they gave him his Christmas present last night, but the national food strategy is really good—I see well-thumbed copies around this Chamber.

It was not the team's fault that the political world has changed and that Secretaries of States come and go, but while the politics may change, the underlying problems really do not. I echo the fury of the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). He is right to be angry about our current food system. Dimbleby's words at the start of the report are damning:

"The food system we have today is both a miracle and a disaster...the food we eat—and the way we produce it—is doing terrible damage to our planet and to our health."

That is quite an introduction—terrible damage to our health. That should be a big flashing warning light to any Government.

I am glad we have a chance to discuss this issue at all. I have been chiding the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food, for many months on this issue, and she has promised that there will be a response in January, but that is almost six months since the report was published. Exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East said, the initial response from Downing Street was to pour a bucket of cold water all over the strategy, in response to some rather foolish tabloid headlines, as if the salt and sugar tax was the only thing in this substantial report.

It was pretty clear that the Government did not like Dimbleby's observations on trade policy either. I raised that issue at DEFRA questions a while ago. I pointed out that Henry was hardly a happy man, given his comments to the Soil Association conference, where he is reported as saying,

"the Government has clearly rejected my advice."

He also said:

"There is no point in creating a food and farming system here that looks after animals, sequesters carbon, and supports biodiversity, if overseas products on our shelves don't do the same."

Well, quite. It is significant that the finished national food strategy report has on it in big red letters, "THE PLAN"—it is the overarching plan that has been missing in this space.

The Food Foundation and Sustain made those points powerfully in their briefings. The Agriculture Act 2020, the Environment Act 2021 and the Fisheries Act 2020, which some of us have been involved in over the last couple of years, would have made much more sense if they were not just a post-leaving-the-EU fix, but part of an overall strategy for how we feed ourselves in a fair and sustainable way. It has all been done the wrong way round—it is back to front. Tomorrow we will see the Government sneak out their report on food security on the last possible day that they are allowed to under the Agriculture Act. How much food we wish to produce should have been a key starting point, not an afterthought. As the Climate Change Committee points out, there is

still no plan from DEFRA on how we get to net zero. So it is muddle, muddle, muddle—perhaps the Prime Minister is in charge after all.

To return to the report and what it tells us about the current state of our food system, that system is highly efficient in narrow economic terms, but Dimbleby also concludes that it contributes to a range of health issues, and particularly obesity, as other Members have picked up. Although there are many fantastic British food and drink producers serving us nutritious, healthy and affordable food—I am grateful, as always, to the Food and Drink Federation for its excellent advice—there is, as has been pointed out, an increasing prevalence of high-salt, high-sugar, ultra-processed and unhealthy foods in our diet.

Many of these figures have already been quoted, but I will repeat them: £18 billion—8% of all Government healthcare expenditure—is spent on conditions relating to high body mass index every year, and one in seven children in England is already obese when they start primary school. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) so powerfully pointed out, those trends exacerbate existing inequalities. Children living in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely as those living in the least deprived areas to be obese, which is not surprising given that the Food Foundation tells us that healthier foods are nearly three times as expensive as less healthy foods calorie for calorie.

The national food strategy shone a light on a lot of this and called for significant Government action to address it. I will not repeat all the points that others have made, but when one looks at where we are now, the Government are failing on too many fronts. In the course of 10 years in government, they have presided over a growing food bank scandal and obesity crisis. Inequality and poverty have gone up, and we know that poor health is often directly related to lack of income. It can hardly have come as a surprise that cutting universal credit and raising taxes for working families at a time when food price inflation is severe—let us remember that with 5% inflation today, many people face a really difficult new year—would not produce good health outcomes. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central pointed out, Sustain and the Food Foundation have produced damning statistics on how much it costs poorer people to feed themselves with decent, healthy food. I pay wholesome tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby for the Right to Food campaign that he and colleagues are running.

When it comes to changing our food culture, there is a clear role for the Government and the food and drink sector to work together. With Labour, there will not just be healthier food for all, but healthy British food. In her Budget speech, the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), told the country that Labour would buy British and make changes to public procurement so that our schools and hospitals are stocked with healthy, locally sourced food—a policy also promoted in the national food strategy.

I have no doubt there is considerable common ground in the Chamber on these issues: we all want a healthier country; an end to food banks; shorter, more secure supply chains; a fair deal for producers; and healthy, nutritious British food widely available. The question is how. When Labour left office, we had a plan, “Food 2030”. Since then, the country has not had a plan.

Ultimately, this Government’s plan is not to have a plan and to leave it to the market. That is one approach, but it does not work if we want healthy, sustainable, fair outcomes, which is why “THE PLAN”—Dimbleby’s plan—is such a welcome contribution to this vital debate.

10.44 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing today’s debate, for her important contributions as Chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the national food strategy and for her broader interest in this area. We have had many conversations driven by her passion for ensuring fair access. I have had similar conversations with many other hon. Members here today.

I thank everyone for their thoughtful contributions. I agree with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) that we have a great deal in common in this space. I add my thanks to Henry Dimbleby for producing the national food strategy and for the way he engaged with me in my previous role. I thank him for taking up the mantle when the Government offered him this work, which he has driven forward.

At this time of year, I would like to recognise and celebrate the hard work of everyone who keeps the nation fed. We have heard about them all today: our great producers from the land, our manufacturers, our retailers, and the charities and volunteers who enable those who are suffering challenges to feed themselves and their broader families and to get the assistance they need.

I would like to refer to Bite Back: meeting those young people, and particularly Dev, on many occasions left me with the powerful impression that this is a cross-Government issue, as many have said. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned the Children’s Minister and public health. I would also include Ministers from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Education.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said, we share food and that shows we care. Food should be that source of enjoyment, good health and cultural expression. It is important that our food system delivers for everyone fairly across the board. Tackling poverty in all its forms is a key priority for the Government and the best way of ensuring that everyone has affordable access to food.

During the past year, significant support has been given to the economically vulnerable as part of the response to covid-19, which has driven greater problems into the system. The key priorities in levelling up are part of that cross-Government, joined-up agenda. I know that my hon. Friend, who supports the work going on in her area, is fully behind ensuring that that works. The Government also continue to monitor food insecurity and will bring a report to Parliament tomorrow, within its timescale. Under the Agriculture Act, that is a regular report, and will have to come to Parliament every three years. The report tomorrow will include supply chain resilience, household food security and food safety.

[Jo Churchill]

We will publish the food strategy White Paper early next year. I have spoken to the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food. She indicated that it is her intention to push for January but, given current circumstances, I will say early next year. That will set out the Government's wider ambition and priorities for the food system, ensuring that food is not only affordable but sustainable and healthy. We want to support those exceptional British producers we have heard so much about, and enhance the nation's health and natural environment.

The food strategy will play a key role in supporting the Government's obesity plan, helping people to make the right food choices for themselves and the planet. It will also recognise the link between deprivation and health outcomes, such as children living in the most deprived areas being twice as likely to be more obese than those living in the least deprived areas. As several hon. Members have pointed out, that is not fair. It is about access and education.

We have spoken on many occasions about the role of educators, not just in schools, in helping people to understand how to access food and what they can do with it. Food waste is a real challenge for this country. We need to ensure that people use the food they buy effectively to give their families a healthy diet. That goes for all families, because the cost of food waste for the environment is enormous. The strategy will also recognise the link between deprivation and health outcomes. Children living in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese than those living in the least deprived areas.

In my previous role at the Department of Health and Social Care, I worked hard on strategies to help people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. That is one of the most important things, because the link between obesity and diabetes, cancer, heart disease, depression and a plethora of other things is so clear.

**Robert Halfon:** In the light of what my hon. Friend has said about children and food hunger, will she personally lobby the Treasury to ensure that we can use the sugar tax to fund breakfast for disadvantaged pupils?

**Jo Churchill:** I am going to try to trot on, but I will answer some of the individual comments now.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central about the need for a holistic approach. This is about inequality of access and the links to deprivation, so we need a vital unified policy across Government. If nothing else, the covid pandemic of the past year or two has shown more starkly than ever the need for that policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, West Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—I will not give his constituency that title every time; I will say my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) from now on—spoke about vertical farming. He, like my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central and several others, said that innovation and education in this space are hugely important. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke about the possibility of vertical farming in urban places to help people have more of a connection with their food. A huge amount could also be gained from those innovations helping people overseas.

I seem to remember that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives was at the Farmvention event in Parliament recently where young people from schools spoke about their food, where it comes from and food production. They came up with some amazing ideas about how to be more sustainable and to grow the healthy, nutritious food that we need.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central that I have spoken to Professor Susan Jebb at the Food Standards Agency. Her background in food is second to none in this country, and I am sure that we will work closely in future. Fast food outlets are more prolific in deprived areas. I know that work has been done with local authorities—Lewisham Council in London springs to mind, but work has taken place across the country—on advertising near schools and on the placement of fast food outlets. I urge my hon. Friend to take up the matter with the Departments that are responsible for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central also mentioned the holiday activities and food programme, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). I remember when I went; it was absolutely fantastic. This year's scheme concentrated on helping to educate young people. In the forest, we cooked a vegetable curry and made little chapatis to go with it, and we worked together to understand food, cooking and all those sorts of things. The extension of those programmes would certainly have my support.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow to lobby both the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Chancellor on the soft drinks industry levy. We know there has been a reduction of around 45% in sugar in drinks, but we have also seen an uptick in the sale of soft drinks, to about 105% of the figure it was when that tax was brought in, so he is right to say that it is not always negative.

I pay tribute to Magic Breakfast and to the many teachers who, without such charities, help and support children in their classes who they know are vulnerable.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives for his positive comments about domestic food production, which is critical. I heard the message about farming and labour, and I will take that back to my hon. Friend the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food so I hope he will hear something on that shortly.

Environmental land management schemes, the 25-year environment plan and the sustainable farming initiative all ensure we are moving towards the right package of initiatives to help our farmers do the right thing. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire spoke about working with producers, so that they are doing the right thing and making sure our children have healthier food.

The Health and Care Bill will bring in restrictions on advertising less healthy food on television and online. By the end of 2022, there will be a 9 pm watershed for high-fat, salt and sugar products to be advertised on TV and there will be restrictions on paid-for advertising for high-fat, salt and sugar products online. The Department for Health and Social Care has committed £6 million to initiatives to help and incentivise people to take on healthier eating habits and lose weight.

On 1 October 2021, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities was launched to tackle the top preventable diseases. I know the chief medical officer is absolutely

committed to making obesity one of his top agenda items and, within that, ensuring there is space to give all people access to a proper diet.

We are making progress and the food strategy will build on that, consider related aspects of affordability and health sustainability in unison, and set out how we can lead, using a holistic, Government-wide approach to making better food, for example in prisons and hospitals. All the recommendations of the hospital food review, led by Prue Leith and Phil Shelley, have been adopted. Next year, we will look at the Government buying standards for food and catering services, which will be hugely important. There are some brilliant schools, but some really need to catch up with making sure our children have the right food.

I still believe we have a teachable moment. I hope that you, Mr Efford, and colleagues are reassured that we are committed to rolling out the food strategy as soon as we can in order to transform the food system and support the important work under way across Government to ensure we are all as healthy as we can be.

10.58 am

**Jo Gideon:** I sincerely thank the Minister. She has always been a champion for this agenda and what she has said today reassures me that she not only will be a champion within DEFRA, but will take this message to other Departments.

I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. It has been very broad, which is the nature of the national food strategy. I thank Henry Dimbleby for the incredible work that has gone into this plan. I reiterate my message that this is a cross-Departmental challenge that we all need to address in a way that satisfies the concerns of everybody around the table.

We covered everything from school food procurement, farming, food education, careers in the food industry, food security, fuel poverty, the food Bill—

**Robert Halfon:** Breakfast.

**Jo Gideon:** Yes, breakfast, and public health across the four nations. Have I left any comments out? The fact the debate is so difficult to summarise in two minutes indicates how important the subject is to everybody in this room. I thank everybody for giving their time, and I particularly thank the Minister for listening and for taking our message back.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the National Food Strategy and public health.

## European Entry-Exit System Requirements: Port of Dover

11 am

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate. This 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. This can be done either in the testing centre in the House or at home. Please give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the application of European Entry and Exit System requirements to the Port of Dover.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about border issues in Dover. For once, this is not about small boats and illegal migration, on which my hon. Friend the Minister and his ministerial colleagues often hear from me, but about European border requirements and legal border controls operating at the port of Dover and other designated locations within the UK. More specifically, it is about the impact of those legal border controls as a result of the upcoming introduction of the digital borders programme by the European Union during 2022, in the context of the Schengen free movement area.

I will set out the context of the debate, which is what happens at, and through, the port of Dover. The port of Dover is the most successful port of its kind in the UK. It is of fundamental strategic and business importance to the whole country and will be well into the future. More than £144 billion in value of freight is transported through the port each year. The port manages a third of all UK trade with the EU, and together with the Eurotunnel, those combined routes—known as the short straits—manage almost 60% of all trade with the EU. The port is beautiful to behold, with a sheer operational efficiency, pace, speed and excellence that saw, pre covid, the port processing 1,000 lorries per hour and a passenger per second when combining inbound and outbound volumes. Few places anywhere have this level of speed and efficiency.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister has joined me at the port of Dover in the past and seen its operations at first hand. Those operations are possible not only because the port is really good at it and has been doing it a long time. It is the shortest route to market, and the market is competitive, and those competitive forces have required efficiency and excellence. I commend chief executive Doug Bannister and the Dover port team for all they do, which is fundamentally possible because border controls between the EU and the UK are part of this well-oiled machine.

Post Brexit, in spite of the many doomsters, gloomsters and fearmongers, trade flows between our nation and its European neighbours continued uninterrupted and unimpeded, other than the appalling consequences to my constituency when the French unilaterally and unreasonably closed the border before Christmas 2020, which predated our leaving the EU. That resulted in

[*Mrs Natalie Elphicke*]

gridlock for Dover and the surrounding area. It meant residents struggling to get essential food, including meals on wheels, and to get to work or to hospital. It is a reminder of the realities of managing that level of lorries and passenger traffic and its impact on the Dover community, the whole of the Kent community and goods and services for the entire country. That is why I do not think it is good enough to allow the entry-exit system implementation to continue to be discussed slowly at the comfortable pace of the respective officials on each side of the border. Discussions between officials have been going on for some time. We do not need more discussions; we need practical, operable solutions that work in a juxtaposed context.

The work needs to be stepped up. It is vital that the Government are proactive and energetic in their diplomatic engagement to move things forward at greater pace and to bring forward a solution, which is now a matter of urgency, not just for Dover but for the country as a whole. Border controls are an essential and central part of the effective trading environment at Dover. I am in Westminster Hall today because border controls are about to change in a matter of months, and how they will work in a juxtaposed control setting at Dover has still not been settled. Let me set out in some detail what the border controls are now and how they will change, and say why a practical and operable solution is urgently needed and vital.

Currently, there are special border arrangements to support frictionless trade and border security between France, Belgium and the UK under the Le Touquet agreement and the Canterbury treaty, which are not EU agreements but bilateral agreements between the respective nation states. Under them, each country's entry checks are made before exit and not after exit. By way of example, the French border security team—police aux frontières, or PAF—operate as PAF in Dover and carry out entry checks before exit from the UK to France. Likewise, the UK Border Force operates in Calais and carries out entry checks before exit from France to the UK.

I am sure that many of us, if not all of us, who are here today have experienced this system, which has been in place for many years, perhaps at Dover, or at St Pancras when taking the Eurostar. It is often the starting point for that fun family moment when someone says their first, “Oui, monsieur. Merci,” and when the smaller ones are encouraged to practise their polite manners in French.

That approach has been implemented for a very serious reason. It has been extremely successful in maintaining frictionless trade and in tackling people smuggling and other criminal activities at each of our borders. That is an approach and an agreement that has continued post-transition from the EU and it works very well.

Moving forward, both the UK and the EU will bring in digital borders, but not at the same time. The EU digital borders system—the European entry-exit system, or EES controls—is due to become operational in less than 12 months' time. The UK equivalent is scheduled for 2024-25. That is really too far away and it is vital that our own UK digital borders programme is accelerated. We must not fall behind and we need to ensure that we are ready.

These new EES rules are part of Europe's smart borders system, which will require biometric checking for every individual each time they cross an EU external border. The UK is such an external border and a third country for the purposes of these controls. There are further parts of the smart borders system to follow, including the European travel information and authorisation system, or ETIAS, which is in effect a new priority partner short-visa system for the non-Schengen countries, which include the UK. ETIAS is also due to come in in 2022.

In due course, as I have said, the UK will have its smart borders system, which will accordingly require changes in France, Belgium and other countries. The problem with the EES, to put it at its simplest, is that it has been designed for airports, by which I mean individual foot passengers. It has not been designed for people travelling in groups, it has not been designed for people travelling in vehicles and it has certainly not been designed for gateways operating juxtaposed controls.

The current EES design requires every driver to be stopped and every passenger to have their biometrics submitted and recorded either in or outside the stationary vehicle or in a purpose-built facility. In practical terms, what does that mean? At the moment, it would mean every passenger and every driver stopping and getting out of their vehicle in live lanes of heavy traffic in a port that manages the greatest number of vehicle movements in the United Kingdom every single day. That is not just impractical and dangerous—it simply will not work.

The matter was raised with the Home Secretary at a recent Kent MPs meeting with her, and it remains urgently important to resolve. It has been raised repeatedly by Kent MPs over the year with the Home Office, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Transport, as well as being raised by the port of Dover, Getlink—which runs the channel tunnel—and other operators. The House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee has also expressed concern in its letter to the Home Secretary on 22 November 2021—so a very short time ago—about unpreparedness. It raised concerns that there could be sustained delays and disruption. The Committee specifically highlighted concerns about traffic and trade disruption, which could occur on the short straits if the operational issues are not satisfactorily, and speedily, resolved.

To date, we, and the port of Dover, have struggled to establish where the ministerial lead sits, whether that is in the Cabinet Office or the Home Office, so I am pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) here today. These issues require close working between the Home Office and the Cabinet Office, and they may, indeed do, require a greater degree of diplomatic engagement to accelerate and bring forward operational solutions.

The port of Dover is the most successful port of its kind in the UK. More than £144 billion-worth of freight is transported through the port each year. It accounts for a third of all UK trade with the EU, supporting thousands of local jobs in Dover and Deal and hundreds of thousands of jobs across the UK. The port of Dover is a national asset that has a huge role to play in post-Brexit global Britain. What Dover and the short straits do simply cannot be replicated elsewhere. That success has been built on trade running smoothly. That success has continued post-Brexit.

We need to see that success continue with necessary decisions and investment, including upgrading the A2 and planning for the EU's new digital borders system when it becomes operational next year. With the clock ticking, it is now urgent that the Government sharpen their focus on implementing the new digital borders system seamlessly in a juxtaposed context. Otherwise, they risk big delays at the port, travel chaos in Kent and real damage to the British economy. It is a Brexit consequential in that the relationships to discuss and resolve have changed along with leaving the EU, and therefore it is an issue that ought to be properly funded, in whole or in part, from the transitional funding arrangements.

As with other transitional arrangements, the consequences of an operable solution not being found could place the whole of Kent at risk of traffic management gridlock, and leave the country and its businesses short of supplies. It is therefore of utmost importance to our country, county and East Kent that the operational, legal, diplomatic and practical solutions for EES and ETIAS are resolved as soon as possible. We have navigated the Brexit transition so successfully, but it would be extremely damaging for the EES issue to result in exactly the adverse outcome for traffic, the community and the country that we have sought to avoid, and have avoided—namely gridlock in Kent, and goods and trade disruption across the UK. It is vital that the issue is now progressed at pace and with urgency. This important issue will have huge implications for my constituents and residents across Kent, as well as the wider British economy, if it is not effectively and properly addressed at the earliest opportunity.

I will conclude by asking my hon. Friend the Minister several questions that would help the port of Dover and ferry operators, as well as hauliers and trade manufacturers, to understand how the system will work in practice. First, when is the target date for detailed guidance on the operational framework for the new arrangements expected to be available from the current Border Force and PAF discussions? Secondly, will hauliers have to stop and exit their cabs at the frontier controls, and will tourists have to exit their cars and coaches? If so, how will the consequential public safety concerns, and the inevitable delays that will result, be managed? Thirdly, what consideration has been given to forms of pre-clearance away from the port—whether on the factory floor, at the departing place of manufacture, at service stations or at border facilities, such as those at Sevington, Ashford and the White Cliffs Dover site?

Fourthly, do the checks need to be made physically by the frontier police, or can they be made by a remote entry system? Fifthly, what is the current state of discussion with France and/or the EU on EES and ETIAS implementation? Sixthly, given the state of current discussions, what do Ministers hope will be the eventual outcome or agreement, and within what timescales? Seventhly, does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that a successful outcome is in the interests of the EU and France as much as the UK, because frictionless trade and strong borders result in the freest trade and the greatest mutual benefit? Finally, does he agree that this should be paid for as part of the post-transitional Cabinet Office budget or another borders budget, instead of potentially needing to be paid for by the port and ferry operators?

I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Minister may not have all the answers to those questions to hand. Indeed, that is the reason for requesting this vital and urgent debate. Will he meet me and Kent colleagues in the first week of January, so that we can now make rapid and determined progress to resolve this issue? Finally, will the Minister join me in congratulating the port of Dover on its immense contribution to the nation, and on the excellent and efficient operations that it runs for the benefit of UK plc?

**Clive Efford (in the Chair):** Before I call the Minister, I remind the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) that it is the convention of the House that the Member in charge does not get to wind up at the end of a 30-minute debate.

11.17 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for securing the debate, and to other colleagues for attending it.

This is clearly a topic of some importance, and I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's understanding of the current position. The EU's entry-exit system, which I will henceforth refer to as the EES for brevity, is a new means of collecting identity and travel document data and registering entry and exit records to and from the Schengen area. The introduction of the EES will affect non-EU citizens travelling into the EU's Schengen zone. Furthermore, on routes where juxtaposed controls are in operation, such as at the port of Dover, EES checks will be undertaken by French officers prior to departure from the UK.

I have to make it clear that as a Schengen border measure, the design and implementation of the EES is a matter for the EU member states. The UK Government do not determine the rules for it, and Border Force will not administer it or be involved in its enforcement. However, as outlined by my hon. Friend, the UK clearly has an interest in its efficient implementation and operation due to the potential impacts on passengers travelling from the UK into the EU, particularly in terms of freight operations across the short straits. As mentioned, we, too, have ambitious plans for the border in order to maintain our focus on balancing fluidity and security with the future implementation of the ETA scheme. That will particularly be the case on routes that operate juxtaposed controls, as checks for the EES prior to departure from the UK will be undertaken at the Eurotunnel entrance in Dover, and at St Pancras here in London. Similarly, ETA checks will be undertaken by Border Force before departure to the UK. It is therefore very much in our interest to work with our counterparts in the EU, as well as with port and transport operators, to identify the requirements and issues involved.

Today, passenger numbers remain a fraction of pre-pandemic levels in many instances, and we are aware that the return to normal volumes of passengers, coupled with increased checks, could have the potential to cause queues. The juxtaposed controls that we operate are a unique and valuable part of the border system. As has been said, they have been in operation in a variety of locations on rail and sea transport modes for almost 30 years: they enable secure checks to be made, and

[Kevin Foster]

allow both ourselves and our partner countries to protect our borders. Those co-operative controls operate on UK soil, and we respect the fact that UK nationals who have abused the hospitality of our European neighbours by committing criminal offences are therefore not welcome to visit those countries again—and, similarly, the other way around. We are all working together to ensure that this is a success. Last year, we completed work with our international partners to successfully extend the arrangements to cover Eurostar services to and from the Netherlands, helping to cut down the overall journey times on this important route into the UK for the travelling public.

It is probably too early to quantify these changes exactly, but they will be a key consideration in discussions around how the EES is implemented by the relevant authorities. There are innovative ways to implement changes, such as those proposed under this new system, and we very much hope our French partners are as open to them as the UK was with the introduction of the very successful EU settlement scheme. Considerations over how much of this process can take place prior to arrival at the border are ultimately a matter for France and the European Commission. However, we remain open to discussing innovative approaches that take place on UK territory, as the UK was to the juxtaposed controls when they were introduced some decades ago.

Turning to the prospect of disruption, it will obviously be the responsibility of the police aux frontières to implement the checks on behalf of the EU member states. We are engaging with France with the aim of ensuring that the checks are implemented in a way that does not damage border throughput. Specific advice will be provided to the travelling public about the introduction of the EES with a view to increasing awareness of the new travel requirements and driving up compliance for both freight and non-freight travellers. However, to be clear, the requirements apply to the person travelling, not to goods and customs arrangements, which are separate and in place already.

I accept that any combination of near-normal levels of travel with the introduction of this new system could have quite a big impact. With people familiarising themselves not only with covid travel rules but with this new system, there could be queues, particularly at Dover. However, for many years there has been a productive working relationship between Border Force and its French counterparts to maintain flows at this key location, and we are constantly talking to them to try to make sure that we can continue to maintain flows, in the interests of both our nations—beyond the introduction of the EES.

I recognise that there is a particular challenge posed by passengers in vehicles. In line with our commitments, we will work with the implementing authorities to determine the infrastructure requirements, processes and procedures that result from the introduction of the EES. To reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Dover, practicality and safety considerations for passengers in vehicles are important elements to be agreed with our French partners. As she outlined, requiring all passengers to exit vehicles to register their biometric and biographic data would be hugely challenging, and we trust that our French partners will be open to exploring alternatives, especially given the obvious safety issues around requiring passengers to mix with active traffic flows at a busy port.

We have been engaging in this area to understand, in particular, what data the Schengen entry checks and the EES will look to secure. We understand that the biometric data to be captured is a facial photograph and four fingerprints, and that, for those enrolling for the first time, it must be captured under the supervision of a border official. Likewise, to counter fraudulent use, there will be a requirement for the supervision of any enrolment kiosks for all passengers. To be clear, this is something that will be in place at all entry points to the Schengen area; it will not be unique to entry from the United Kingdom. The juxtaposed controls present a particular situation, but also an opportunity, that we need to explore and resolve.

Last week, the European Commission announced that it is planning for the implementation of the EES in September. We of course want to finalise plans for the implementation under the juxtaposed controls that are based in the UK as soon as possible; however, we cannot set particular deadlines or timelines, given that it is all subject to further discussion with our French partners, who will operate them on behalf of the Schengen zone.

We recognise the port of Dover's role as a key entry and exit point to and from the UK for a wide variety of time-sensitive goods, as well as passengers. Prior to the pandemic in 2019, it handled 1.2 million roll-on-roll-off units—more than all other ports serving mainland EU routes combined. It is also the UK's largest international sea passenger port, handling nearly 11 million passengers in 2019. We are therefore fully committed to protecting this vital link, and that will be a key priority in our approach to assisting our partners in an effective implementation of the EES.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for securing the debate, and I join her in congratulating and thanking the port of Dover for the outstanding contribution to the economy that it facilitates through seamless daily trade with our European partners. I recognise the vital work that Dover Harbour Board undertook to complete a traffic management improvement project, which delivered an additional 4 km of freight holding capacity to help to keep traffic moving and better deal with traffic peaks. As the UK's busiest roll-on-roll-off port, Dover is a recognised pressure point at the frontier and maintaining flow is a priority for UK customs planning, without compromising border security.

Across Government, officials will continue to engage with the port, the chamber of shipping and road hauliers to work through ways in which we can ensure that the border continues to be effective through 2022, with the staged customs controls coming to an end on 1 January and the prospect of the introduction of the EES in September 2022. It will have to be a cross-Government effort. I note the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for a meeting with me. That meeting would almost certainly need to involve colleagues from the Cabinet Office, who take the lead on a number of the items that she highlighted in terms of the direct relationship with the European Union. To be clear, the Home Office's role is very much on the operational side of how Border Force and the police aux frontières can come to sensible working arrangements on the ground that suit the shared interests of our two nations.

As I have a bit of time, and a colleague from north Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) is in the Chamber, for anyone querying what impact this may have on, for example, Holyhead to Dublin, the answer is none, because the Republic of Ireland is not in the Schengen zone. It is obviously part of the common travel area with the United Kingdom, and therefore routine immigration controls are not in place at Holyhead or Dublin in terms of entry to the UK; however, there are provisions for intelligence-led operations. To be clear, if people are wondering why we are focusing on Dover rather than mentioning other entry points from the European economic area, it is because the EES will not apply to travel between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, due to the common travel area and the Republic not being part of the Schengen zone.

The debate has been a useful opportunity to highlight and discuss the issues. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Dover and Cabinet Office colleagues to discuss some of the points that have been raised. Given that the decision process is going through the European Union and being implemented by French colleagues, I hope that she will understand that sadly I cannot give some of the answers today that I would be able to give were the UK Home Office deciding and implementing the process; however, I assure her that we are committed to doing whatever we can to make sure that the border functions effectively, not just when coming into the UK but when going out of it, because we recognise the strong impact that there will be if that is not the case, particularly in Dover.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Northern Ireland Protocol: Veterinary Agreement

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 21 April, 28 April, 16 June and 15 July 2021 on Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, HC676.*]

2.30 pm

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate, 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. This can be done either 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.

**Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of securing a veterinary agreement in the Northern Ireland Protocol.

It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your auspices, Ms Rees, and I am delighted to speak on this really important issue.

I want to go back a little over two years and quote what the Prime Minister said when asked about form-filling as a result of the Johnson protocol, which he paraded as a triumph of his negotiating skills. He told the world:

“If somebody asks you to do that, tell them to ring up the Prime Minister and I will direct them to throw that form in the bin... There will be no forms, no checks, no barriers of any kind. You will have unfettered access.”

Two years have gone by. If it were two days, perhaps we would all say, “Let’s just wait and see.” If it were even two weeks or two months, we might say, “We’ll give the Prime Minister a chance to negotiate a solution.” But two years is outrageous.

This debate is not about the Johnson protocol, about which I know those hon. Members present have different views. I say to my friends in the Democratic Unionist party that the majority of people in Northern Ireland are in favour of the protocol, but I know that there are serious doubts about it. This debate is not about the protocol but about the operation of the protocol, an issue on which there is widespread agreement in Northern Ireland.

The situation in Northern Ireland at the moment is quite dangerous. It is building up tensions and concerns, and is possibly being manipulated to the extent that the loyalist community in particular fear for their future. That is why it is irresponsible that, two years on, we have no solution.

The sanitary and phytosanitary controls, which will come fully into operation at some point, are already having an impact, but it is important to acknowledge the very welcome grace periods for chilled meats and medicines. Lord Frost told the Lords last week that he expects those grace periods to continue at least until the end of the year and beyond if negotiations are constructive. Does the Minister expect the grace periods to continue? That really does matter.

[Tony Lloyd]

Export health certificates have already come into operation for goods being transported from Great Britain to the European Union, and from GB to Northern Ireland. Aodhán Connolly, convenor of the Northern Ireland Business Brexit Working Group, told both the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the International Trade Committee that there is no food shortage—that has to be acknowledged—but that not everything is perfect. Big supermarkets in Northern Ireland usually stock between 40,000 to 50,000 lines; in the worst case there was a shortage of 600 lines, but in better cases the figure is in the tens. Therefore, there is no food shortage, but there are some specific shortages. A friend told me recently that she could not get flour or vanilla. Such things are important for some people, and we ought to acknowledge that there are shortages.

Of course, trade volumes are down. Earlier this year, pork sales from GB were down some 70%, and piglets were going to be slaughtered because farmers simply could not sell them on the open market. That was some time ago, but can the Minister provide an update on how trade has been affected. Even with the grace periods, and even though the export health certificates have come into operation only recently, the reality is that the volume of sales has gone down. I have heard very different estimates, so it would be helpful if the Minister could update us?

Under the SPS regime there is a need for forms and documents. Vets have to certify the fitness of animals, either live or slaughtered, and there is a certification process for food products as well. Vets also have to check the registration number of vehicles, to guarantee that they are the same ones that originally carried the food. We do not know exactly how that will work for GB to Northern Ireland. We do know, however, how it works for GB into the European Union, because at the port of Dublin there are physical checks on 4% to 5% of goods, and documentary checks on up to 30%. That is a major barrier to trade for GB producers.

The chief veterinary officer for Northern Ireland says that they need 27 vets to do the checking work that will now be required at the ports, but only half that number are available. There is a real question for the Minister about the number of vets available—not simply at the ports in Northern Ireland, but across GB—to ensure that GB producers can sell to Northern Ireland.

There is already a cost to us in Great Britain and to the EU, and this does not just apply to Northern Ireland. Welsh lamb and Scottish fishery products are also affected, as are the processed foods that the whole of Great Britain sells in considerable numbers. There are, however, real questions, which my Northern Ireland colleagues will want to hear addressed, about whether GB producers will consider it worth selling to Northern Ireland in particular. Supply chains already face challenges and the biggest issue is that of uncertainty. I do not know how much of an answer the Minister will be able to give us but, two years on, producers still have uncertainty hanging over them and are asking whether it is reasonable for them to sell to a relatively small market in Northern Ireland when the alternative is simply not to go through the hassle involved.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for introducing the debate. The very point that he is making is one that is obvious to us. Certainly for my party, including my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who is sitting here beside me, the problem is one not only of cost but of bureaucracy, and people are just turned off. In the past they had a simple system allowing them to bring stuff from the UK mainland to Northern Ireland, but suddenly there are all these difficulties. One quick example is the seeds sector for plants and flowers. If someone wants to buy a wee packet of seeds, there is an added £10 or £15 charge, which is ridiculous for a seed packet that costs about £2.50.

**Tony Lloyd:** The hon. Member is absolutely right. It is possible to transport used farm equipment without the need for many checks, and yet a packet of seeds, which is produced in a controlled way, has to have that bureaucracy and those checks, so he is right to be concerned. The central point is that is the bureaucracy that is frustrating for businesses in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

There is a question for the Minister about the uncertainty. Traders have told us that the trader support service is working well. I am sure that is true, but they also make the point that an education process is needed for producers in Great Britain. How far along are we in securing that process of public education?

As I have said, the damage is already here and now. The sheep industry in Northern Ireland, for example, faces scrapie controls, which means that it will be three years before some sheep farmers can sell their goods into the GB market. Cattle breeders also face uncertainty because of the new regulatory regime. That is not because they move cattle—generally they move fertilised products and suchlike—but because they cannot plan for the future. That is disastrous for the agricultural industry.

The chief executive of Lynas Foodservice, the biggest food processor in Northern Ireland, has pointed out that there are eight different bureaucratic processes to bring mozzarella from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. He estimates that it will cost the business some £50,000 a year to service that requirement. It can do that because it is big, but a small producer cannot compete with that, so supply is going to be a real issue.

The Conservative manifesto was clear—I hope there is still common ground on this—that there would be no “compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards.”

I hope the Minister will repeat that commitment, because I know it is the mantra that the Government insist on. If that is true, it should be very easy for us to move towards an SPS veterinary agreement. The CBI has talked about the need for a

“bespoke, modern UK-EU Veterinary Agreement”,

specific for Northern Ireland within the context of the protocol. That is supported by Retail NI, the Ulster Farmers Union and every party represented in Stormont. Oddly, it is one of the things that everyone agrees on—as well as that there should be no amnesty for those who committed murder during the troubles. It would be a great unifier if it was not such a negative thing. We should be able to get that agreement.

The Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said in February that the Government want to work on a veterinary agreement so that they can secure the flow of goods and improve the forms. Amen to that. The EU Vice-President told us that a veterinary agreement was “on the table”. Everybody is in favour of it, so what is stopping us? One thing that is stopping us—and the Minister has seen a way to address this—is the lack of trust and the lack of good faith that has been built up. The public diplomacy and rhetoric have been massively unhelpful. It is not something political or a shouting game, but that is what it has become. That has been very unhelpful and it has led to cynicism.

The Minister might want to say that the real ambition is to achieve a trade deal with the United States—not because that would compensate for the trade we have lost with the EU, but because it would allow the Prime Minister to stand up with the big banner headline and say, Donald Trump-style, “I have done a great trade deal”. That is not enough, however, if the price is lower food standards coming into our market, and it is certainly not enough if it prejudices our capacity to deliver a veterinary agreement that could make things easier. Ironically, even in the context of a US trade deal, President Biden has said that he sees no barrier to there being a veterinary agreement between the EU and the UK to protect the situation in Northern Ireland and the protocol.

There are two different models that we can look at. The first is probably a variation of the New Zealand deal, which I know is something that the Government have thought about. It has advantages. I have talked about between 4% and 5% of goods being subject to physical checks in Dublin. If the New Zealand example worked for us, that figure would go down to 2% and documentary checks would go from 30% to 10%. Those are still barriers, though, and the Minister should not underestimate that they would be real for businesses.

The other, much more attractive option is what the EU calls dynamic alignment. In actual fact, we are aligned at the moment. We have not moved our food standards, and nor has the EU. What people have talked about is the possibility of a temporary agreement, which could of course have a guillotine and could be terminated if we sign up to the Australian deal, the New Zealand deal or the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-pacific partnership. We could have a guillotine and move on, but let us have that temporary veterinary agreement, which would allow alignment and enable us to get rid of all the form-filling and other problems. That is the real thing we should play for. So, I ask the Minister, why not?

Well, to a degree we know why not—it is because Lord Frost has ruled it out, saying that he has grave doubts about how long it would take. Actually, that is nonsense—and I hope that the Minister in turn will also tell Lord Frost that it is nonsense—because it would take almost no time. It is the basis on which we were operating 12 months ago, and it would simply mean reverting to a reality already known to businesses in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the EU.

If we can get this issue right, there is something enormous to be gained, because it would unlock not only the Northern Ireland protocol but the issues

experienced GB businesses trading with the rest of the EU. That is something big and really important, and it would stop the erosion of trade.

My final point is that we need to move on to some form of trusted trader scheme. It ought to be easily achievable. It is not magic; it is a very easy thing to achieve. Of course it requires work but, two years on, that work should already have been done.

Perhaps what we really need is a trusted negotiator scheme, and perhaps that would not involve the current Prime Minister. That may sound trivial but this is a serious point, because as long as people play politics with this issue, they will get it wrong. If we can consider the needs of the people of Northern Ireland and the needs of businesses in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we can begin to come up with a real solution. It takes a little bit of imagination—not very much—but it takes a lot of political will, and that is what the Minister has to persuade us exists in the Government today.

2.47 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to make a contribution, Ms Rees.

I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for giving us a chance to participate in this debate. To be fair to him, I think that he and I know these issues. On the Northern Ireland protocol we have very different points of view, but this debate is about the difficulties that the Northern Ireland protocol has brought in through the veterinary agreement. So I will speak about that, because that is perhaps where we will find the unified approach—which I think is what we are trying to do—to overcome the problems.

I am so pleased once again to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), and the Minister; it is always a pleasure to engage with the Minister in debates in this Chamber.

I will also pay a special tribute to the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). I had the opportunity to invite him to my constituency and I must say that it was a wonderful chance to engage with him. He himself had asked for such an invitation and I was very pleased to make it happen. He could find out what the Unionist people were saying and thinking, which gave him, as he told me himself, the chance to understand better the psyche of those of us in Unionism and what the key issues for us are. By the way, he is a very engaging person—I say that very honestly—and I know that all the people from my constituency who met him were certainly impressed by him. I will just put that on the record. I have said it to him before, but now it will be in *Hansard* for the future.

This issue is a very evocative one for me, for my party and indeed for a huge majority of the people I represent. I will give just one example of the Northern Ireland protocol working. To be fair, it is not a veterinary issue, but in just the last week parents and children have been inconvenienced at Christmas—not my grandchildren, by the way, but other grandchildren. To get their Barbie Dream House on Amazon, people have to pay an extra £35 to buy it in Northern Ireland. It is not just the inconvenience but, as the hon. Member for Rochdale said, the cost. It is almost as though £35 or £40 was just added on.

[Jim Shannon]

Here is another example. A lady who wanted to buy a rug for her horse made inquiries, as she did every year, about buying it on the UK mainland, and was shocked to find that its price had suddenly jumped from £40 to £65. She was quite annoyed at having to spend the extra money; and when she agreed to pay the extra £25, she was then informed that they would not send the rug anyway—the paperwork and the bureaucracy was so great. That was a veterinary issue for a person who has horses and understands those issues—great difficulties.

To be fair, the Minister understands the issues; we will not be telling the hon. Lady anything that she does not already know, but these are our frustrations about the protocol. These issues are not just inconvenient for business people; they are challenging the viability of their very businesses, from those who cannot supply motor parts, parts for lawnmowers or parts for mobility scooters, to the businessman whose supplies have been cut by over a third because of paperwork.

The hon. Member for Rochdale referred to tractors and machinery, and I will provide some examples from my constituency. Tractors must be scrupulously cleaned. If they have any mud or muck on them they cannot come across, even though, on 31 December 2020, that was perfectly acceptable. Did the world change on 1 January 2021? This makes me think that it did. Although we obviously cannot see the change, the EU certainly found a reason to change. The central theme of my speech will be the EU's attitude and the obstructions that it is putting in place in relation to this issue.

The Northern Ireland protocol is affecting every aspect of life, and as we have said before—and I must put it on record because it is our party's position—it has to go. It is not fit for purpose; it is massively affecting the quality of life, the cost of living and the rights of people in my constituency of Strangford and across the whole of Northern Ireland. I could, although I will not, speak for days on this issue. Everyone would say, "Look: it's getting dark, Jim." I will not do that, but there are so many examples that I could cite to reinforce the points that the hon. Member for Rochdale has made. I am sure that all of my comments on this topic in the House could well amount to a day's worth—I, at least, definitely sometimes felt as though I was going on for days and days. The reason that I did so, and will continue to do so, is simple: the protocol is unfair, discriminatory and constitutionally unacceptable.

I turn to the specifics of today's debate, to which the hon. Member for Rochdale referred and about which I want to speak. I contacted the Ulster Farmers Union—I declare an interest as a member of the union—and they have said that we must have a veterinary agreement immediately to survive this impasse. So that is the Ulster Farmers Union, which represents the majority of farmers in Northern Ireland—not all, because, I believe, the Irish Farmers' Association has a lot of members in the west of the Province. The Ulster Farmers Union said:

"A veterinary agreement could remove up to 80% of checks and documentation that would otherwise be needed. It will support the agri-food and retail industries as well as farming and will keep prices low and choice high for NI families...even a time-limited agreement would assist us in the short and medium term and provide some relief to the current pressures—both trade and social."

The Ulster Farmers Union has a very large membership. All of my neighbours in the Ards peninsula—I live on a farm as well—are members. That is not just because the insurance premiums are fairly keen but because, in all honesty, it represents us very well.

Farmers cannot wait for further machinations as the Government attempt to reason with the unreasonable. It has been made abundantly clear by the treatment of the European Commission and the manner in which Unionist people are spoken of in those circles that this protocol is not a matter of practicality for the EU; for them it is a matter of pride. They are out to beat us and are using the Northern Ireland protocol as a method to do that. Their pride was hurt, and the saying that hurt people hurt other people is true here.

I have to put on record my disquiet and anger at the tone and the methodology of the EU and how they have treated us. They are determined to inflict as much pain on the Brits as they look upon it. I would just say this: I am a Brit. I am very proud to carry a British passport. I am very proud to be a member of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. When they attack the Brits, they are attacking us as well, so I feel quite angered at how the EU have gone at this. We are not to be the conduit to inflict that pain.

I have two more examples—no more, because they all illustrate the same issue over and over. In his introduction, the hon. Member for Rochdale referred to the movement of cattle. I have been incredulous to hear some of these things. My farmers on the Ards peninsula have cows of a very high pedigree. They sell their bulls and cows all over the United Kingdom. This year, some of them phoned me as they were taking their bulls to market. These bulls are worth about £20,000 or £25,000 on the market when they take them across to the mainland and to Scotland. They informed me that if they went to the market sale on the mainland and they did not perchance happen to sell that bull or cow, they would have to then apply for a licence to keep there the bull or cow that they were hoping to sell. It would have to stay in quarantine for five to six weeks. Fortunately, they did sell them, but the possibility of not selling them meant that the cost factor arose, and that is something that I have great concerns over. The situation is affecting agriculture. It is affecting cattle. I am very concerned.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend is making extremely valid points and has raised a number of issues. Daily, businesses highlight to us that they cannot get seed potatoes into Northern Ireland; we cannot get approval for plant protection products; more recently, the Woodland Trust cannot bring its community tree packs into Northern Ireland for the Queen's Green Canopy because it creates some sort of a risk. How is a tree coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland a risk? It is not; it needs sorted.

I have sympathy with what is being proposed here today. A common SPS area would be beneficial. However, it does not deal with the protocol regulations in their entirety. The message today, if my hon. Friend agrees, is that the protocol needs to go. It needs to be fixed, and it therefore needs to go in its entirety. We need to enter new negotiations and try to get a sensible, common-sense way forward.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. I absolutely agree. I know this debate is about the machinations of the protocol, but

we are very clear where we stand. We are against the protocol per se, for the reasons covered in this debate, but also for reasons far beyond them.

My hon. Friend has stolen two of my examples. The first was seed potatoes. Speaking in a debate here last week, the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) mentioned seed potatoes, where there are clear issues for us. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) has been very much at the forefront of trying to address some of those issues. The seed potato sector in Northern Ireland was doing great, but it has lost its way because of the Northern Ireland protocol and veterinary issues.

On the trees, it seems unrealistic that we cannot get in Northern Ireland the trees that the Woodland Trust and others are planting on behalf of schools across the rest of the United Kingdom—in England, Scotland and Wales. Really? They were okay on 31 December 2020, but they did not seem to be okay on 1 January 2021.

I will give another example. I shall not go on too long about this, but I want to have it on the record. One of my constituents from Ballygowan in Strangford bought three horses from England in February or March this year. She was not aware that there would be any problems for them to come over, but when she got them to the harbour she was told she could not bring them in, even though the papers, pedigrees and licences on medical health were all right. She could not bring them in because of the veterinary arrangements in the Northern Ireland protocol. They were held in quarantine for five to six weeks. Only on the intervention of our colleague, Edwin Poots, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, were they released from quarantine at the harbour to their new home in Ballygowan. Frustration does not get where we are on this.

I said at the start that we in Northern Ireland were being used as a stick to beat the British for daring to leave the EU. Nothing said or done since has altered that opinion. The path forward is clear—I put it on the record. It is to trigger article 16. Do it sooner rather than later; do it right away. The conditions have been met and these intensive talks, which were made or break, are now two months down the line. I am not involved in those negotiations, which may be a good thing, but something is glaringly obvious to those of us on the sidelines. The insulting play for power is not to be borne by us in Northern Ireland any longer. It cannot be borne any longer by anyone.

I thank everyone for their patience, and I will conclude with this. I am aware that discussions are ongoing but progress is not. In the absence of any clear progress, I believe—I say this with respect—that the Government are left with no option other than to trigger article 16. Fulfil your word. Refuse to be made fools of by the Europeans for one second longer. Bring Northern Ireland back from the sidelines and into the fold once more. I believe that “Grin and bear it” is no longer an option. I urge Government and my Minister to make the right choice. I know it may not be the Minister’s choice on the protocol, but I hope it is on the veterinary issue. Make it quick; enough is enough. Stop the toing and froing, knock the protocol on the head and make a final decision that the protocol can no longer rise again.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** Thank you, Jim Shannon. I think we are all grateful that you shortened your remarks by at least two minutes, because Christmas is coming, I have been told.

3.2 pm

**Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for bringing the debate and for his long-standing and genuine commitment to achieving good outcomes for Northern Ireland. I know that is a common cause for many hon. Members across the House, for which we are grateful.

Divergence and potential divergence on veterinary and SPS arrangements is the reason for the vast majority of checks between Britain and Northern Ireland since Brexit. Stripping out the politics, it is worth saying that the island of Ireland has always been counted as one single epidemiological and veterinary unit. That long predates Brexit and has offered protection for biodiversity, agri-foods and farming generally. Hon. Members will remember that foot and mouth disease did not ravage the island of Ireland because we were protected by those checks.

I will defer as always to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on farming matters—South Belfast is not a farming constituency—but moving organic material in the form of soil had not been allowed before Brexit, because of the SPS arrangement. Those high quality standards have offered protection and given a unique selling point to Northern Ireland farmers and producers for many years. That is what we do: we produce high-quality goods and sell them to people who wish to buy high-quality goods. As far as I am aware, there is no demand to drop those standards. For what it is worth, I do not see demand to drop those standards in Britain, either.

I am a member of the UK Trade and Business Commission, which has MPs from across the House, including from the Democratic Unionist party. Over the last year, we have heard evidence on all sorts of trading and business issues from all sorts of sectors. The clear message from a range of businesses is that they value those high standards and do not want to drop them. People say that we will have higher standards in Britain—knock yourself out. It is a bit like going to a museum where the minimum donation is £5. If someone wants to put £20 in there, that is absolutely fine. The minimum standards can still be agreed, and Britain can exceed them if it wants to. So it is genuinely perplexing to me that the UK Government would not consider a veterinary arrangement. The EU even offered to sunset it, so that in a few years, when Britain worked out what it wanted from Brexit, that agreement could dissolve and a different set of arrangements could exist. Genuinely, I can only put that decision down to ideological reasons, because I do not see a demand for it from UK businesses or consumers.

As for our obeying these rules until new year’s eve and the question of what the difference is now, the difference is that the UK spent five years saying, “We don’t play by anybody’s rules,” so it is difficult now to get everybody to stick by particular rules. This is not the time or place—Christmas is coming—to get into the minutiae of global trade rules, but it is around having an identifiable set of rules and it is around preventing a thousand cliff edges. If on 1 January the UK says it will

[*Claire Hanna*]

no longer adhere to a standard on soil and on 2 January says it will no longer adhere to a standard on the temperature of cows or whatever, we will create cliff edge after cliff edge. In the absence of a set of rules, businesses cannot possibly compete.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for her measured delivery of that point. The issue may not be as clear as she refers to. The soil was okay at Hillmount Nursery in my constituency before 31 December, and it was no different afterwards. The issue was not that the UK or Northern Ireland were going to do anything different. We want to obey the same rules. So the rules were there that we were going to adhere to.

**Claire Hanna:** The point is that the UK has made it very clear that it will not sign up to commit to those rules. That is fundamentally the issue—that the UK has not agreed, as a continuum, to adhere to those rules. Yes, obviously the soil has not changed over the new year, so I understand some of the frustrations, but those could be addressed by exactly the sort of veterinary arrangement that the hon. Member for Rochdale suggests, and that businesses across the UK have been suggesting. It is perplexing to me that all of the parties across the board in Northern Ireland did not get together to call for that, because at different times all of them said that an SPS arrangement would be acceptable. That unanimity and that consistency of message from Northern Ireland's political representatives would have been very powerful.

In the absence of that SPS arrangement, which I would love to see, the protocol is the show in town at the moment. It is nobody's first choice; nobody loves it; nobody would have designed it. It is a bit like that thing about getting directions in Ireland—"I wouldn't start from here," and you would not start from the protocol, but the reality is that all the other options have been taken off the table. I genuinely understand the frustration and confusion of constituents and consumers, reflected by the hon. Members for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Strangford. They say that all of a sudden the rules are different, but that is because of Brexit, which in every way was always going to mean barriers. Brexit is, by definition, a set of trade barriers. That is why some of the rules have changed. In Northern Ireland, businesses were clear before the referendum that they were very happy with the status quo—being able to trade north, south, east and west.

**Carla Lockhart:** The hon. Lady makes a valid point. Some of the regulations and rules brought in at this point in time are Brexit-related. However, will she not accept that more are actually protocol-related? Had NI left the EU on the same grounds as GB, we would not be in this position and would not be dealing with issues such as seed potatoes, the Queen's canopy and all the others listed here today.

**Claire Hanna:** They are issues that flow from Brexit and from the trade and co-operation agreement voted through by a large majority in the sovereign Parliament of the UK. I did not support it. The hon. Member did not support it. But that was the settled arrangement.

**Tony Lloyd:** Could the hon. Member remind us who negotiated the trade and co-operation agreement? Who put the protocol into it?

**Claire Hanna:** I am happy to remind the hon. Member. It is all over *Hansard* and in TV clips. I think it was one Mr Boris Johnson and one Lord David Frost. I believe that at Christmas-time they told us that it was over and ready to go, but it was clearly not. These are all consequences that flowed from a series of decisions.

As I say, business did not want to change the status quo. Businesses outlined their preferences for any solution that would mean no barriers in either direction. The Social Democratic and Labour party and I personally campaigned exhaustively over those five years, begging those people who were voting to not choose a solution that created a barrier either between north and south or east and west. Not alone did no business I have ever met want to choose between their trade with the single market and their trade with the GB market, but because we are a fragile and interdependent region that was always going to create the perception of winners and losers. That will have come to pass.

Members will be aware of some of the sporadic unrest that was seen in and around Belfast in the spring. For what it is worth, I think it was fairly contrived. Riots and bus burnings that switch on and off like an appointment are not very organic. I say that having spent all my life in a fragile region. I think they were part of a campaign to project an aura of chaos. I really felt for one young man, who was arrested at the riots in April and quoted on BBC TV. He said, "I don't know what the protocol is, but my leaders keep telling me I am losing." That is at the root of this Brexit problem. It created a barrier in one direction and created the perception of winners and losers.

Unfortunately, the protocol has been spun by many not to be a consequence of a series of decisions that the UK made for its own reasons. It is fair enough; they are a sovereign Government and are entitled to make decisions, but the perception has been given that it was because of Dublin or the EU. I have had the police round twice at my door with death threats because people have been told, "She brought you the protocol," when these are the consequences of the UK's decisions. Unfortunately, that is what we are working around.

I do not love the protocol, but we are now in the business of trying to make it work. At the moment, there are a variety of discussions between the EU and the UK to talk about how we can make the operation smoother based on the reality of how it works. The fact is that if the two jurisdictions have a different trading and customs regime, a border will have to go somewhere. That has been a fact since long before the Brexit referendum. It says it all over leaflets that I spread in 2016: that border will have to go somewhere, and it will create the headache of all headaches for this region.

According to recent polls by Queen's University Belfast and the University of Liverpool, people are saying, "No, I want a different solution." That is a consequence of years of misinformation and deflection. I want a different solution too, but there is not one. We have spent five years discussing all the different ways to skin this cat, and the protocol was the outcome. The Commission and the UK Government, in conjunction with business and civil society, are trying to work through and find a way that works best for businesses.

There are a lot of challenges for businesses. There is no doubt about that. Brexit equals friction, and friction equals cost for business. Particularly for very small

businesses that are moving low-value items and do not have a procurement or logistics department or whatever, it is worth saying that it has always been the case that there are different costs for some businesses between Britain and Northern Ireland. I have numerous examples. I become the most Unionist little warrior on Amazon when somebody tries to charge me a big fee. I have many email exchanges long predating 2016 where GB businesses are saying, “If is going to the highlands and islands, then it is going to be a different price.” I say, “No. It should be subject to the same rules.”

That issue predates Brexit. It has gotten worse after Brexit—there is no doubt about it—but that is a consequence of the failure of the UK Government to explain and prepare GB businesses for the changes that were going to come their way. That I am aware of, there is not one single product that is unavailable now in Northern Ireland. I hope my children do not read *Hansard*, because I am the Santa at home. I, too, have been trying to procure items for three children, and there was nothing I could get here that I was not able to get in Northern Ireland.

**Jim Shannon:** Did they ask for seed potatoes though?

**Claire Hanna:** No, my children are not seed potato fans. As I said, we are dealing with a series of responses—the consequences of the UK’s decisions and, as I said, they are the UK’s decisions. I do not agree with them. It is very clear that people in Northern Ireland wanted something different. That is a fact. I do not want to get into—we are talking about the practical issues and I am aware that it is difficult to divorce the practical, the emotional, the political and the constitutional, but the discussions under way are about tackling the practical outcomes of the pandemic.

However, there will be differences for Northern Ireland—that is a fact. We have always been a different SPS zone. Even those people who were behind the alternative arrangements commission, and all of those kind of Brexiteer leading lights, have been very clear that there will always need to be some form of protocol to address that situation.

I will not get into all of the issues around consent, but the people of Northern Ireland rejected Brexit and, at every subsequent election, they have chosen parties that reject Brexit and want to try to find a way to make it work for our particular circumstances. That has been very clear in poll after poll; even among those who voted for Brexit, many of them do not want Brexit on exactly the same terms as people on this island. People want that dual market access.

I will briefly address that. There are huge opportunities for Northern Ireland, which has not had a unique selling point in many decades, to trade equally into the UK single market and into the EU single market. That could create jobs, create prosperity and change our futures. The founder of our party, John Hume, said, many times, that the best peace process is a job. We finally have the opportunity to say to businesses, from wherever, that if they want to have a foot in both markets, Northern Ireland should be the place to invest.

However, investors need stability. They need clear rules and to know that there will not be unrest about all of those things. Businesses are very clear that this situation is not perfect, but they have solutions—they have ways to try to make it work. They do not talk

about trusted traders, but they talk about data-based solutions. They are also very clear that they do not want the hard Brexit that Britain has; they do not want article 16 to be triggered. They know that it is not the silver bullet that it has been presented as, and that it just brings us back to the table, which is where we are now.

Brexit was always going to be bad news for Northern Ireland. It was always going to insert all of the difficult things for us—sovereignty, identity and borders—into our everyday conversations. That is driving real polarisation. Sovereignty is different in Northern Ireland because people voted for the Good Friday agreement 23 years ago, and it does not operate in the same hard way as it does in other nation states. The protocol, imperfect though it is, is how we will chart our course through this situation.

It is important that the EU and the UK can get around to the solutions. What people in Northern Ireland want, more than anything, is to not have to talk about this any more—not have to turn on the radio and hear this all day long, all year long. The only way to ensure that is to make the protocol work and agree that these are the choices that were made by the people of Northern Ireland and by the UK Government, and to try to make them work.

3.18 pm

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing the debate, and for the interest that he has shown. I see that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not with us at the moment, but I would like to also thank him for his generous tribute. I learned many things on my visit to Northern Ireland, and perhaps one of the most important ones was that, even though a Northern Ireland fishing boat is fishing just a few miles off the Scottish coast, by the time it has caught its haul of prawns and taken them back to Portavogie, it is a Portavogie prawn and has had its passport.

I also concur heartily with the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), who I also met when I was in Northern Ireland. Her constituency is many things. It is very beautiful, in parts, but it is certainly not an agricultural constituency—I certainly did not run out of fingers and toes counting all of the tractors I saw on the Malone Road of a morning.

The very simple reason we are here is because of another one of those familiar three-word slogans, which are so beloved by the Prime Minister: “Get Brexit done”. Of course, what he could not admit at the time was that his particular manner of choosing to get Brexit done would create a trade and regulatory border right down the Irish sea. Those frictions, which are already there, are only set to increase when the UK has to begin enforcing sanitary and phytosanitary checks on imports to GB from the EU and Northern Ireland.

As the hon. Member for Belfast South said, quite accurately, that is happening as a result of the negotiating objectives that Her Majesty’s Government had at the time. The only rationale I can think of for having those objectives was the need to keep options open about the level at which we were willing to impose animal welfare and food standards, in order to open up the possibility of trade deals with other jurisdictions. I know that the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), who

[Richard Thomson]

made a couple of very telling interventions earlier, has to be on her way to get back home now. If she were still in the Chamber I would have said to her that, for all the issues around the Northern Ireland protocol, the terms on which the UK as a whole has left the European Union do not work for agricultural producers across the UK either. They certainly do not work for my constituents, and I represent a highly agricultural constituency in the north-east of Scotland. Simply put, the terms that we have agreed to are not working for us either.

While I take a keen interest in Northern Irish politics, I do not take any sides. Let me say that I do understand, I hope, and can sympathise with those in Northern Ireland who feel that they have been distanced or separated from Great Britain as a result of the manner in which we left the European Union. Although I am very clear that a protocol is required, it does not need to be on the terms of the current protocol; if we are going to renegotiate the terms of whatever protocol is there, it has to be done in a constructive way that keeps in mind the objectives of all parts of our jurisdiction. I understand the importance of having seamless trade east to west, as well as north to south, on the island of Ireland. However, we cannot get away from the fact that the very reason that we no longer have that is a function of the choices made by the UK Government.

**Tony Lloyd:** I am following the hon. Member's speech very carefully. When he talks about the renegotiation of the protocol, even if that is desirable that will probably be a very long-term effort. Would he agree that what would be easier for his own constituents would be a SPS agreement that would allow GB trade from Scotland, England and Wales into the EU, and, of course, from GB into Northern Ireland? That is easy to achieve.

**Richard Thomson:** I agree with the hon. Member's intervention, and if he will allow me, I will go on to develop some of the many reasons why I believe that to be the case. We should be looking for the most pragmatic solutions in the short term to minimise those self-inflicted obstacles that we now have to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and also between Great Britain and the European Union.

Businesses have been calling for a veterinary agreement for as long as the Brexit deal has been in place; it is now more important than ever that we get one. Before I was elected to this place I was a local authority councillor. One thing that we had blinking aggressively on our radar was that if there was a no-deal Brexit or something like that, the sheer amount of pressure that would be put on our environmental health officers and local vets to try and provide export health certificates to be able to certify goods that were of an appropriate standard for export would be huge. We could not just wave a magic wand and create these environmental health officers overnight. They need a bachelor of science degree, I understand, which takes at least three years, and then they need two years of practical experience on the job. It takes five years from when someone walks through the doors of whatever institution they are studying at until they can sign off their first consignment of fish from Peterhead market. We were very worried about that, and those fears have not gone away.

I find it very difficult to disagree with James Withers, the chief executive of Scotland Food and Drink, when he said at the UK Trade and Business Commission's session on the UK-EU TCA:

"A veterinary agreement is the single most important step that could be taken to improve exports to the EU, red meat and seafood, two of our most important animal product exports, are caught in a tsunami of bureaucracy and paperwork."

Let us consider some of the evidence. For a dairy in Galloway in the south-west of Scotland—famed rightly for the quality of its agricultural produce, particularly in the dairy sector—it is easier to export a shipping container of ice cream to South Korea than it is to send a block of cheese across to Northern Ireland to somebody who wishes to buy it. Our food and drink exports to the EU were down 16% at the start of the year, and over the first half of the year they dropped by almost half. Filling out the additional forms that are required takes hours every morning, and businesses are incurring tens of thousands of pounds in additional costs to ensure that they comply with them. Some businesses need to hire customs agents that they did not before.

Adding to the delays are problems with the documentation, which is obviously very complex and takes a long time to fill out. If someone gets something wrong, it banjaxes the whole thing. Sometimes they need to fill out up to 80 pages of documentation compared with the one-page delivery note and invoice that went with shipping pre Brexit. We have heard the saga of seed potatoes. I have some seed potato growers in my constituency. Their standards were already the highest in the world, and they have not diminished, but because the UK is not prepared to sign up to the same level of obligation and standards, they are virtually unable to export to what were always their most productive markets, even though those markets are desperate for the disease-free quality that those potatoes can bring.

If there is an area crying out for pragmatism it is that multi-million pound trade. Europe needs our Scottish seed potatoes—we have always exported them—as does Ireland. There is a reason our producers did not take up the opportunity to export east of Aden despite being encouraged to do so: it is because it is so difficult to do that. They have had a ready market taken away from them. All it requires is a pragmatic realignment, which will once again allow that world-leading industry to get on with doing what it does best. Part of the problem will go away with an agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary standards. Such an agreement has widespread support. Back in June, the CBI was calling on both sides to negotiate a bespoke veterinary agreement, saying that it would end the friction that Brexit has caused, particularly to the food, drink and agri sector. The EU is clearly willing to sign up to such a deal; it has been signalling as far back as February that it would be open to signing that kind of bilateral deal with the UK.

I will cite a couple of business voices on how the matter is perceived in Northern Ireland. Richard Gray of the Carson McDowell law firm said that not one business has raised concerns about the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice or its role as the court of ultimate appeal under the Northern Ireland protocol; nor have any business organisations raised that issue on behalf of clients. Stephen Kelly, the chief executive of Manufacturing Northern Ireland, which represents

5,500 Northern Irish firms, has likewise said that not one of the businesses represented by it has raised issues with the ECJ position. He said:

“Everyone knows a treaty needs legal backup. There have been border problems with the rest of the UK”

but the ECJ is

“nothing but a Brexit purity issue”.

Again, I find that hard to disagree with.

I am sure that the noble Lord Frost has many estimable qualities, but as a negotiator he strikes me as the sort of person who seems to like to pour oil on troubled waters only to set fire to it later, when it suits his purposes to do so. The UK Government should look for pragmatic agreements, and focus on reaching agreements with the EU in this area. It is not just the UK that now has sovereignty; the EU has the sovereignty that it has always had, and nobody’s sovereignty should trump anyone else’s. It should be a pragmatic negotiation to achieve the best outcomes that we can.

The UK Government should focus on reaching the kind of agreement that businesses and the food industry are calling for, rather than focusing on artificial grievances that seem to be peripheral at best to the concerns of most people. The Government have a choice between ideological purity, and the accompanying impoverishment that it will cause for our businesses opportunities, or pragmatism. I dearly hope that the Minister will indicate that pragmatism is winning that battle.

3.29 pm

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who is an expert on this issue. He is a highly distinguished former Minister and shadow Secretary of State, among the many other roles he has carried out during his political career, so his words carry real weight. His introduction was exemplary and his critique was gentle and nuanced—I suspect I will be a little more aggressive, but I may make similar points.

The contributions from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), and the exchanges between them, were fascinating. In many ways, it was a résumé of the discussions we have, sadly, been having over many years. The almost intractable nature of some of the problems came out, but it is good that people are discussing them and pulling out the difficulties that we face as we try to find a constructive way forward. I was particularly struck by the idea that we would not start from here. Well, I do not think anybody would, and I have some sympathy for the Minister in trying to untie this knot at the end. These are not all problems of her making, but she is part of the Government so she bears the responsibility.

This is a hugely important issue for people in Northern Ireland, for the future of the United Kingdom and, as was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale, for trust in politics. Of course, it was the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who famously said that no British Prime Minister would allow a border in the Irish sea. Sadly, it turned out that she was wrong. Despite all the promises, all the clever technical solutions and all the rest of it, the truth is that since the start of this year there have

been additional checks. Despite the Northern Ireland protocol, life has been made much more difficult for everyone, which is why securing a veterinary agreement is such an important prize.

As others have said, a veterinary agreement would help not only the situation in Northern Ireland. Meat, dairy, fish and agrifood products accounted for over £11.3 billion of annual trade into the EU in 2019. Now, however, costly red tape in the form of burdensome SPS checks on every food and agrifood product entering the EU is costing British farmers, fishers and businesses dear, hampering their efforts to trade. Between 2019 and 2021, exports of beef to the EU fell by 37%, with a 34% fall in exports of cheese. Other products have been similarly affected, with a 19% drop in exports of milk, cream and chocolate. According to the Food and Drink Federation, this has led to almost £2 billion in lost sales. Its head of international trade, Dominic Goudie, commented:

“The return to growth in exports to non-EU markets is welcome news, but it doesn’t make up for the disastrous loss of £2bn in sales to the EU. It clearly demonstrates the serious difficulties manufacturers in our industry continue to face and the urgent need for additional specialist support.”

He is right.

The UK failed to secure an agreement on SPS standards with the EU, so each agrifood product entering the European Union has to be accompanied by an export health certificate costing £150 to £200, is subject to physical checks at ports of entry and requires veterinary sign-off. Exporters must also give EU border control posts advance notice of goods arriving—a process that *The Guardian* newspaper has estimated takes 26 steps. Full SPS checks are due to be introduced in 2022, risking the problem getting worse. The chair of the British Chambers of Commerce has said:

“it should not be the case that businesses simply have to give up on exporting to the EU”—

a point made earlier in the debate.

The fishing industry has warned that companies that have been around for 30 or 40 years and that relied on the export market are closing their doors, calling the experience “an unmitigated disaster”. Without an agreement on SPS standards, which the Government sought but failed to secure in the Brexit negotiations, British businesses and farmers face steep and permanent rises in the cost of trade.

For Northern Ireland, the deal the Prime Minister negotiated inevitably resulted in a barrier splitting our Union. This year has been miserable for many, with all the problems that we have read about and that people in Northern Ireland endured in the early months. There is a suite of regulatory checks on food products, including dairy, eggs, meat and other staples, and there is the vexed issue of chilled meat. Those checks are now a requirement on GB-NI trade. Once the grace periods expire—we were all glad to hear that they may continue—we will face costly EHCs and a requirement for vets to sign off the product. Some products, such as chilled meat, will likely be barred altogether. Given the flow of trade between GB and NI, that is the equivalent of having an international boundary on a main road. The chief executive of Northern Ireland’s largest food manufacturer, Lynas Foodservice, has been quoted giving the example of mozzarella cheese, which we heard earlier. He says that his business is often out of stock because of the wait for a vet to certify products.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Maybe all of this was an afterthought—maybe nobody considered it—but people in Northern Ireland have paid a high price for those rushed negotiations in the days before new year. I am sure the Minister recalls the phone briefing she did for Members to try to defend the Prime Minister's ludicrous assertion that there were no non-tariff barriers. Like everything else, I am afraid, it did not survive the collision with reality on the ground.

It did not have to be like this. The UK's negotiating position called for an SPS framework similar to that in the Canadian or New Zealand trade agreements. As we all know, the Conservative party manifesto said:

“we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards”,

so one might have expected something in any agreement to make sure that that happened. However, neither the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement nor the Northern Ireland protocol includes a veterinary partnership agreement. That is failing Britain's farmers, dividing our Union and undermining the trade that tens of thousands of businesses rely on.

That is not perhaps for want of trying. Back in February, the DEFRA Secretary committed to a veterinary agreement, saying:

“what we want to do, and we're very open to do this, is to work on a Veterinary Partnership Agreement established under the FTA so we can get some easements and ensure goods can flow more smoothly and improve the forms.”

In April, the cross-party Select Committee specifically called for such an agreement as a priority. But here we are, almost a year on, still looking for it. We know that an agreement could reduce the mountain of red tape that businesses currently face, easing trade into the European Union, not just into Northern Ireland. Trade in food and drink amounted to over £14 billion last year and two thirds of that export market was in the European Union. That trade has been most affected by the new red tape.

The Conservative party manifesto promised to “increase trade and prosperity”, but the Government's failure to agree common food standards, which are part and parcel of trade agreements around the world, is hampering British business. An agreement on common standards would reduce the friction and allow businesses to trade more freely with our largest export market. Currently, EU trade into Britain gets a free pass, while British businesses face costly burdens. An agreement on common veterinary standards would dramatically reduce the number of physical checks and streamline or remove altogether the costly paperwork requirements that so disrupt supply chains.

There is no shortage of organisations calling for an agreement. NFU Scotland has said:

“an agreement on equivalence on sanitary and phytosanitary trade standards...is critical to alleviate the problems of asymmetric trading”.

Glyn Roberts of Retail NI has said:

“veterinary alignment would take a lot of the hassle out of the food transit problem”.

The Northern Ireland Retail Consortium has called for a veterinary agreement to remove friction. The Ulster Farmers' Union has backed such a move, saying:

“It would do away with a large percentage of the physical and documentary checks that are currently required, helping to ensure agri-food products and livestock can continue moving, flowing as freely as possible from GB to NI without extra complications and costs.”

I am afraid that the checks that the Prime Minister insisted on having down the middle of our Union are doing damage. He should get the agreement he promised on common food standards, which has overwhelming support in Northern Ireland. But that prompts the question, why can't he? Why is it so difficult? I am afraid that—others have alluded to this—that the conclusion must be that the Government do not want to enter into an agreement that might reduce their scope to undermine the high food standards enjoyed in Britain in the trade deals they want to strike elsewhere. That is the truth of it. The Minister shakes her head, but burdensome regulation and red tape strangling our farmers and food producers are being exchanged for allowing cheap chlorinated chicken to flood our market.

Labour absolutely rejects that path. We are ambitious for this country and seek the highest food, environmental and welfare standards in the world. We need a veterinary agreement but frankly this Government are unlikely to achieve it. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale talked about having a trusted negotiator scheme. Well, I doubt that we could have one, because this Government are unable to maintain the trust of people in our own country, let alone in other countries. We may need a new Government to make that happen, and that cannot come soon enough.

3.39 pm

**The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis):** It is lovely to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees.

I, too, thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this debate and I echo the words of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner): we have heard a résumé of the discussions that we have had for the last few years about this difficult and sensitive subject. It is always good to hear the first-hand experience of the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), and it is also interesting when those experiences are somewhat different, not least on the issue of Christmas present availability.

Let me explain what the UK Government are seeking in the negotiations. Our Command Paper published in July proposed a new model for GB to NI movements where the product stays within the UK. We agree that additional confidence could be provided by a well-designed SPS agreement. I think we all agree that that would be a helpful step forward. I reassure the House, regardless of what the hon. Member for Cambridge thinks, that that would obviously cover GB to NI agrifood movements and would set out where both UK and EU legislation provides for the same high standards. That absolutely should be taken as read. The Government stand by our manifesto commitment to standards.

As hon. Members know, we are still in the midst of technical discussions with the Commission to try to find satisfactory solutions on the Northern Ireland protocol. There is some precedent, as has been rehearsed, for the EU making such agreements with other countries—one that has been suggested this afternoon is that between the EU and New Zealand, which has

been in place for many years—or as part of wider agreements with trading partners such as Canada or Switzerland.

In the trade and co-operation agreement negotiations last year, the UK put forward an SPS model based on equivalence. That would have been very similar to the model agreed between New Zealand and the EU. Sadly, the EU absolutely and repeatedly rejected the possibility of an agreement based on equivalence. Instead, it has pushed for the Swiss-EU style of SPS arrangement, which is based on dynamic alignment. An agreement based on dynamic alignment is not acceptable to us, as it would compromise our sovereignty over our own laws and impact on our ability to strike trade deals or agree trade facilitations with non-EU countries.

**Claire Hanna:** Does the Minister accept that the UK is a sovereign nation and that deciding—for the protection of all its businesses and particularly for the fragile area of Northern Ireland—to make sure there is no divergence between Britain and Northern Ireland and to have an SPS arrangement based on dynamic alignment would be a sovereign decision? That would be a decision of a responsible Government who said, “This is something we should do for all parts of the United Kingdom, for our businesses. This is a decision that we will make ourselves.” Is that not completely compatible with sovereignty? Otherwise, it is very, “I would do anything for Northern Ireland, but I won’t do that.” It is the act of a sovereign Government to act in the interests of all parts of their kingdom.

**Victoria Prentis:** Dynamic alignment is not acceptable to this Government. The difficulty is that we are already starting to see some divergence. The hon. Member for Cambridge and I took part—oh, no, the hon. Gentleman was not there. One of his colleagues took part in an excellent debate earlier this week on getting rid of the VI-1 certification form for wine certification, which is an issue I have discussed with the hon. Gentleman on many occasions in the past.

We are in a position where our laws—not our standards, but our laws—have started to diverge from those of the EU. What we need to achieve, because of that, is an agreement that recognises the equivalence of mutual high standards, facilitates trade, reduces bureaucracy and maintains our regulatory autonomy. The VI-1 certification is just one of a very small number of issues on which we are starting to diverge. We need to start from where we are.

**Tony Lloyd:** Will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Prentis:** I was going to leave time for the hon. Gentleman to respond at the end of the debate, if that is all right. I have a great deal to get through.

**Tony Lloyd:** I would like to intervene at this point.

**Victoria Prentis:** All right, as it is Christmas.

**Tony Lloyd:** My dear deceased friend, Gerald Kaufman, once said, “Never kick a man until he’s down.” I appreciate that it is unfair to be kicking the Prime Minister at the moment of his maximum weakness—the Minister might not want to comment on that. But, seriously, is changing

the VI-1 certification worth all the problems that we have heard about today? This is so trivial that I hope the Minister will say, “It isn’t worth it.”

**Victoria Prentis:** Of course all of this is not worth it for VI-1. I merely mentioned the VI-1 certification as one very small example of changes that have been made in recent days. It popped into my head because we have been able to achieve that through a statutory instrument that was passed earlier this week. The point is that we need to achieve an agreement that recognises equivalence of standards. We do intend to diverge from EU regulations in ways that we probably have not even thought of yet.

I can give a few more current examples. There are some more onerous organics regulations that the EU is bringing in early in the new year, which we do not intend to copy. There is a position on gene editing, for example, where we as a nation are extremely keen to forge ahead and look at how that could help with our plant breeding, and the EU is somewhat behind us. There are probably many other examples where we need to achieve an agreement that recognises equivalence of standards, not necessarily complete alignment.

We continue to discuss the Northern Ireland protocol with the EU. We published our proposals in July, as the hon. Gentleman knows. In response, the EU published a series of papers in October. Its suggestions were to do with simplified certification and reduced checks for retail goods, which are designed only for sale to end consumers in Northern Ireland. Our analysis and wide engagement with the industry and consumers in Northern Ireland throws into question the level of actual simplification achieved by the EU Commission’s proposals.

To give certainty and stability to businesses while the discussions continue, the Government have announced that they will maintain the grace periods—the standstill arrangements—and continue to operate the protocol on the current basis. This will include extending the grace periods and easements that are currently in force. The aim is to provide a clear basis on which businesses and citizens can operate while we wait for the discussions to conclude.

We really welcome the EU’s recognition that there are serious problems that cannot be solved simply through the full implementation of the protocol. That was very much a change of position for the EU. We do not, however, think its proposals provide the solution. For example, they do not eliminate even one customs declaration. The 50% reduction in declarations that the EU Commission briefed to the media is actually a 50% reduction in the number of fields in the declaration, with the most burdensome ones still remaining and every movement still requiring an individual declaration.

There are still substantial gaps between our two positions. The proposals do not free up goods movements between GB and NI to the extent necessary for a long-term solution. Nor do they engage with the changes needed in other areas, such as subsidy policy, VAT and governance of the protocol, including the role of the Court of Justice. We still think the gaps can be bridged through further intensive discussions, and those are going on today, probably as we speak. Our preference is still to find a consensual solution that protects the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and the everyday lives of people in Northern Ireland.

[Victoria Prentis]

In order to make progress it is important that the discussions continue with energy and impetus. There are real difficulties, some of which we have heard about today. More than half the food moving from GB to NI currently benefits from easements, as we have also heard. When we started this in January we hoped that it was a temporary solution for GB to NI movements, and it should have opened the door for a more long-term solution. The EU's paper does not provide for that. Owing to the additional certification required, movements of chilled meats between GB and NI declined by 95% between January and July this year.

As we have heard, there is a complete prohibition on moving seed potatoes from Scotland to Northern Ireland, as well as on some traditional varieties of GB trees, as we heard from the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). Under the protocol, moving livestock and pets to and from Northern Ireland requires additional, unnecessary and costly certification and border checks. Our Command Paper proposal puts forward a simple and effective solution to all of these. The EU's paper on SPS sees minimal movement from the full protocol requirements, and we hope that the EU will be able to move. That said, the EU's proposals show that what had previously been considered impossible by the EU has become possible: the EU has accepted reduced checks and global certification for retail goods, for example. The proposals demonstrate that the EU is able to move beyond a rigid application of single market rules towards bespoke arrangements for Northern Ireland. We welcome this creativity and flexibility, which show that, with ambition and imagination, we will find a solution.

The article 16 safeguards in the protocol are provided to deal with a situation in which the protocol ceases to support the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We must always bear that in mind, but we have, I emphasise, put forward a package that is capable of doing the job. It is ambitious because the problems are significant, but it is a genuine attempt to solve the problems, and we are genuinely, and with real enthusiasm, taking part in the discussions.

Unfortunately, the EU banned the import of seed potatoes from GB at the end of last year. We believe that equivalence is the answer here, but in the committee session in September, the EU reaffirmed its position that dynamic alignment is needed between the UK and the EU for equivalence to be agreed. Given that our regime already aligns substantially with the EU's, we continue to challenge the Commission to reconsider its position. We are very keen to resolve this.

The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned cattle movements to shows and sales. The Government have negotiated new rules with the EU that provide for NI livestock to move into GB and return to NI within 15 days if they are not sold at a sale, without needing to serve residency periods. That is significant.

On borders, for agrifood products, the Command Paper proposal would operate through the same internal UK trade scheme proposed for customs. The full SPS requirements of EU law would be applied for goods going to the Republic, and the UK would undertake to enforce them. There would also still be the means to apply risk-based controls on consignments as they move

into NI, but there would be no need for numerous certificates and checks for individual items that are intended only for consumption in NI.

Live animals pose a different order of risk and require a specific approach. As has been said, that was recognised in national rules before the UK left the EU: all movements, including internal UK movements, were pre-notified, accompanied by health documentation and subject to checks. We would propose, broadly, to maintain these arrangements in this model. Similarly, recognising the potential biosecurity risk posed by certain plants and plant products, there should be an appropriate regime for these movements that does not obstruct the movement of standard products, such as seeds and plants for garden centres or personal use.

To conclude, technical discussions with the European Commission continue. They have intensified over recent weeks as the reality of what businesses in GB face and the impact of trade diversion on businesses and consumers in NI have been fully realised. Our preferred solution remains, as July's Command Paper states, to have proposals that work for all parts of the supply chain and all products. If an SPS agreement is required to support the aims of the Command Paper, we are ready to engage with the Commission on this—absolutely.

It has been a delight to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Rees, and I wish all hon. Members who have taken part in this broadly good-humoured debate a very merry Christmas.

3.54 pm

**Tony Lloyd:** I thank hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has enormous experience of the situation in Northern Ireland, and both he and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) made valid points about the disruptive effect from the failure of both the EU and the UK Government to properly negotiate an arrangement that made sense. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), in her forthright style, made her views clear on the same problem while recognising, as we all must, that the situation is fraught with a danger that goes beyond the narrowness of a veterinary agreement and to the real sensitivities of people on both sides of the conversation in the north of Ireland. This issue is therefore both serious and urgent.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), on behalf of the SNP, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), on behalf of the Labour party, made similar points. Actually, there is enormous agreement among hon. Members. As I said to the Minister, at Christmas time, she may have gone into the stable in Bethlehem filled with straw and drawn the short straw in having to respond to the debate. Nevertheless—I say this kindly—while she gave a technically interesting answer, yes, some of the people at fault are in Brussels, but some are most certainly just down the road in Downing Street, possibly including the noble Lord Frost. The reality is that only a bumbling negotiator would end up in a situation without a plan for alignment of sanitary and phytosanitary products.

The Minister repeated Lord Frost's words about dynamic alignment, but the marginal changes that we have made in the short run were not worth causing so much damage to the economy of Great Britain and the economy of Northern Ireland. As the hon. Member for Gordon

said, it is not just about Northern Ireland; it is also about the ability of Scottish, English and Welsh agrifood and agribusiness to export not simply to Northern Ireland but to the whole of the EU. Failure to create such alignment is bumbling beyond belief. We do not need dynamic alignment; we simply needed to maintain the status quo until proper arrangements were made, and that is the Prime Minister's failure. As I said, never kick a man until he is down. This Prime Minister is well down, and he most certainly deserves a good kicking for his failure on this important issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of securing a veterinary agreement in the Northern Ireland Protocol.

## Free Period Product Scheme for Schools

4 pm

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate. This is in line with current Government and House of Commons Commission guidance. 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. This can be done either at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room. I call Ruth Cadbury to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Free Period Product Scheme for Schools.

Thank you, Ms Rees. Is the loop on? I could not hear you very well because the loop was not on. As you probably will not be speaking too much, I hope I will cope.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** We will sort that out now. I do apologise.

**Ruth Cadbury:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. The debate concerns the Government's free period product scheme, where period products are available in English schools. As Chair of the all-party parliamentary group on period equality, I again bring a debate. Until recently, we found the pages of *Hansard* rather bare when it came to menstrual health. I believe the word tampon was first used in this place in the 1980s, in relation to an incident involving a customs officer. However, we have made progress since I joined this place in 2015 and in more recent years, when I brought a debate last year.

I welcome the chance today to talk about the Government's scheme for schools and colleges in England. I will start by describing in a few words what it means to come on a period when in school. The Minister will realise that it has been rather a long time since that happened to me. Not all of these words apply to me, but they are common emotions and feelings for youngsters in school: unexpected, messy, embarrassing, shameful, bad back pain, headaches, PMT, stress and unexplained strong emotions and, overall, bloody.

When I applied for the debate, we did not know whether the Government would extend the scheme or whether there would be any changes or tweaks to it. We were very pleased on 26 November, when we received the welcome news that the Government would extend the scheme for 2022. There was a sigh of relief from students, teachers and parents across the country.

The precursor to the current Government scheme was the red box project, organised and delivered nationally by volunteers. Like many MPs, I worked with our local organiser who ran the Hounslow red box, led by Yeliz Kazim. She worked tirelessly, like many across the

[Ruth Cadbury]

country, to get red boxes into schools, so that students could easily access free period products. I learned from Yeliz that it was not only period products that young people were asking for via their teachers. Yeliz also supplied spare underwear, tights and deodorant in the boxes she supplied. She had started to work with other organisations, such as youth clubs and council and community settings, to ensure that period products were available free in other settings.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I have always supported this campaign. I know that in Northern Ireland, the local Education Minister is considering the matter, off the back of a debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly last week. There is an eagerness for local councils to play their part. My own, Ards and North Down Borough Council, is part of that. I commend the hon. Lady, and let her know that there is a willingness and interest for this to happen in Northern Ireland in the way she is indicating.

**Ruth Cadbury:** It is welcome to hear about what is happening in Northern Ireland. I will later describe legislation that has been passed in the Scottish Parliament as well.

As many groups and charities, such as Bloody Good Period, have rightly said, that important work should not fall to the kindness of charity. Thanks to the tireless work of activists such as Amika George and of groups such as Free Periods, the school scheme was introduced after much lobbying and campaigning.

Although we have made much progress in improving how we talk about period poverty and menstrual health, I am aware that some people still question why we need the scheme. People incorrectly assume that tampons and pads are cheap, that women might need only one a day or that they are easy to get—but certainly, when pupils are supposed to be in school, it is not easy to go out to the shops, even if there is a shop nearby.

Period poverty causes pupils to miss schooling. A report by phs found that one in 14 girls said that “they have missed schools as they could not afford or access period products.”

A report published in July found that period poverty got worse in the last year as the cost of living, loss of work and so on hit many families. It also found that 35% of teenage girls said that they had taken time off school because of their period, which was a 7% increase on 2019. Some of that will have been due to period pains or PMT, but poverty is a contributing factor. In that survey, 11% said that they had stayed off school because they could not afford period products—that figure was only 2% in the 2019 survey. The problem of poverty in accessing period products is getting worse and is affecting children’s ability to attend and remain in school.

Plan International UK, in its October report, estimated that nearly 2 million girls in the UK missed school at some point because of their period. It warned that there is a “toxic trio” of issues fuelling period poverty: first, the lack of proper education about periods; secondly, the stigma and shame around menstruation; and thirdly, the cost of the products. We have moved on since the distant days of my schooling, but we can do much more.

On stigma and shame, when I talk about the issue I tried to avoid the word “sanitary”, because it implies that having a period is a dirty or unbecoming act, which of course it is not. Great work is being done to tackle the stigma around periods in sport, which has an impact on many students. The Blood, Sweat and No Fears campaign raises awareness around sport and features powerful testimony from many elite athletes.

Young people, not just girls, need to learn and be able to talk about periods, which are a natural function and not something shameful. Too many mothers, teachers and other adults do not talk about periods and feel that they need to hide the facts, and too many young women feel shamed when they are on their period.

There is also the issue of cost. In the past few months, I have heard from many families locally how difficult it has been to make ends meet with the £20-a-week cut in universal credit, inflation, loss of work or a cut in hours, rising rents and rising fuel prices. The cost of buying period products for those who need them in the household adds to that—they cannot get away from that cost.

The Government’s period product scheme has a part to play in the awareness of periods, stigma and education. Having those products available, talking about them and advertising them in the school community is part of that and why they are needed. It provides an opportunity to talk about periods among boys and girls, which is important. The main advantage of the scheme, however, is that it can make a significant difference to addressing period poverty.

On the scheme, we welcome the fact that the Government have taken over from the Red Box Project, a charity and a voluntarily run scheme. I want as many schools as possible to sign up for the Government’s scheme. I welcome the latest figures that show that more than 70% of secondary schools have signed up, but 24% have not. The lower sign-up rate of 41% among primary schools is concerning, however. We know that many pupils could be having their first period in primary school: as the years go on, menstruation is starting at an earlier age, so these products are absolutely essential. The higher level of ignorance—if you like—in primary schools makes it even more important to have these products available in those schools, even though only a small percentage of their students need them.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Again, to give an example from Northern Ireland, these products are available through school nurses in the schools. Whenever pupils go to ask for them, I think they need to be able to ask someone who understands.

**Ruth Cadbury:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We need to make this easy and accessible, so that everybody knows who they can go to and that they can talk in privacy, because it is not just, “Could I have three pads please, miss?” It is about the staff member being open to having a conversation if needed, particularly with youngsters who have only just started having periods.

The other concern is the regional variations in the uptake of this scheme. From 2020, it appears that the north-east has an uptake of only 44%, compared with 50% in London. Although MPs can and do play a role in encouraging schools to sign up—that is something that we in the all-party parliamentary group do—I

appreciate that our powers are not limitless, and we can only go so far in encouraging schools locally to sign up. I have heard feedback that some schools in more affluent areas think that they do not need to sign up to the scheme. Schools with lower numbers of students on the pupil premium were less likely to sign up, but that does not help those students who do need the service, and anyway, this is not just about affordability: there is a shame issue. We still hear of girls being unable to ask their mothers for the money to buy pads or tampons, or not knowing what to do or where to get them, so that is another reason why all schools should have these products available. I urge every school to sign up to this scheme and ensure that all pupils can access free products. We do not deny schools the chance to distribute free condoms on the basis of the school being in an affluent area, so I very much hope that all schools sign up.

What can the Government do to address these uptake levels, in addition to what they have already done? First, they can make it as straightforward and easy as possible for schools to access and operate this scheme. School staff have faced a huge strain from covid-19, and even before the virus hit, they had enough on their plate. If the Government could make it easier by making this scheme an opt-out one, rather than opt-in, that would really help. The other issue is communication: take-up is encouraged through occasional emails from the Department and some pieces on social media, but more could be done, including in those areas where sign-up rates have been lower. The APPG is happy to assist the Department in doing so.

The second issue I want to address is that of the products available in the scheme. Schools can currently order and receive products from Public Health England depending on their budget, and I understand that as some products are more expensive, schools naturally spend their budget on cheaper items if they get a bigger quantity. However, as with nappies, we know that the cheaper the product, the less useful it is. I remember that from my days—I will not go into detail; Members do not want to know. Actually, they do want to know, because they need to know that the cheaper product lasts less long and creates more mess.

We should also consider allowing a greater range of products—such as we had in the original Red Box scheme in Hounslow, based on feedback from young people and teachers—such as tights, pants, deodorants and so on. I would also welcome more use of reusable products, which of course are expensive, such as mooncups and even washable pads. Washable pads are really simple to make, but because they are still a minority product, as it were, they are expensive to buy. If they were available through the scheme, it would save young people the costs of buying single-use products every month, not to mention the environmental impact that single-use products have.

There is also the question of the scheme's long-term future. Both this year and last, we have had to wait until late in the year to find out if the scheme was going to be continued or if it was going to be scaled down. I am sure it would provide schools and colleges with much-needed certainty if the scheme could be put on a more secure footing, and we did not face this cliff edge every year.

Finally, I hope that the Government do not think of this as a tick-box way of tackling period inequality—that, because of this scheme, the issue is solved. It is much

more complex than that. The toxic trio of low awareness, discrimination and cost needs a more ambitious programme. I am proud of the amazing work of Monica Lennon, the Labour MSP in the Scottish Parliament, who fought for so long to see the pioneering Period Products (Free Provision) Scotland Bill pass into law. In the end, it was passed unanimously. It is a global first, as it mandates local authorities to provide free period products, which means that the roll-out will extend beyond schools and into places such as town halls, leisure centres, community settings and other public sites. This is the type of bold and ambitious policy that will make a huge difference to so many young people—and not just young people.

We know that period inequality does not just impact pupils. The poverty issue affects migrants, refugees and many marginalised people. Whenever I buy something for a food box or donate things to asylum seekers living on £8 a week, I always include period products. The scheme is a welcome and much-needed step to ensure that all of society is tackling period poverty. I have some questions for the Minister—I can give him my sheet of paper if it helps. Will the Government look at making this an opt-out rather than an opt-in scheme for schools? Will the Minister tell us what is being done to improve the take-up rate generally and in certain regions? Will the Government improve communications with schools about the scheme? Will they look at the products available in the scheme, so that they can be expanded to include pants, tights and other multi-use products? Will they look at putting the scheme on a more permanent or long-term footing? Will the Minister look at adjusting the scheme so that regional and local inequalities are addressed, such as by using pupil premium numbers? Will the Government look at the Act in Scotland and consider what more can be done to tackle period inequality?

Parliament and Government have become much better at talking about, and raising awareness of, menstrual health, and we are making progress. None the less, the figures over the past year show that period poverty is getting worse and that the impact on schooling is getting greater. We cannot afford to continue with a business-as-usual model. We need a bigger and better approach to ensure that no student misses school because of period inequality.

4.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees, especially as it is my first Westminster Hall debate as a Minister for the Department for Education.

First, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this very important debate. She has been a passionate campaigner on this issue for a long time. She articulated the case very eloquently—far better than I ever could—for this scheme and the need for it. I will try to cover as many of the points and questions that she raises but, as ever, I am happy to meet her at a later date to discuss the scheme in detail.

Let me begin with the point that she made at the beginning of her speech about stigma and taboo, because it is very important. We all have a part to play in this, and I will come on to it later in my contribution. The first thing to say is that we are committed to providing a world-class education, training and care for everyone.

[Will Quince]

No young person in our country should be held back from reaching their potential because of their gender or background. There may be people listening and watching this debate thinking, “What does this middle-aged bloke know or care about period products?” But I do care passionately about this issue. I am passionate about ensuring that women and girls are supported in education and beyond.

The hon. Lady may not know this, but I was one of the architects of the tampon tax fund. Some £90 million has gone to women’s health charities as a result of that scheme, and now VAT has been removed from products. I am also the father of two young girls, one of whom will soon—very soon, I think—be in this position, so I have a personal interest, too. I want my girls and every girl in this country never to have to worry about period products being available in their school, and I want them to feel comfortable speaking about that with their teachers, peers and, I hope, their parents, and indeed their father.

As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, we launched the period product scheme in January 2020, and I am delighted that we are extending it until August 2022, the end of the summer term. She made this point clearly, but I emphasise that the scheme has significant benefits. Schools and colleges can continue to use the scheme, and all will receive new spend cap allocations for the remainder of the academic year. That will be announced on 4 January. The hon. Lady pushes me to announce a further extension. All I can say at this stage is that any further extensions or new contracts will be announced in due course. I want to ensure—I think the hon. Lady knows how passionate I am about this subject and how committed the Government are to it—that schools and colleges are given as much notice as possible in order that they can place orders.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister will be aware that Northern Ireland Education Minister Michelle McIlveen said:

“No-one should miss out on their education because they cannot afford or access these essential products. Providing free products will help pupils manage their periods confidently at school, reduce anxiety and stress and enable students to focus on their learning.”

Northern Ireland’s three-year, £2.6 million scheme will also tackle the lack of understanding and the stigma to which hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) referred. That might be an incentive for the Minister to try to follow Northern Ireland.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Gentleman is right, and all the points he raises are fair and accurate. We work closely, particularly at official level, with devolved Administrations to develop schemes of this nature, to make sure that, as much as possible, there is some synergy. In September this year, Northern Ireland launched a three-year pilot scheme to address period poverty in schools, which we very much welcome. I suppose it is telling that all Governments across our United Kingdom are aligned on this issue. We recognise this need. I have to pay credit to the hon. Lady and the APPG for driving this agenda.

We are absolutely clear that organisations should have products available should learners need them. Many schools and colleges have benefited from charities over

recent years, as the hon. Lady rightly points out, and we very much thank those charities for their support. Schools and colleges do not have to use the national scheme to purchase products. If they prefer to use an alternative route, they can of course do so, although costs are only met through the use of the Department’s scheme. With that in mind, our supplier, phs, will proactively contact organisations that have accessed the scheme so far. Organisations that have already ordered products should continue to use their existing account and log-in details. Schools will potentially be listening to the debate, so I refer them to phs’s contact details and more information about the scheme being clearly set out in guidance on gov.uk.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth rightly referenced take-up. Since the period product scheme launched in January 2020, it has been fantastic to see how many schools and colleges have used it. Importantly, the scheme remained in operation throughout the partial school and college closures as a result of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. We had fantastic examples of organisations ensuring that young people continued to receive that support, even when they were learning from home. The hon. Lady referenced these figures, and it is really encouraging that 76% of secondary schools and 79% of colleges ordered products from the scheme during 2020. We continue to encourage those who have not yet accessed the scheme to do so. It is really important that they do, and that they recognise that that support is there. We intend to publish updated statistics from the scheme early next year. Although I cannot say much about that, I hope, I think and am confident and optimistic that the hon. Lady will be pleased when those new figures are published. She rightly raises the take-up of primary schools. I take up her offer to meet at a later date to discuss some of her ideas to improve that.

The hon. Lady also rightly referenced the environment. We continually monitor the ways in which we can make our scheme and others like it more environmentally friendly, such as by setting a minimum order value based on the organisation’s budget—for an average secondary school, that is about £1,500—in order to limit deliveries and reduce traffic and all those things. Importantly, we continue to include a range of sustainable and environmentally friendly products for schools and colleges to select, as I think the hon. Lady would hope. Our supplier reports that, over the past few months—I suspect driven in part by COP26—orders for environmentally friendly products increased significantly in the weeks up to and after COP26.

The hon. Lady rightly pushed me on range. Range is important, and she has raised the issue with me in private. I am looking very closely at additional period products, such as period pants, that we could potentially include in the product range for 2022. There are limitations as to exactly what we can include in the current contract, but I certainly commit to the hon. Lady that I will take this issue away and explore what further products we could include in the scheme.

**Ruth Cadbury:** Many of the reusable products, such as period pants and period pads, are made by very small SMEs. That is a different kettle of fish for the Department from having a single big contract with a major supplier.

I hope the Minister will consider that opportunity, even though it might be an administrative burden of a different type for the Department.

**Will Quince:** I certainly will do that. One advantage of working with pbs is that it has that capability and national reach, as well as the ability to procure at a local level.

The hon. Lady rightly touched on stigma and taboo, which I mentioned earlier. I think we do need to talk about periods. A vital element of the scheme's success is ensuring that learners are aware that period products are available when they need them in their school or college. It can be challenging for some schools and colleges to communicate about this, especially if teachers and students find it difficult to talk openly about periods. Periods are a natural process, but too often they are treated as a taboo subject. I remember what it was like when I was a pupil at school: they were very much something that was not talked about.

We are taking action to tackle that through the new health education curriculum, which became compulsory for state-funded schools in England in 2020. Our statutory guidance insists that both boys and girls should be taught the key facts about the menstrual cycle, including what is an average period, the range of period products, and the implications for emotional and physical health. We have developed a "changing adolescent body" teacher training module, which will very much help in that regard. I desperately want teachers to feel confident in talking to students about this issue to tackle the stigma around menstruation.

Beyond the health education curriculum content, we have statutory guidance that directs schools to make adequate and sensitive arrangements to help ensure that girls prepare for and manage periods, including through requests for period products. I think that will make a real difference. Our user insight shows that even small changes, such as using the term "period products"—I have been very careful to use it, as did the hon. Lady—as opposed to "sanitary products", help to shift the

conversation away from any suggestion that periods are in some way unhygienic, which of course they are not; they are an entirely natural process.

I will touch briefly on ordering and distribution. This is a matter that mostly affects girls. Fundamentally, no girls should miss out on their education because of their period. Our scheme helps young people to go about their daily lives without getting caught out. It is not just about period poverty; it is about not being caught out. That is not just about pupils; it is also about teachers, who sometimes come on their periods unexpectedly, forget to bring products in with them or cannot afford the products they need. We have the online portal, but I am keen to work with the hon. Lady on how we can improve the process and ensure that more schools access this provision.

I am conscious that there are lots more questions and I would like to answer them. I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady at a later date to do so. This issue mostly affects women and girls, but it is important that we are all comfortable discussing it. I want more people in this House and in schools and colleges up and down the country to discuss this issue, so that it is not a taboo and so that we take the stigma out of it. My message to girls and young women up and down the country is this: please do not ever miss out on your education because of your period. Make sure your school or college signs up to our period products scheme, and that you are able to make the most of the continuation of this fantastic scheme. I conclude by thanking the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their contributions, and wishing all within the House a very merry Christmas.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** I wish you all a merry Christmas.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.29 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 15 December 2021

## CABINET OFFICE

### Border Controls

**The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis):** My noble Friend, the Minister of State in the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Lord Frost, has today made the following ministerial statement:

On 14 September, the Government announced a revised timetable for the final stages of the introduction of controls on incoming goods. These controls relate primarily to customs, sanitary and phytosanitary—SPS—controls, and safety and security declarations. The first phase of these new controls is implemented on 1 January 2022.

Implementing these arrangements for goods moving from the island of Ireland, whether from Ireland or from Northern Ireland, is particularly complex. This is because there are specific treaty and legislative commitments to “unfettered access” for goods from Northern Ireland, because there are currently “standstill” arrangements in place for operating the Northern Ireland protocol, and because negotiations on the protocol itself are still under way and will not be definitively completed by 1 January.

Given this wider uncertainty and complexity, and the undesirability of bringing in new changes while the protocol arrangements themselves remain unsettled and while diversion of trade is already occurring, the Government have decided that the right thing is to extend, on a temporary basis, the current arrangements for moving goods from the island of Ireland to Great Britain for as long as discussions on the protocol are ongoing.

This means that goods moving from the island of Ireland directly to Great Britain will continue to do so on the basis of the arrangements that apply currently, until further notice; and will not, for now, be affected by the changes being introduced on 1 January for all other inbound goods.

The Government believe that this pragmatic act of good will can help to maintain space for continued negotiations on the protocol. It also ensures that traders in both Ireland and Northern Ireland are not faced with further uncertainty while the protocol arrangements themselves are still under discussion.

This will be given effect through legislation by 1 January 2022 and the Government will continue to work with the devolved Administrations and interested stakeholders.

These arrangements are temporary and we will continue to keep them under review as negotiations on the protocol continue. We will ensure traders have sufficient time to adapt to any future changes.

The border operating model will be updated to reflect this and a copy will be placed in the Library of both Houses.

[HCWS486]

### Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Allocations

**The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis):** I wish to update the House on the progress of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) for financial year 2020-21, as well as to announce the initial regional and thematic allocations for this financial year (2021-22).

The CSSF is a cross-Government fund which uses both Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA funding to enable the integrated delivery of National Security Council priorities. In 2020/21, the CSSF spent £1,260.2m million against a final cross-Government allocation of £1,264.8m million (99.64% spend). A further breakdown of spend against regional and thematic allocation, by department and by discretionary and non-discretionary spend is included in the CSSF’s annual report for 2020-21, published today.

The report outlines how the fund adapted to and tackled challenges caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic. It details further improvements made on monitoring and evaluating results to ensure value for money, including the introduction of new fund level outcomes: Conflict and Instability, State Threats, Transnational Threats and Women, Peace and Security. The report demonstrates how CSSF programmes have delivered clear and impactful results against these fund outcomes across portfolios.

A copy of this document will be placed in the libraries of both Houses and has been published on gov.uk.

The CSSF allocation for financial year 2021-22 is £875.61 million, of which £375.48m is ODA and £500.13 million is non-ODA. The CSSF will continue to support the delivery of the Government’s top national security priorities as set out in the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, including the UK’s international response to conflict and instability, transnational threats and state threats.

#### *FY 2021-22 Allocations (millions)*

Allocation	Non-ODA	ODA	Total
Middle East North Africa	38.300	60.500	98.800
Eastern Europe, Central Asia	39.660	46.900	86.560
Africa (sub- Saharan)	30.169	36.000	66.169
Western Balkans	8.500	33.900	42.400
Overseas Territories	34.041	5.000	39.041
South Asia	4.300	30.200	34.500
Asia Pacific	0.600	8.500	9.100
Americas	1.000	8.000	9.000
<b>REGIONAL TOTAL</b>	<b>156.570</b>	<b>229.000</b>	<b>385.570</b>
Counter Extremism	13.220	20.000	33.220
Serious and Organised Crime	6.500	14.500	21.000
Cyber	6.000	12.000	18.000
Multilateral Strategy	3.800	5.500	9.300
Gender, Peace and Security	0.500	4.880	5.380
Migration	0	5.000	5.000
National Security Communications Team	3.000	0	3.000
<b>THEMATIC TOTAL</b>	<b>33.020</b>	<b>61.880</b>	<b>94.900</b>
Peacekeeping	229.800	80.400	310.200
AMISOM	30.000	0	30.000

Allocation	Non-ODA	ODA	Total
MOD UN Ops Africa	28.640	0	28.640
MOD UNFICYP	18.100	0	18.100
<b>Non-Discretionary TOTAL</b>	<b>306.54</b>	<b>80.400</b>	<b>386.940</b>
Corporate Delivery Support & Other (this includes Joint Funds Unit and pilot activities)	4.000	4.200	8.200
<b>TOTALCSSF</b>	<b>5.00130</b>	<b>375.480</b>	<b>875.610</b>

[HCWS487]

### National Cyber Strategy 2022

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay):** I am pleased to announce the publication of the new National Cyber Strategy.

This strategy builds on the significant progress made through the National Cyber Security Strategy 2016-2021 and delivers on a commitment made in the Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy which was published earlier this year.

Exponential advances in technology combined with decreasing costs have made the world more connected than ever before. The pandemic has accelerated this trend, but we are likely still in the early stages of a long-term structural shift. The global expansion of cyberspace is changing the way we live, work and communicate, and transforming the critical systems we rely on in areas such as finance, energy, food distribution, healthcare and transport. In short, cyberspace is now integral to our future security and prosperity. This offers extraordinary opportunities for technologically advanced countries like the UK to pursue their national goals in new ways.

As such, this strategy reflects our ambition to cement the UK's position as a leading cyber power. While cyber security remains at the heart of this strategy, it now draws together the full range of the UK's capabilities inside and outside Government, with a particular emphasis on taking the lead in technologies relevant to cyber. It calls for a truly joined up, national strategic approach that is shaped by and helps guide decision-making in organisations across the country, and provides the basis for stronger collaboration with our partners in the UK and around the world.

Our vision is that the UK in 2030 will continue to be a leading responsible and democratic cyber power, able to protect and promote our interests in and through cyberspace in support of national goals:

a more secure and resilient nation, better prepared for evolving threats and risks and using our cyber capabilities to protect citizens against crime, fraud and state threats;

an innovative, prosperous digital economy, with opportunity more evenly spread across the country and our diverse population; a science and tech superpower, securely harnessing transformative technologies in support of a greener, healthier society; and, a more influential and valued partner on the global stage, shaping the future frontiers of an open and stable international order while maintaining our freedom of action in cyberspace.

The strategy is built around five core pillars which focus on: investing in our people and skills; increasing cyber resilience; taking the lead in the technologies vital to cyber power; advancing UK global leadership in cyber; and detecting, disrupting and deterring our adversaries.

As announced in the spending review, the Government will be investing £2.6 billion in cyber and legacy IT over the next three years to support the strategy. This is in addition to significant investment in the National Cyber Force announced in the spending review 2020.

We will invest more than ever before in a rapid and radical overhaul of Government cyber security, setting clear standards for Departments and addressing legacy IT infrastructure.

Government's critical functions will be significantly hardened to cyber-attack by 2025 and we will ensure that all Government organisations—across the whole public sector—are resilient to known vulnerabilities and attack methods by 2030.

A copy of the National Cyber Strategy has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS484]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** My noble Friend the Minister for South Asia, United Nations and the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, has made the following written ministerial statement:

Afghanistan is facing a serious and worsening humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that 22.8 million people, over half the population, are now suffering "crisis" or "emergency" levels of acute malnutrition, over a third more than at this time last year. Afghanistan is now estimated to have more people suffering from "emergency" levels of acute malnutrition, 8.7 million, than any other country.

The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to address the situation, including through our presidency of the G7. The Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Minister of State have discussed the situation extensively with world leaders including in the margins of COP26. The Foreign Secretary represented the UK at a G20 leaders meeting on 12 October that agreed to step up emergency aid. Lord Ahmad visited New York in late October to speak to senior UN officials, and has been in regular contact since August, with the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator, heads of UN agencies including the World Food Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs as well as other senior officials such as the head of the ICRC and the Aga Khan Development Network. In November, he also met with Deborah Lyons, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan.

We have used our engagement with Taliban to press them to ensure a suitable environment for aid delivery, as well as to respond to international concerns on terrorism, the protection of human rights, especially the rights of women, girls and members of minorities, and the departure of non-Afghan nationals and Afghans eligible for resettlement overseas. These were our top priorities during the visit to Kabul by the Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghan Transition, Sir Simon Gass, on 5 October, as well as in telephone calls and subsequent meetings by UK officials with the Taliban in Doha.

The UN Secretary General launched a flash appeal for Afghanistan on 13 September. The event was attended by the then Foreign Secretary and by Lord Ahmad. But further efforts will be needed. The UN has requested nearly \$4.5 billion for 2022, the largest humanitarian appeal on record, reflecting the magnitude of the humanitarian challenge ahead.

The UK was at the forefront of this, and in August, the Prime Minister said that the UK would double its assistance for Afghanistan to £286 million this financial year.

On 3 September, the Government announced the allocation of up to £30 million of this for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, of which £10 million has been disbursed directly to humanitarian agencies in the region.

On 31 October, the Prime Minister announced the allocation of £50 million in immediate support for vulnerable communities within Afghanistan. We have now disbursed £49 million of this, in addition to the disbursement of over £32 million for humanitarian activity inside Afghanistan between April and October. 1.

On 12 December, the Foreign Secretary announced the allocation of a further £75 million to provide life-saving food, and emergency health services as well as shelter, water and hygiene supplies. Through the £75 million and £50 million allocations, the UK will support over 3.4 million people, with emergency food, health, shelter, water and protection. We will work with aid agencies to prioritise those most at risk, including households headed by women and people with disabilities. The funding will be channelled through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the World Food Programme, the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund and International Rescue Committee.

In addition, the Government have today committed to matching donations from the British people to the Disasters Emergency Committee Afghanistan appeal, up to £10 million. This means that public donations will have greater impact and give life-saving support to more people in Afghanistan.

So far this financial year, we have disbursed over £81 million within Afghanistan and £10 million to support Afghan refugees in the region. A full breakdown appears in the annexes attached. All our humanitarian assistance is going to UN agencies or trusted and experienced international NGOs and not to the Taliban.

We are particularly concerned by the impact of the situation on women and girls. We are consulting women's organisations, Afghan women leaders and implementing partners to understand how best to support their needs. In allocating UK funds, we are seeking to ensure that women, girls and other marginalised groups have equal, safe and dignified access to assistance and services.

The humanitarian crisis has been a central subject of all our conversations with the Taliban. We have pressed them to respect humanitarian principles and allow aid agencies to operate freely. The Taliban wrote to the UN's emergency response co-ordinator on 10 September promising to respect humanitarian principles, including free access for aid workers.

We are monitoring the situation carefully. Our partners report that aid delivery channels are open and humanitarian access is reasonable. But aid workers also face challenges as a result of the liquidity shortage, which makes payments more difficult. We are working closely with multilateral organisations, banks and NGOs to address these.

The UK has also taken a leading role in international discussions on how to support essential basic services. We are encouraging the World Bank and its shareholders to use the \$1.5 billion in the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund for this. We welcome the decision by the World Bank's Board on 30 November to transfer \$280 million to support the humanitarian response and basic health services via UN agencies. We are also working with G7 partners to encourage the World Bank to produce options to allocate the \$1.2 billion remaining in the fund.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-12-15/HCWS489/>

[HCWS489]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Housing Update

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes):** I wish to update the House on the publication of the Government response to the 2021 Future Buildings Standard consultation and the laying of a statutory instrument today to implement the outcomes of this consultation, and our previous consultation on the Future Homes Standard.

Today's publication of the consultation response, and the implementation of an ambitious uplift to the building regulations, will ensure new homes and buildings in England are highly efficient, with significantly lower carbon emissions. This marks an important step on our journey towards a cleaner, greener built environment and it supports us in our target to reduce the UK's carbon emissions to net zero by 2050.

#### *The Future Buildings Standard consultation*

We have recently conducted a two-stage consultation on proposed changes to the building regulations and the associated statutory guidance. Today I am publishing the Government's response to the second stage of the consultation, the Future Buildings Standard consultation.

The Government response to the first stage of the consultation, the Future Homes Standard consultation, was published in January this year. It set out our plans for the Future Homes Standard, an ambitious new standard for new homes to be introduced from 2025. It also set out plans for an uplift in standards for new homes in 2021 as a stepping stone towards the 2025 standard.

The Future Buildings Standard consultation built on that by setting out plans for the Future Buildings Standard, to be introduced for new non-domestic buildings in England from 2025. The consultation also set out plans for an uplift in standards in 2021 in advance of implementing the 2025 standard.

The Government response to the Future Buildings Standard consultation confirms that, with implementation starting from 2025, the Future Buildings Standard will produce highly efficient non-domestic buildings which use low-carbon heat and have the best fabric standards possible. The 2021 uplift to the building regulations will support the delivery of the Future Buildings Standard through a 27% reduction in the carbon emissions of new non-domestic buildings in England.

The consultation response sets out the measures we are taking to simplify and clarify the guidance on ventilation and safeguard the health of building residents and users. Covid-19 has also shown the importance of ventilation in reducing the spread of infection. The consultation response confirms that we are introducing new guidance to mitigate the risks of airborne infection.

The consultation response also confirms our intention to introduce a new requirement on overheating mitigation in the building regulations. This will mean new residential buildings must be designed to reduce overheating. This is an important part of our work to adapt our country to face climate change, and it will protect people where they live and sleep. Several local authorities have already set overheating mitigation policies for their areas, and we have learnt from them in developing this national standard. The new overheating standard is a part of the building regulations and is therefore mandatory, so there will be no need for policies in development plans to duplicate this.

I am placing a copy of the Government response to the 2021 Future Buildings Standard consultation in the House Library.

#### *Implementation of the 2021 uplift to the building regulations*

Together, the policies set out in the Government response to the Future Buildings Standard consultation and the policies set out in the Government response to the Future Homes Standard consultation, form the policy for the 2021 uplift to the building regulations. The 2021 uplift is intended to provide a meaningful and achievable increase to the energy efficiency standards in the short term and support industry to prepare and position itself to build to the full standards from 2025, as well as delivering the outcomes on ventilation and overheating covered above.

Alongside publication of the Government response to the Future Buildings Standard consultation, I have laid a statutory instrument to implement the amendments to the building regulations and I have published new statutory guidance.

Implementing this uplift is a significant moment for the sector and on our journey to net zero. It provides a pathway towards creating homes and buildings that are fit for the future, and a built environment with lower carbon emissions and homes adapted to the overheating risks caused by a warming climate.

[HCWS495]

## **BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

### **BEIS Update**

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** The last few months have seen unprecedented increases in the levels and volatility of wholesale gas prices across the globe. This has been due to multiple international factors in supply and demand and has led to a shift in the size and shape of the energy retail market, with a significantly higher number of supplier exits than would normally be expected during this period.

Three principles have consistently guided the Government's response. Customers, and particularly vulnerable customers, should be protected. We will not be bailing out failed companies with poor business models. And we must not return to the cosy oligopoly of the past.

The energy retail market is the main interface between consumers and the energy system, and its stability and effectiveness is vital. Ofgem has today set out in its open

letter to energy suppliers the further steps it is taking to protect consumers, provide greater certainty for investors, and strengthen the resilience of the sector.

#### *Future of the energy retail market*

Earlier this year, the Government published an Energy Retail Market Strategy for the 2020s. This strategy set out our vision for a market which enables net zero and where:

Consumers should receive appropriate levels of protection, pay a fair price for their energy, and be able to easily engage with the market to exercise choice;

Energy companies should invest in innovative products and services to unlock the benefits of low-carbon technologies; and

Consumer choice and active market competition contribute towards a lowest-cost flexible energy system, which gives the right price signals and drives the uptake of low-carbon products and services.

This vision remains the right one. However, we also need to take account of the lessons from recent months to ensure that the energy retail market is resilient, sustainable, and continues to protect consumers as we move to a net zero energy system.

The Government therefore intend to review these lessons as part of a wider refresh of the current energy retail market strategy, with the aim of publishing an updated strategy as soon as possible, once the market has stabilised. We are inviting views on how future Government policy can best achieve the vision set out earlier this year, and how the lessons from recent market developments should inform this. We are particularly interested in:

How the retail market can help achieve the best outcomes for consumers, no matter how they engage;

How energy companies can help drive the private investment needed to achieve net zero; and

How the retail market, its underpinning regulatory framework and the energy price cap, may need to evolve to enable a lowest-cost, flexible and resilient energy system that continues to protect consumers.

To enable this refresh of our overall retail market strategy, and to help stabilise the market in the short-term, the Government is therefore pausing policy development on the recent public consultation on opt-in and testing opt-out switching. The Government are grateful to all those who took the time to respond to this consultation, and to the other recent Government calls for evidence on third-party intermediaries and on the transparency of carbon content in energy products. The Government will set out next steps on these issues and publish a summary of responses in due course.

This is a key opportunity to help shape the future of the sector and I would encourage every interested party to engage in this process.

#### **The Energy Price Cap**

The energy price cap has shielded millions of customers from price volatility in wholesale markets. As announced earlier this year, the Government remain committed to seeking to legislate to extend the energy price cap beyond the existing longstop date of December 2023, when parliamentary time allows, subject to conditions for effective competition not being in place. We continue to reflect on the price cap's effectiveness and will take this into account in the design of any future cap.

### Fairness and Affordability

The Government remain committed to publishing a fairness and affordability call for evidence on the options for energy levies and obligations to help rebalance electricity and gas prices and to support green choices, with a view to taking decisions in 2022.

[HCWS497]

## TREASURY

### Overseas Framework Consultation

#### **The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):**

The Chancellor's Mansion House speech and accompanying document—"A new chapter for financial services"—set out the Government's vision for an open, green and technologically advanced financial services sector that is globally competitive and acts in the interests of communities and citizens, creating jobs, supporting businesses and powering growth across all of the UK.

In December 2020, HM Treasury published a call for evidence on the UK's overseas framework, and the regimes within it, to ensure that they continue to work effectively and support the UK's consumers, firms and markets. The Government issued a response to that call for evidence and set out next steps for this review in July 2021.

In doing so, the Government stated that they remain committed to maintaining a safe, open and globally integrated financial system, enabling international financial services business by reducing barriers and frictions, where safe and practicable. Our overseas framework, including regimes such as the overseas persons exclusion, has been a fundamental part of the success of the UK as a global financial centre.

In responding to the call for evidence, the Government said that there were four principal areas that they wanted to look at in more detail:

- The overseas persons exclusion (OPE);
- Investment services equivalence under Title VIII of the Markets in Financial Instruments Regulation (MiFIR);
- Recognised overseas investment exchanges (ROIEs);
- The Financial Promotion Order (FPO) in general, and specifically in relation to the distribution of certain overseas long-term insurance products in the UK.

The Government's response to the call for evidence noted that there are still information gaps about how firms use the OPE, how they might do so in future, and what the implications are for UK financial markets, including their resilience and safety. We have been working closely with the Financial Conduct Authority, the Bank of England and the Prudential Regulation Authority to gather further information in preparation for an upcoming consultation on the UK's regime for overseas firms and activities. This involves considering whether the access for overseas firms remains appropriate following the UK's exit from the EU and given technological developments that are changing how firms can serve their clients.

The Government are committed to maintaining an overseas access regime that ensures firms based in the UK can connect with counterparties and customers globally, while continuing to ensure that those with significant UK business lines continue to maintain the appropriate operations, regulatory permissions and

authorisations in the UK; and are able to be supervised effectively. We want to ensure the UK remains a world-class environment to do business and maintain the ability of UK and global firms to benefit from the UK's deep wholesale markets, which has been key to the UK's leading global role in financial services.

The Government have noted the feedback from respondents to the call for evidence that the current overseas framework is complicated, difficult to navigate and that the implications of any changes to the framework should be carefully considered. As such, the Government intend to assess how the current framework is being used and consider the implications of any reforms in careful detail before bringing forward proposals on potential changes to the UK's regime for overseas firms and activities. The consultation will also consider changes to the UK's overseas framework which will make it more coherent and easier to navigate, reinforcing the Government's commitment to maintaining an open financial centre.

In considering how best to move forward, the Government want to be fully informed about the views of stakeholders. We would emphasise the importance of further evidence being provided on how these regimes are used, and how market participants navigate them, so we can ensure they continue to support the principles that guide our approach to cross-border financial services.

[HCWS490]

## DEFENCE

### Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report

#### **The Minister for Defence People and Veterans**

**(Leo Docherty):** Today, I am pleased to lay before Parliament the Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2021. The covid-19 pandemic has once again seen the armed forces step up to support the nation in its hour of need. The UK's promise to support our armed forces community and to ensure they are treated fairly is as important as ever. We owe them a profound debt of gratitude and have a duty to ensure that those who serve, or who have served, in our armed forces, and their families, suffer no disadvantage in comparison to other citizens. In some cases, special consideration is appropriate, particularly for those such as the injured or the bereaved. This is what the covenant sets out to do. In the same vein, this Government have committed to making the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran, acknowledging veterans' service to this country and setting out our plans in the "Strategy for Our Veterans".

Never has the armed forces covenant and support to veterans been more vital, and we recognise that partners across the UK, at all levels of the public, private and charitable sectors, have been working hard to support the armed forces community throughout the covid-19 pandemic. I am proud to lay this report before Parliament, with the full blessing of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Office for Veterans' Affairs, as a demonstration of that work.

Highlights from this year's report include:

- The new Veterans' Mental Health High Intensity Service in England, which launched in October 2020, with seven regional "pathfinders" running until the end of March 2023.

The launch of Operation Courage in England in March 2021, bringing together existing mental health services for veterans into one comprehensive pathway.

Record levels of investment in service family accommodation in the financial year 2020-21, with a total of £160 million invested—this investment is enabling 775 long-term empty properties to be completely refurbished, and a further 10,200 properties to be significantly improved.

The development of a new method for recording and reporting cases of suicide within the veteran community, in order to produce a national measure of the total number of veterans who die by suicide each year—this will enable an understanding of its prevalence to better inform future policy.

But while progress has clearly been made, both this year and across the 10 years since the covenant was established, more still needs to be done. The next reporting period—October 2021 to September 2022—will see the creation of the new covenant duty, which will require certain public bodies to have regard to the principles of the covenant when exercising specific functions in the areas of housing, healthcare and education. It will also see the delivery and initial implementation of the new Armed Forces Families Strategy, providing a framework that reflects modern and diverse family needs and encourages recruitment to and retention in service.

This year's report is a collaborative effort, with input from service providers and professionals from a diverse array of backgrounds. We would like to thank colleagues across central Government, the devolved Administrations and local authorities, and those at every level and from every sector who are continuing to drive forward the work of the covenant and "Strategy for Our Veterans". We are also grateful to the external members of the Covenant Reference Group who were consulted throughout the process and provided their independent observations.

[HCWS491]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### UK and Crown Dependencies: Fishing Licences

**The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis):** This statement provides an update on the written ministerial statement made on 3 November 2021.

It sets out the number of fishing licences issued by the UK and the Crown dependencies since the trade and co-operation Agreement (TCA) was signed on 24 December 2020. The information is correct as of 12.30 pm on 15 December 2021.

This statement now includes the number of licences issued for "direct replacement" vessels. Our approach for licensing replacement vessels will be published by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), which is the UK's single issuing authority, on gov.uk.

Throughout this process, the UK's approach has been evidence-based and in line with our commitments under the trade and co-operation agreement (TCA). We have licensed vessels where sufficient evidence has been provided that demonstrates that a vessel qualifies for access under the TCA. Where that evidence has not been provided, licences have not been issued.

#### UK waters

The number of licences that have been issued to EU vessels to fish in UK waters are as follows.

#### UK overall total

Applications received	Applications approved	Applications not approved
1,871	1,822	49

#### UK 12-200nm zone

The majority of licences were granted on 31 December 2020 with 1,285 EU vessels licensed. The numbers below are accurate as of 13 December 2021.

Applications received: 1,669

Vessels licensed: 1,669

By Member State:

Member state	Applications received	Licences issued	Applications not approved
Belgium	64	64	0
Denmark	120	120	0
France	736	736	0
Germany	49	49	0
Republic of Ireland	355	355	0
Lithuania	2	2	0
Netherlands	194	194	0
Poland	2	2	0
Portugal	49	49	0
Spain	90	90	0
Sweden	8	8	0

#### UK 6-12nm zone

##### Vessels over 12m

Applications received: 109

Applications approved: 106

Vessels currently licensed: 99

By Member State:

Member state	Applications received	Licences issued	Approved but unallocated or withdrawn	Applications not approved
Belgium	21	18	1	2
France	88	81	6	1

##### Vessels under 12m

Applications received: 50

Applications approved: 20

Vessels licensed: 19

By Member State:

Member state	Applications received	Licences issued	Approved but unallocated or withdrawn	Applications not approved
France	50	19	1	30

##### Direct replacement vessels

Applications received: 43

Applications approved: 27

Vessels licensed: 27

## By Member State:

Member state	Applications received	Licences issued	Applications not approved
<i>Belgium</i>	2	1	1
<i>France</i>	41	26	15

*Crown dependency waters*

Licensing figures for the Crown dependencies are as follows:

*Jersey*

Total applications	Full licences issued	Temporary licences granted. Valid until 31-01-22. Further information from the Commission/member state required if they are to become full licences	Lapsed on 30-10 due to lack of evidence
217	130	33	54

Jersey has also received 11 applications for replacement vessels, which are pending until the methodology is finalised.

*Guernsey*

Total applications	Full licences issued	Approved but unlicensed applications as the vessel is no longer active	Applications not approved
58	40	3 these will be issued to replacement vessels in due course	15

Guernsey's transitional arrangement which allows 167 French vessels including those that have now been issued with a full licence, to continue fishing on a temporary basis, will remain until 31 January 2022.

*Isle of Man*: no applications received.

[HCWS492]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Covid-19 Update

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid):** The UK's covid-19 vaccine programme continues to work tirelessly to protect the nation against the virus. As of 14 December, 51.2 million people have now received their first covid-19 vaccine dose and 46.8 million have had their second dose. Over 24 million people have also received a third dose/booster vaccine, which we now know is essential in providing the best protection against the Omicron variant.

### *Temporary suspension of 15-minute observation period*

The SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.529 (Omicron) was designated a variant of concern by the World Health Organisation on 26 November 2021. Since its discovery, scientists around the world have been working at pace to understand whether this strain could escape the vaccine, and if so, to what extent. On Friday 10 December, the UK Health Security Agency published an early analysis of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines' effectiveness against Omicron. This analysis indicated that two doses of either the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccines were insufficient to give adequate levels of protection against infection and mild disease. However, the study estimated that a third booster dose of the Pfizer vaccine increases the protection against symptomatic disease for the Omicron variant to 71% for those who received a primary course of the AstraZeneca, and 76% to those who received a primary course of the Pfizer vaccine.

Based on current trends, the Omicron variant is projected to become the dominant variant of coronavirus in the UK in the coming days and weeks, and therefore it is vital that we increase the pace of the booster programme. To this end, on 12 December 2021, the Prime Minister announced all eligible adults would now be offered a booster jab before the end of the year—bringing forward our target by a month. We need to do everything we can to speed up the pace of the booster programme and that is why I have agreed, based on advice from the UK's Chief Medical Officers (CMOs), and lead Deputy Chief Medical Officers (DCMOs) for vaccines, to temporarily suspend the 15-minute observation period for the mRNA vaccines.

The UK CMOs have advised that the 15-minute observation period should be temporarily suspended for first, second and homologous or heterologous boost vaccinations with mRNA vaccines. The CMOs' views are aligned with those of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's Commission on Human Medicines (CHM). The CHM will keep the suspension under close review.

Those individuals with a history of allergic reactions will continue to be managed in line with the advice set out in the UK Health Security Agency's Green Book on Immunisation.

How the 15-minute suspension is operationally implemented will be determined by each nation in line with their needs. The UK Health Security Agency updated the Green Book to reflect the change from on Tuesday 14 December. The updated Patient Group Direction and Protocol will be published shortly.

The advice of the CMOs and DCMOs, and the MHRA, can be found at the following links. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/suspension-of-the-15-minute-wait-for-vaccination-with-mrna-vaccine-for-covid-19-uk-cmos-opinion/](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suspension-of-the-15-minute-wait-for-vaccination-with-mrna-vaccine-for-covid-19-uk-cmos-opinion/)

[www.gov.uk/government/news/temporary-waiver-of-15-minute-observation-period-after-covid-19-mrna-vaccines](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/temporary-waiver-of-15-minute-observation-period-after-covid-19-mrna-vaccines)

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when there are further important developments in the covid-19 vaccine deployment programme.

[HCWS496]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Data Sharing: Immigration

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean):** Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the Home Office's review into data sharing arrangements between the Home Office and police on migrant victims and witnesses of crime with insecure immigration status.

The review follows a commitment made in response to recommendation 2 of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services "Safe to Share" report, published in December 2020.

Having considered the views of domestic abuse and modern slavery sector groups the Home Office review acknowledges the concerns raised around the current data sharing arrangements and recognises that there is room for improvement to give migrant victims greater confidence to report crimes committed against them.

The Home Office is committed to supporting the reporting of crime affecting anyone and this includes migrants who have insecure immigration status. Current data sharing practices between the police and the Home Office are essential in protecting those most vulnerable and protecting the public from individuals who are considered to pose a risk of harm to communities.

The review recommends establishing an immigration enforcement migrant victims protocol as an alternative to a data sharing firewall and to give greater transparency to victims on how their data will be shared. The protocol will set out that no immigration enforcement action should be taken against that victim while investigation and prosecution proceedings are ongoing, and the victim is receiving support and advice to make an application to regularise their stay. It will set out, in line with the code of practice for victims rights, what information and signposting IE could offer to migrant victims to help them regularise their stay and thereby reduce the threat of coercion and control by their perpetrators.

The review sets out a commitment to identify safeguards to mitigate the deterrence effect of data sharing and explore analytical options to assess the barriers to reporting crime(s) amongst migrants with insecure immigration status within the UK, to identify further initiatives that could encourage reporting.

The police and Home Office will develop and implement a comprehensive stakeholder and outreach engagement programme designed to promote reporting of crime amongst migrants with irregular immigration status. A key component of this work will focus on building trust and confidence in immigration enforcement and police activities in supporting migrant victims.

The review has been laid before the House and will also be available on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS488]

## JUSTICE

### Justice Update

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab):** I am today announcing the publication of Sir Christopher Bellamy's "Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid" report.

Since his appointment as chair of the review at the end of last year, Sir Christopher has undertaken a "whole-system" review of criminal legal aid fee schemes and the market of providers in England and Wales, considering its role as an enabler of many functions of the criminal justice system. Throughout his review, Sir Christopher has been supported by a dedicated expert advisory panel including legal practitioners, academics and members of the judiciary. Evidence to the review has been wide-ranging, reflecting the experiences of the legal profession, victims, witnesses, and defendants. I would like to thank Sir Christopher for his dedication in undertaking this important review and members of the expert advisory panel and other contributors for their comprehensive work.

I am extremely grateful to members of the Bar, the solicitor profession and chartered legal executives for their continued professionalism, dedication, and adaptability in delivering vital public services, particularly against the challenges of the pandemic, including their commitment to reducing court backlogs.

Sir Christopher has set out his vision for the role of legal aid in an efficient and effective criminal justice system. I recognise the importance of remuneration in delivering long-term sustainability of the market and I will consider his recommendations on this matter very carefully.

Beyond the important issue of funding, I welcome many of the principles underpinning his vision for the role of legal aid in an efficient and effective criminal justice system. I agree that data-sharing and transparency can enable us to make a better assessment of the efficiency, incentives, costs and effectiveness of criminal legal aid. My Department is continuing to explore ways to improve the availability and accessibility of data across the criminal justice system. Alongside the review, the Government have supported greater transparency by launching criminal justice system scorecards, which bring together data on a range of performance measures.

I am committed to ensuring defendants and other users of criminal legal aid services have access to high-quality advice from a diverse range of practitioners. I will carefully review Sir Christopher's findings and consider where there are opportunities for the Government and the legal professions to work together to improve diversity to achieve a more equal gender and ethnicity balance within the profession and to support young barristers after pupillage.

I also recognise the importance of ensuring suitably experienced advice is available as early in a case as possible, so that cases are resolved at the earliest opportunity, increasing efficiency and improving outcomes in the criminal justice system. Sir Christopher makes specific recommendations on pre-charge engagement, which I will consider carefully.

It is important that the provision of criminal legal aid services meets the needs of its users, which may differ between regions. We will carefully examine the findings in the review around the potential for improving local outcomes, and in particular the potential future role of local criminal justice boards.

Beyond Sir Christopher's review, the Government continue to support the defence profession and the wider criminal justice system. The Government have committed to invest £2.2 billion between 2022-23 and

2024-25 to meet increased demand on the criminal justice system from the additional 20,000 police officers and to fund the system's recovery from covid-19. As part of the latest spending review, the Government have also committed over £200 million across the spending review period to complete the £1.3 billion court reform programme by the end of 2023. The court reform programme is an important step towards digitising court and tribunal services and enhancing the experience of their users.

In his review, Sir Christopher notes that listing decisions are for the judiciary. He also notes that how cases are listed is important to efficiency and to the experience of victims, witnesses and practitioners. We will consider Sir Christopher's analysis to see where we can support further improvements.

My Department will continue to work with legal professionals and the judiciary on the future of remote hearings. As with listing, while the format of hearings is a judicial function, there are issues to consider around consistency.

We will consider Sir Christopher's findings fully, and consult before taking decisions regarding his specific recommendations. It is right that such a detailed report receives the thorough consideration that it deserves, while giving the legal profession an indicative timeline. Therefore, I intend to publish a full response no later than the end of March 2022 alongside a consultation on all policy proposals.

Sir Christopher's report can be found on gov.uk and I have placed copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS494]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Covid-19 Update

**The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson):** I am announcing today the appointment of the right hon. Baroness Heather Hallett DBE as chair of the forthcoming public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic, which is set to begin its work in spring 2022. The inquiry will be established under the 2005 Inquiries Act, with full powers, including the power to compel the production of documents and to summon witnesses to give evidence on oath. The inquiry will be held in public. In consultation with Baroness Hallett, I intend to appoint additional panel members in the new year in order that the inquiry has access to the full range of expertise needed to complete its important work.

Baroness Hallett retired from the Court of Appeal in 2019 and was made a crossbench life peer. She has conducted a range of high-profile and complex inquests, inquiries and reviews, including acting as coroner for the inquests into the deaths of the 52 victims of the 7 July 2005 London bombings; as chair of the Iraq Fatalities Investigations; and as chair of the 2014 Hallett Review of the administrative scheme to deal with "on the runs" in Northern Ireland. Baroness Hallett's appointment to this role follows a recommendation made by the Lord Chief Justice.

Baroness Hallett is currently acting as coroner in the inquest into the death of Dawn Sturgess, who died in July 2018 following exposure to the nerve agent Novichok. The Home Secretary announced on 18 November that a public inquiry would be established into these matters,

and the inquest adjourned, in order to permit all relevant evidence to be heard. A new chair for that inquiry will be appointed early in the new year.

The public inquiry into covid-19 will play a key role in examining the UK's pandemic response and ensuring that we learn the right lessons for the future. In doing so, it must ensure that those most affected by the pandemic—including those who have sadly lost loved ones—can play their proper role in the process. I will now consult Baroness Hallett and ministers in the devolved Administrations on the terms of reference for the inquiry and will publish these in draft in the new year. Baroness Hallett has agreed to then take forward a process of public engagement and consultation—including with bereaved families and other affected groups—before the terms of reference are finalised. I will make a further statement when it is time for that process to begin.

[HCWS493]

## TRANSPORT

### Road Improvements: Consideration of Environmental Matters

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** I have been asked by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps) to make this written ministerial statement. This statement confirms that it has been necessary to extend the deadlines for decisions on the following two applications made under the Planning Act as indicated below to allow for further consideration of environmental matters:

*M25 Junction 28 Improvement project:* for the proposed development by National Highways which would authorise the creation of a new two-lane loop road with hard shoulder, for traffic travelling from the M25 northbound carriageway onto the A12 eastbound carriageway towards Essex. The Secretary of State received the Examining Authority's report on 16 September 2021 and the current deadline for a decision was 16 December 2021. The deadline is now extended to 16 May 2021.

*A1 Northumberland – Morpeth to Ellingham Improvements:* the proposed development comprises the widening of approximately 20.6km stretch of the A1 between Morpeth to Ellingham with approximately 14.5km online widening and approximately 6.1km new offline highway. The Secretary of State received the Examining Authority's report on 5 October 2021 and the current deadline for a decision was 5 January 2022. The deadline is now extended to 5 June 2022.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the Examining Authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline.

The Department will also endeavour to issue decisions ahead of the deadlines above wherever possible.

The decision to set new deadlines is without prejudice to the decisions on whether to give development consent for the above applications.

[HCWS485]

### Electric Vehicles: Grant Scheme and Charging Infrastructure

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** I am making this statement to update the House on changes being made today to the

Government's plug-in vehicle grant scheme as well as our plans to regulate to improve the experience for drivers charging electric vehicles.

#### *Plug-in grant scheme*

For over a decade, the plug-in vehicle grant scheme has helped to boost the uptake of zero and ultra-low emission vehicles by offsetting their up-front cost, supporting our goal of eliminating tailpipe greenhouse gas emissions in our drive towards net zero, as well as removing air pollutants that harm human health.

The Government have invested over £1.5 billion since 2010, supporting nearly half a million vehicles. The approach has worked—it has helped to kick-start a market that is now moving forward at pace. Over 150,000 zero emission cars have been sold so far this year, more than one in 10 of all new cars sold. Electric van uptake is also accelerating at pace, with grant orders up 250% this year compared with 2020. And almost 50% of mopeds sold in 2021 have been electric, with some models costing the same up-front as an internal combustion engine equivalent.

Last year the Government announced a further £582 million to continue the plug-in grants until at least 2022-23, and more money was allocated at the spending review in October. This funding remains in place. However, with demand so strong, it is right that we seek to focus the grants, which are funded by the taxpayer, on the areas where they will have the most impact and where the market still needs Government support.

From today, the Government will provide grants of up to £1,500 for electric cars priced under £32,000, focusing on the more affordable vehicles and making best use of taxpayers' money. Wheelchair accessible vehicles are being prioritised, with a higher grant of £2,500 for vehicles priced under £35,000. Small vans will also receive £2,500, and large vans £5,000, with a per financial year limit of 1,000 grants per business to ensure that funding is spread fairly. There will be no changes for small or large trucks, which receive £16,000 and £25,000 respectively. Motorcycles priced up to £10,000

(L3e category) will receive £500 and mopeds (L1e) will get £150. These changes will allow the scheme's funding to go further, helping more people and businesses to switch to an electric vehicle.

Generous tax incentives, including zero road tax and favourable company car tax rates, which are a strong driver of uptake and can save drivers over £2,000 a year, remain in place. It is expected that the total cost of EV ownership will reach parity during the 2020s compared to petrol and diesel cars.

#### *Improving drivers' experience of charging*

The UK has been a global frontrunner in supporting provision of charging infrastructure along with private sector investment. Our vision is to have one of the best infrastructure networks in the world for electric vehicles, and we want charge points to be accessible, affordable and secure. Government and industry have supported the installation of over 27,600 publicly available charging devices including more than 5,000 rapid devices. Government have also supported the installation of almost 250,000 charge-points in homes and businesses.

Earlier in the year Government consulted to improve the consumer experience at public electric vehicle charge points. Next year we will introduce new rules that will increase confidence in our electric vehicle charging infrastructure. This will mandate a minimum payment method—such as contactless payment—for new 7.1 kW and above charge points, including rapids. Consumers will soon be able to compare costs across networks in a recognisable format similar to pence per litre for fuel and there will be new standards to ensure reliable charging for electric vehicle drivers.

#### *Conclusion*

Today's announcement, which is part of a wider package of £3.5 billion funding that this Government are investing to support the automotive sector and consumers in the transition to zero emission vehicles, is in response to a market-led acceleration towards greater electric vehicle ownership.

[HCWS483]

# Petitions

Wednesday 15 December 2021

## OBSERVATIONS

### LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

#### Walsall Arboretum

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that the Black Country Plan will build 5000 homes on the Walsall Green Belt; further that 592 of these homes will be built alongside the Walsall Arboretum, the only area of the park with open field and animal grazing views; further that the development will destroy the Green Belt, wildlife corridors and increase flooding; further that protected species of badgers and bats' habitats will be destroyed; and further that the red deer, barn owl, tawny owl, buzzards and parakeets will be lost to the area as they try to navigate around noise and light pollution.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and cancel plans to build houses on the Walsall Green Belt.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Valerie Vaz, *Official Report*, 1 December 2021; Vol. 704, c. 1017.]

[P002700]

*Observations from The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher):*

The Department cannot comment on local planning matters due to the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role in the planning system. While the Government set national planning policy for England through the National Planning Policy Framework, local authorities are responsible for local planning matters. The development plan for the area outlines how land should be used, the type and location of future development, and the presence of necessary restraints such as green belt. Local plans and strategies are created in consultation with the local community and submitted for rigorous independent examination by a planning inspector, who acts on behalf of the Secretary of State to make sure it is sound and accords with national planning policy.

Local authorities act independently of central Government. Government Ministers have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities, except where specific provision has been made in an Act of Parliament. Democratically elected local authorities are accountable for their actions to their electorate and must act within their statutory powers. Therefore, we cannot comment on the handling by Walsall MBC or any other planning authority of any draft plan policy or strategy aspect in the Black Country Plan.

The emerging Black Country Plan has been subject to consultation; most recently from August to October this year and I understand that it is scheduled for pre-submission (Regulation 19) consultation in August 2022. At that time, the public will be able to respond to Walsall MBC directly and make their concerns known. Councils can only adopt a plan that is sound - it should be consistent with national policy, be supported by

evidence and take the views of local people into account. Each plan is subject to a public examination in front of an independent Inspector, who plays an important role in examining plans impartially to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound.

The Government are committed to protecting and enhancing the green belt, in line with our manifesto. Our strong protections for the green belt remain firmly in place. The National Planning Framework states that a green belt boundary may be altered only in exceptional circumstances through the local plan process. A local authority should consider releasing land from green belt only if it can fully evidence that it has explored all other reasonable options for meeting its development needs. The authority should be able to show that it has been using brownfield land as much as possible, optimising the density of development, and discussing with neighbouring authorities whether they could accommodate some of the development required.

The Government are also committed to planning reforms which are intended to not only deliver the housing that we very much need but also to provide better protection for our environment. The Environment Act's new requirements for biodiversity net gain will begin commencement from 2023, meaning most types of new development will deliver improvements of 10% or more for biodiversity. We are working in accordance with the principles in the Environment Act 2021 to ensure that development results in environmental improvement rather than merely preventing harm. Existing areas designated for environmental protections will continue to be upheld.

With regards to development increasing flooding, the National Planning Policy Framework is clear that all sources of flood risk need to be considered (including areas that are at risk of surface water flooding due to drainage problems), taking into account future flood risk, to ensure that any new development is safe for its lifetime, resilient, and without increasing the risk of flooding elsewhere. Areas at little to no risk of flooding from any source should always be developed in preference to areas at a higher risk of flooding. Inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding, whether an existing or a potential future risk, should be avoided, and, where possible, alternative locations at a lower flood risk should be identified.

## TRANSPORT

### Bennetts End Road

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Hemel Hempstead,*

Declares that Bennetts End Road is a very busy and long road; further that, over the last few years, there have been numerous incidents on the road as a result of local residents crossing the road for various reasons; further that it is especially dangerous for local children accessing the various schools in the area; and further that a solution needs to be found as soon as possible to avoid further incidents on the road and provide all residents a safe way of crossing the road.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make Bennetts End Road safer by reallocating funding for Hertfordshire County Council to use to install a pelican crossing on Bennetts End Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Mike Penning, *Official Report*, 7 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 352.]

[P002701]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Roads, Baroness Vere of Norbiton*

The design, installation and maintenance of pedestrian crossings are matters for local highway authorities. They have powers to establish crossings on their roads, as well as a duty under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to “secure the expeditious, convenient and safe movement of vehicular and other traffic (including pedestrians)”.

Local authorities would need to consider local factors such as pedestrian numbers, road layout, traffic flow and speed and accident records in deciding whether a crossing is necessary, and if so what type to provide. The Department for Transport has published guidance on the assessment and design of pedestrian crossings, in chapter 6 of the “Traffic Signs Manual”.

This is available on the Department’s website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/traffic-signs-manual>

With respect to funding, between 2020-21 and 2021-22, the Department will provide over £510 million to local authorities in England, outside London, through the integrated transport block for small-scale transport schemes, including safety measures. From this capital funding, Hertfordshire County Council will receive over £9.1 million. The integrated transport block is not ring-fenced, allowing authorities to spend their allocations according to their own priorities. It is therefore for each authority to decide how it allocates its resources and which transport improvement projects to support.

Local authorities are free to make their own decisions about the design of the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. It would be inappropriate for the Government to seek to intervene in the process of local democratic accountability.

# Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 15 December 2021

## TRANSPORT

### **Draft Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2021**

*The following is an extract from the Third Delegated Legislation Committee debate on 13 December on the draft Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2021.*

**Trudy Harrison:** It is worth noting that around 6 million drivers who passed their test before 1 January 1997 can already drive a car with a trailer without having to take

a separate test. This change affords that same entitlement to drivers who passed the test after 1997.

*[Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 13 December 2021, Vol. 705, c. 4.]*

*Letter of correction from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison):*

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

**Trudy Harrison:** It is worth noting that around 16 million drivers who passed their test before 1 January 1997 can already drive a car with a trailer without having to take a separate test. This change affords that same entitlement to drivers who passed the test after 1997.



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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Wednesday 22 December 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE  
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Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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