

Thursday  
16 December 2021

Volume 705  
No. 93



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 16 December 2021**

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# House of Commons

Thursday 16 December 2021

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: Delays

1. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help resolve delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. [904779]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** The DVLA has introduced more online services, recruited extra staff, is using overtime and has secured extra office space.

**David Warburton:** I appreciate the efforts being made by my right hon. Friend, and I understand the various union issues involved, but it is clear from numerous constituents who have got in touch having been unable to get through to the DLVA—this also applies to the MPs' hotline—that the delays are having an impact on urgent and severe cases relating to other issues. I am sure that Members across the House are experiencing the same thing. What is the timeline for ensuring that the DVLA provides the service it is tasked to do, which we very much need it to do?

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the dual problems of the impact of the pandemic and the strike action through the year, which I am pleased to say is now resolved, led to a backlog, particularly of occupational licences—that was at 55,000. I am pleased to report to the House that that has now been entirely cleared and those are being processed in five working days. The rest of the work is now being processed much more quickly as well, and we expect the service to return to normal next year.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Transport Committee has been raising concerns about the DVLA's performance for well over a year and it does not seem to have approached the pandemic and its management of confidential and paper records as other Government agencies with similar challenges have been able to do during the pandemic. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the delays that are still ongoing, particularly for heavy goods vehicle drivers and those who wish to be driving HGVs, are only adding to the crisis in the supply chain and in lorries delivering essential goods?

**Grant Shapps:** The hon. Lady is right to be concerned about the backlogs that built up, but she is wrong to suggest that that still applies to HGV drivers. Those licences are now being turned around in five days for medical applications. There are considerably more applications than before the pandemic and that has led, alongside our 32-point plan, to more HGV drivers coming on to the road now. I have to stress that the unnecessary and lengthy strike at the DVLA came at the worst possible moment and it hurt vulnerable people. I am pleased to say that that strike has now collapsed, which is enabling the DVLA to get on top of the rest of the list.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I note what my right hon. Friend says, but my constituency is a major centre of the logistics industry and HGV drivers are certainly still experiencing problems. This problem has continued for years now. Can I urge him to redouble his efforts to ensure an improvement to the service?

**Grant Shapps:** As I mentioned, at its height, there were 56,000 applications. The last figure I saw last week showed that that was down to 9,000. There is a regular flow; it will never be zero because, of course, applications come and go. Medical applications are processed within five days and the only time that is not the case is when additional medical information is required. Those medical applications—the D4 forms—require checks from the DVLA to make sure that the information is correct, so the turnaround will never be faster than five days. If any Member has an issue with occupational DVLA applications, please let me know, because I will personally look into it.

#### TfL Funding: Discussions with Mayor of London

2. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Mayor of London on Transport for London's funding. [904780]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** Ministers and officials in the Department for Transport regularly meet officials from Transport for London and the Mayor's office to discuss a range of issues around funding for Transport for London. Most recently, Baroness Vere met Heidi Alexander on 2 December.

**Matthew Pennycook:** The move to plan B this week has seen bus travel demand in our capital fall by 9% and tube travel demand by a staggering 29%, leaving both still well below pre-pandemic levels. TfL's financial problems are a direct result of the national effort against coronavirus. The failure to agree a funding settlement will not only decimate services for Londoners, but put at risk the entire country's economic recovery. I therefore impel the Secretary of State to put aside any vindictive party political considerations and, in a spirit of magnanimity, do what is necessary today to save TfL from collapse.

**Grant Shapps:** I am afraid that I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of the situation. It does not seem particularly vindictive to pay out £4.1 billion in support of TfL as it rightly battles its way through coronavirus. It is not entirely correct to say that all the problems are related to that; the £13 billion of debt that it has is considerably higher than when the Mayor took

over. Putting that aside, I am keen to continue to support TfL. The House will be interested to know that I had to wait more than three weeks for the Mayor to come forward with measures that he was supposed to provide us with in the middle of November.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Yet again, the Government seem to be engaging in a blatant act of political sabotage of London's vital transport networks. This week, Londoners have listened to Government advice, done the right thing and worked from home to keep our NHS and communities safe. As a result, passenger levels have dropped by over a quarter, which has had a further colossal impact on TfL's revenue.

All the while, Ministers continue to force a cliff-edge negotiation on TfL finances in what can only be seen as a political attack that will punish hard-working Londoners for simply doing the right thing. As we saw in last week's *Evening Standard*, from transport trade unions to square mile firms, London is totally united in its opposition to these disastrous political manoeuvres. Will the Secretary of State do his job and finally meet the Mayor of London? Can he get around the table today and sort it out?

**Grant Shapps**: It is interesting that the Front-Bench team have taken their briefing directly from the Mayor of London. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not catch what I just said: the letter that I received with the measures that the Mayor had to meet, which were outlined in an agreement, arrived on my desk three weeks late. Not unreasonably, on behalf of the taxpayer, I went back to him and asked him to clarify some of those points.

The hon. Gentleman accuses us, as other Opposition Members have, of playing politics with this issue, which is completely untrue. Yesterday, I received a long and—I am pleased to say—quite detailed letter to clarify some of those measures, but where did I receive that letter? It was in the *Evening Standard*, not even on my own desk.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): As the Rail Minister in 2018, long before covid, I remember that my negotiations with the Mayor of London resulted in a loan of more than £2 billion for TfL. I am aware of further loans and bail-outs since. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is simply wrong to say that TfL has not been supported by the Government?

**Grant Shapps**: My hon. Friend, a former Transport Minister, is absolutely right. There has been about £9.6 billion of waste in TfL finances since 2016. Crossrail is £5.2 billion over—it was on time and on budget when the Mayor took office; there is the pensions cost of £828 million; the failure to raise the fares while the rest of the network had to, which cost £640 million; and another £400 million of combined fare dodging. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition do not want to hear about the waste, but the Government have supported TfL and will continue to do so, but we will not support the incompetence of the Mayor.

**Mr Speaker**: There was a question about meeting the Mayor, and hopefully that can be resolved. I think the Secretary of State got distracted by a former Rail Minister, but we will not get into that.

### Northern Powerhouse Rail: Stakeholders

3. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Transport for the North and (b) other stakeholders in the north of England on completing further sections of Northern Powerhouse Rail. [904781]

17. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Transport for the North and (b) other stakeholders in the north of England on completing further sections of Northern Powerhouse Rail. [904800]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson)**: We will build Northern Powerhouse Rail, including 40 miles of new high-speed line and electrification of the TransPennine route between Manchester and Leeds.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck**: I thank the Minister for that response, but the reality is that the Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are refusing point blank to meet Transport for the North. The Secretary of State has claimed that the Government's rail promises to the north are going to be fulfilled, so will he now commit to meet TfN to implement the plans contained in the northern transport charter?

**Andrew Stephenson**: I am sorry, but the hon. Lady is wrong. I meet Transport for the North regularly. I am happy to meet it again.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck**: What about your gaffer?

**Andrew Stephenson**: The Secretary of State meets northern leaders regularly. The Secretary of State established the Northern Transport Acceleration Council. I am sure he will continue to meet all northern stakeholders. But the most important thing here is that we are getting on with delivering for the north, with over £17 billion being invested in Northern Powerhouse Rail.

**Afzal Khan**: In the north, we have been waiting six years for the so-called Northern Powerhouse Rail to improve connectivity between our major cities, yet in the integrated rail plan the Government broke their promise and ditched the line between Manchester and Leeds in favour of tinkering upgrades to existing routes. Northern Powerhouse Rail's chief architect, George Osborne, last month accused the Prime Minister of lacking ambition and said:

"Levelling up, at the moment, feels more like a slogan than a plan".

Minister, why do this Government keep on failing the north?

**Andrew Stephenson**: It is simply not true. Since 2010, we have invested over £29 billion in northern transport. There comes a moment when you have to move away from big fancy plans to actually delivering. This plan is going to deliver benefits for the north: £17 billion being invested in Northern Powerhouse Rail, with early benefits happening soon; and over £2 billion already committed to the TransPennine route upgrade. We are getting on with delivering benefits to passengers across the north.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): After 18 years of Tory underfunding, privatising, fragmenting and running our railways into the ground, the priority of the last Labour Government was to invest billions of pounds to modernise our old, inefficient trains. Given the awareness around the climate crisis, the priority during the last decade should have been to electrify our railways, but it has been a lost decade. After abandoning Northern Powerhouse Rail, betraying our northern towns and cities, I was stunned to read reports that Government promises on electrification are being broken because the Treasury has decided to block the £30 billion needed to decarbonise our railways, even though it knows full well that over 10,000 km of rail must be electrified by 2050 to get to net zero. So can the Minister answer a simple question: how is he ever going to meet Government targets on electrification when the Chancellor is blocking the funding needed to get there?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Again, unfortunately, the Opposition are just getting this simply wrong. The integrated rail plan will kick off the electrification of more than 75% of the country's rail network. If the hon. Member takes the TransPennine route through Church Fenton at the moment, he will see the overhead electrification cables being erected. The midland main line electrification will start before Christmas. I would just gently remind the Opposition spokesman that, in 13 years of Labour Government, they electrified only 63 miles. Over the past 11 years, we have already electrified 1,221 miles.

#### Restoring Your Railway Programme

4. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to maintain funding for restoring your railway projects following the covid-19 outbreak. [904782]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Good morning, Mr Speaker, and merry Christmas to you and your staff. [*Interruption.*] Well, someone has to do it.

Through our restoring your railway programme—a £500 million fund—we remain committed to reopening lines and stations, reconnecting communities across the country.

**Danny Kruger:** Mr Speaker, a merry Christmas from me, too, to everybody.

Devizes is of course the jewel of Wiltshire. It used to have, according to medieval chroniclers, the finest castle in Christendom, until Cromwell pulled it down. It also used to have a very fine train station. Beeching closed it. The Victorians rebuilt our castle. I hope the Government are going to rebuild our station. Can the Minister tell us when he is likely to announce the successful award of restoring your railway funding to Devizes?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Can I thank my hon. Friend for his question and congratulate him on obviously being a huge champion for his constituency? His knowledge of the history of the railways in his locality and beyond is second to none. As he will know, we have now received the business case for that particular scheme, and we will be considering the next steps for a tranche of projects, including Devizes gateway, in the new year.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Happy Christmas from the Opposition Benches to you and all your staff, Mr Speaker.

Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), I am supporting the opening of the Barrow Hill line, which goes from Sheffield to Chesterfield through my constituency, hopefully with new stations at Beighton and Waverley. The real advantage will be if we can get people out of their cars on to the new line so that we avoid the congestion in Crystal Peaks and Handsworth in my constituency, and on the Sheffield Parkway. We have more chance of doing that if, rather than a heavy rail service going into Victoria that puts people in the middle of nowhere, we get a tram-train on the line going into the centre of Sheffield, which would have a much better chance of encouraging people out of their cars. Will the Minister seriously look at that option?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I actually know the project very well—I have participated in a deep dive on it—and I think he is completely right. There are now many more light rail and very light rail products out there, which would be very suitable for this scheme. The whole point of the restoring your railway scheme is to help people find the right product to deliver the right scheme for them in their locality. If he would like a meeting on this, I would happily meet him.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As well as wishing you a merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, I thank you and all the staff in this place for everything you do for us. May I extend that to the ministerial team and say thanks for all the evidence they have given to the Transport Committee?

With regard to restoring our railways post the pandemic, it is essential that we give passengers the confidence to get back on board. I welcome the proposals announced this morning to allow compensation to be easily applied for. Will the Minister consider looking at automated and automatic compensation to allow the money to come straight back into bank accounts even if passengers do not even know they were late?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee and wish him a merry Christmas too. I know for a fact that he is very interested in this subject, because he introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on this very point a while back. He has been ahead of the curve, and certainly ahead of the industry, on this issue for quite some time. Great British Railways will almost certainly be doing this sort of thing. We are trying to make sure that we go faster, so what he will have seen in the story today is our direction of travel. We want people to have every confidence when they return to our railway that, should they be significantly delayed, it is a very simple process to claim their refund.

#### Zero-emission Buses

5. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What progress he has made on the delivery of the 4,000 new zero-emission buses announced by the Government in February 2020. [904784]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** The Government remain absolutely committed to supporting the roll-out of 4,000 zero-emission buses and achieving an all zero-emission bus fleet. This will support our climate ambitions, improve transport for local communities and support high-quality green jobs.

**Liz Twist:** Is the Minister aware that the north-east bus fleet is older than the UK average? Transport North East is preparing a bid for funding for 73 zero-emission buses. In this season of good will, will the Minister give her backing to that bid, to show that the Government's commitment to levelling up transport is genuine? Will she also commit to expanding the roll-out of zero-emission buses across the north-east? People in Blaydon and the north-east need and deserve cleaner air and better buses.

**Trudy Harrison:** I can certainly give the hon. Member an assurance that I am across the detail of that bid. I am delighted that 49 of the buses would go to Go North East, 14 to Durham County Council and 10 to Northumberland. Those will be in addition to the nine electric buses that are already operating in the north-east at the moment. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where?"] The answer is between Newcastle and Gateshead on Voltra routes 53 and 54. We will have a further nine buses later this year.

**Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con):** Will Ministers make time to visit Equipmake, a fast-growing specialised manufacturer of batteries for electric buses—which began as a start-up at the excellent Hethel innovation centre in my constituency, and having outgrown those premises, has moved to Wymondham, which was in my constituency but is now in that of the Science Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman)—so that the Science Minister and I can explain to them just how at the cutting edge Norfolk is technologically and how much more it can do with the right support?

**Trudy Harrison:** I would be delighted to accept that invitation. The UK has a wealth of bus and coach manufacturers. About 80% of the service buses are made in the UK and I look forward to the invitation.

**Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab):** In February 2020, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet promised to deliver 4,000 zero-emission buses by 2025 as part of the Prime Minister's "bus revolution". After all, there can be no journey to net zero without green transport. Yet 18 months later, where are they? Is Santa going to deliver them? No major British manufacturer has even started production yet, nor have any orders even come in. The Department for Transport still seems unable to show how many are on order. Can the Secretary of State and Ministers confirm that the beginning of the release of funding for the ZEBRA—zero emission bus regional area scheme—contracts for building those buses will be given to British-based manufacturers? After speaking to them over the past few days I know that, given the unfolding omicron crisis and passenger levels again plummeting, they are desperate to have reassurances about their future and the future of tens of thousands of British jobs in their industry. Can the Minister enlighten us as to when, if ever, she expects the 4,000 zero-emission

buses to be on the road? Exactly how many are in production now? How many are being procured right now?

**Trudy Harrison:** As I said, we already have nine in the north-east and 50 operating in the country at the moment. We have 500 zero-emission buses being supported through the ZEBRA scheme, with £120 million of investment. A further 300 zero-emission buses will be supported through the all-electric bus city scheme and over 100 zero-emission buses have been supported through the ultra-low emission bus scheme since February 2020. In addition, £355 million of new funding was made available for zero-emission buses at the autumn 2021 Budget.

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** I wish you, Mr Speaker, the staff and all Members of the House a merry and safe Christmas, and a good new year when it comes.

Despite that answer from the Minister, the Transport Secretary confirmed to the Transport Committee that only 121 zero-emission buses are actually on the road in England, less than half of them outside London, since the Prime Minister made his 4,000 bus pledge. The Scottish order book, in contrast, is full to bursting. Will the Minister confirm how many of those 4,000 buses are currently on order from bus manufacturers, such as Alexander Dennis? When will any of those buses be on the road? When will all 4,000 buses be on the road? When will this Government raise their ambitions and horizons from their current plans to replace only 10% of the English bus fleet?

**Mr Speaker:** You might need an Adjournment debate for all those questions.

**Trudy Harrison:** As I said, we already have 50 buses operating now and a number of schemes are being supported through the variety of funds I have just set out. As for the more detailed information the hon. Gentleman requests, I will endeavour to write to him.

#### Affordable Bus Travel: North-east England

6. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to support affordable bus travel in the north-east. [904785]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** The Government are investing £1.2 billion of new funding to deliver better bus services in England, including across the north-east.

**Chi Onwurah:** Despite having lower average earnings, my constituents pay much more for their bus journey than Londoners. Yet the Secretary of State refuses to confirm funding for our bus service improvement plan or to confirm funding for the Metro throughout the covid crisis, which means there is less money for our buses, which he also will not support during the covid crisis. We have had our application to reopen the Leamside line refused. We have had the HS2 eastern leg abandoned, which means there is no hope of getting high-speed trains in Newcastle. We have had the manifesto promises on the Northern Rail Powerhouse refused and they will not even help to paint the Tyne bridge for its 100th birthday. Why are the Government such a scrooge for north-east transport?

**Mr Speaker:** I know it is the season of good will, but do not take advantage by doing a whole road map of the north-east. Minister, pick something from that please.

**Trudy Harrison:** We are working with Transport North East as it develops its business case under the zero emission bus regional area scheme to introduce 73 electric buses and the necessary charging infrastructure. It will submit its final business case at the end of January.

#### Major Road Blockages: Climate Activists

7. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help prevent climate activists from blocking major roads in England. [904787]

8. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help prevent climate activists from blocking major roads in England. [904788]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** National Highways continues to pursue legal action against individuals who breached its injunctions. Thanks to those injunctions, which I asked National Highways to pursue, 11 people have been prosecuted and will be spending this Christmas at Her Majesty's pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

**Marco Longhi:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who stop ambulances from reaching emergencies, those who block children from seeing their dying parents one last time and those who block vital goods from reaching their destination should face the full force of the law?

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is unacceptable for people to disrupt other people's lives by gluing themselves to roads. It is dangerous both for them and other users of those major roads; it is irresponsible; and it does not help with climate change, because all those cars are sitting there not moving, blasting out all the greenhouse gases that we are trying to avoid. That is why I instructed National Highways to take out a nationwide injunction, which they received. Two further cases, after the nine who were originally sent to prison, were committed to prison yesterday and there are further cases in the works. I very much hope that the message has been sent and received that this action simply does not work. I note that it has ceased to take place since the beginning of November as a result.

**Tom Hunt:** I welcome very much the national injunction on motorways and key strategic road networks. However, I understand that it is temporary. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could confirm that he is considering making it permanent. I also welcome the prison sentences that we have been handing out to many individuals. However, in most cases, it is because they have broken a High Court ruling. Does he agree that sometimes, actually, those sorts of fast punishments should be considered immediately, even if it is a first-time offence?

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend is right to spot a gap in the law here, which is why the Home Secretary is introducing, in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, legislation that would make the actual activity criminal. Instead, we have had to resort essentially to civil law. Through those injunctions, 130 activists have

been served with 475 sets of injunction papers. We are seeing the fruits of that when they reoffend and the courts take offence to the fact that they have ignored the court injunction and continue to persist. Prison and unlimited fines are the upshot of that, but a proper law to cover this is coming and I invite the Opposition to support it.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Roads across this country are blocked every single day not by protesters, but by traffic congestion, at a huge cost to health, the environment and business. This problem will only get worse unless the alternatives to rising car use—walking, cycling and public transport—are safer, more convenient and affordable. Will the Secretary of State reverse his plans to raise rail fares by an eye-watering 3.8% next March?

**Grant Shapps:** I do not want to try your patience by switching to a rail discussion, Mr Speaker, but I will say to the hon. Lady, who knows a great deal about this subject, that Opposition Front Benchers do not want to build or maintain any roads in this country. Whether it is a bicycle or an electric bus—to go back to the previous conversation—they all require roads to drive along, so I suggest that she has a word with her Front Benchers and supports our plan for £24 billion for road maintenance and development.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his commitment to legislation that will effectively stop people delaying, inconveniencing and obstructing people going to their work and elsewhere. There is a fine balance to be met between the right to protest and not obstructing or delaying people by what is happening. Will he confirm that the right to protest can still exist but not to the detriment of road users?

**Grant Shapps:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the right to protest is absolutely central to the way that we go about our democracy, but that does not provide people with the right to stop people getting to urgent hospital appointments, getting their kids to school and going about their lawful business. That is where we draw the line. It is why these injunctions have been used and, as has been discussed, we intend to put this into proper law as a criminal offence, rather than having to use the civil route.

#### Park-and-ride Schemes

9. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What discussions he has had with transport authorities on the role of park-and-ride schemes in encouraging people to use public transport. [904789]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** Government guidance to local authorities on developing bus improvement plans includes advice on park-and-ride services, as set out in the national bus strategy.

**Theresa Villiers:** In London, suburban tube station car parks are important park-and-ride facilities, encouraging people to get on the public transport network, so will the Government exercise their powers under section 163 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to prevent

1. [Official Report, 5 January 2022, Vol. 706, c. 2MC.]

the Mayor from shutting down these facilities in Cockfosters and High Barnet and to ensure that these station car parks remain available for people to use?

**Robert Courts:** The Secretary of State has indeed received a number of applications submitted by Transport for London under section 163 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to dispose of operational land at London underground stations. These are considered carefully on a case-by-case basis, but my right hon. Friend's views have been heard very clearly.

### Transport and Logistics: Labour Shortages

10. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on tackling labour shortages in the transport and logistics sectors. [904790]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** The Government have taken decisive action to address the acute HGV driver shortage, with 32 specific measures that have been taken. As Logistics UK, the main industry haulier body has said, this has reduced the crisis as we have started to see more HGV drivers on the road.

**Richard Thomson:** The Government may have taken decisive action in their own eyes, but it does not seem to be having the desired effect, because the temporary visas issued by the Government in the latter part of this year have failed to attract even 10% of the open visa spaces. Given that the rest of Europe also has an HGV driver shortage, will the Secretary of State accept that the UK Government need to make our visa package for HGV drivers more attractive to EU drivers in order to help quell the domestic driver shortage?

**Grant Shapps:** I do not accept that. The hon. Gentleman actually highlights the problem, which is that the rest of Europe—indeed, the rest of the world—has a very significant HGV driver shortage. Simply trying to take from another part of the market that is already massively restricted is not the answer. We do not think that issuing visas is the right way forward. I know that the Leader of the Opposition called for 100,000 visas to be issued for HGV drivers. That is not our approach. These 32 measures are seeing vastly more people coming into HGV driving, with more than 1,350 more tests each week compared with pre-pandemic levels.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I have to say that we on the Labour Benches are not feeling the Christmas love from the Secretary of State today. Neither have we been invited to his last couple of Christmas parties, but we will wait to hear more on that. Perhaps, after the *Sunday Times* article, he should spend a little less time defending the rights of private airstrips where he can land his plane and a little more time sorting out the estimated 90,000 shortage of HGV drivers, which is holding our economy back. So here is some helpful advice: will he finally act to back Labour's plans to appoint a Minister for the supply chain crisis, boost driver recruitment and retention, and secure agreement with the EU, particularly after the news on France today, to prevent future import controls at ports worsening the situation?

**Grant Shapps:** The hon. Gentleman attacks aviation, but Labour does not understand: the Department for Transport is about all forms of transport. We support all the different forms of transport, no matter what they are. He makes reference to the HGV crisis, not understanding that freight both by rail and by air is all part of that, and he does not seem to understand how cargo moves around the world. In relation to his point on the supply chain, which is a very serious one, I can confirm that I have spoken to my French opposite number, Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, who has confirmed that although France is bringing in additional controls on movement to France, it will not include hauliers in those measures.

### Road Condition

11. **Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the condition of roads in Wycombe. [904791]

14. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of England's roads. [904795]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** As announced in October's spending review, during this Parliament the Government are investing over £5 billion in highways maintenance—enough to fill in millions of potholes a year, repair dozens of bridges, and resurface roads up and down the country.

**Mr Baker:** I am grateful for that reassuring answer, but I am sorry to report that in High Wycombe there are all too many jarring potholes, and a number of our surfaces on important junctions are now breaking down to the point that they are dangerous to motorcycles. Is it not absolutely vital that councils are properly funded and equipped to keep our roads safe?

**Robert Courts:** My hon. Friend is quite right. Potholes are a menace to all road users, particularly motorcyclists. That is why the Government are working tirelessly to remove them from our roads. The Government's decision to provide local highway authorities with a three-year highway maintenance funding settlement will enable them, in line with good asset management planning, to proactively plan their maintenance and pothole repair programme more effectively. I am sure that that will bring results in Wycombe.

**Giles Watling:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It takes an hour and a half by train to do the under 70 miles to Clacton, and we rely on our roads to prosper. We in Clacton often feel overlooked. I would like the Minister to come down to our sunshine coast, where he will see that we need better roads. Does he believe that transport links, particularly in coastal communities, should be the focus when it comes to levelling up?

**Robert Courts:** Coastal communities such as Clacton are part of this nation's soul, and this Government are committed to such coastal communities and to levelling up across our Union. I can assure my hon. Friend that this Department works closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that coastal communities recover from covid-19 and to help them to level up. Of course, that includes transport links.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): The road across Hammersmith bridge has been completely closed since April, causing congestion, chaos, pollution and danger across Putney. Can the Minister confirm whether there will be funding in the Transport for London settlement for the repair and renewal of Hammersmith bridge, whether there will be funding for Hammersmith and Fulham Council and whether the Government will provide the additional funding to reopen Hammersmith bridge?

**Robert Courts:** That bridge is of course owned by the local Labour authority. The Transport Department has been stepping in to help, but I would urge the hon. Member to continue engage with her local authority to ensure that the repairs take place.

#### Mass Transit System: Leeds

12. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that work begins on delivering a mass transit system in Leeds. [904792]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Government are committed to supporting and delivering a mass transit system in Leeds and West Yorkshire, and we will provide funding for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to progress its plans.

**Fabian Hamilton:** As Leeds remains the largest city in Europe without a mass transit system, or indeed any kind of rail-based system, surely the Secretary of State should stop pouring money into feasibility studies when they have already been carried out and instead give my constituents in Leeds North East some clarity by telling the House just how much of the £100 million from the integrated rail plan will be spent on a mass transit system for Leeds and west Yorkshire. And will he tell us who will make the decisions on how that money is spent?

**Andrew Stephenson:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about Leeds being the largest city without a mass transit system. The integrated rail plan committed £100 million to start work on the mass transit system and to look at the most effective way to get HS2 trains to Leeds. However, it is worth noting that in addition to that, £830 million was allocated to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority through the city regional sustainable transport settlement in the autumn Budget, of which we expect £200 million to take forward the mass transit system based on the current proposals.

#### A14 at Kettering: Junction 10A Funding

15. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will ensure that funding for junction 10A on the A14 at Kettering is incorporated into road investment strategy 3 from 2025. [904798]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Government recognise the importance of the strategic road network in supporting local growth. National Highways has reviewed earlier work on a potential junction 10A on the A14 so that the project can be considered for the next road investment strategy. The review's findings will be available in the new year.

**Mr Hollobone:** Residents in Kettering, Barton Seagrave and Burton Latimer desperately needed this junction in RIS3 from 2025; otherwise, Kettering will simply grind to a halt. Will my hon. Friend be kind enough to secure for me a meeting with the noble Baroness Vere, the roads Minister, and North Northamptonshire Council, so that we can finally get this scheme included in the road investment strategy?

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend continues to make a powerful case for this scheme. I know that he has met my noble Friend the Baroness Vere before, but I am sure she will be delighted to meet him again to talk about this important scheme for his constituency.

#### Transport Decarbonisation

16. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken to facilitate decarbonisation of (a) public transport and (b) the wider travel sector in line with the Government's net zero target. [904799]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** Our world-leading transport decarbonisation plan sets out the Government's commitments and the actions needed to decarbonise transport, putting the sector on the pathway to net zero.

**Deidre Brock:** A merry Christmas to you and your team, Mr. Speaker. Considerable Scottish Government investment is going into electrification and new rail lines, but hundreds of millions of pounds are leaving the Scottish rail system every year to pay Network Rail access charges. Does the Minister agree that one of the top priorities for the new Great British Railways must be a review of the system in which Scotland's railways pay a massive premium simply to run services?

**Trudy Harrison:** Access charging will remain with GBR, but we can certainly arrange a meeting if that might be helpful.

#### East-west Rail Connections: North England

18. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps he is taking to help improve east-west rail connections in the north of England. [904801]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Northern Powerhouse Rail project will deliver real benefits for passengers and communities, enhancing journeys and levelling up for a growing population.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The integrated rail plan contains many good things, but a significant improvement would be an improved direct connection between Bradford and Manchester. There are ways to do it without significantly increasing the overall £96 billion budget. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the opportunities?

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for his constituents, his region and the whole north of England. The integrated rail plan was designed

to deliver improvements to Bradford sooner, but I am of course happy to meet him to discuss possible future investment.

#### Tram Service Suspensions: West Midlands

19. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on transport in the west midlands of the suspension of tram services due to cracks on vehicles. [904802]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** The Department for Transport has had several meetings with Midland Metro Ltd to discuss the suspension of tram services and the impact that has had in the west midlands.

**Steve McCabe:** When a similar problem occurred in Sydney with the same type of trams, built by the same company, CAF, the trams were off the tracks for 18 months. With the Commonwealth games due to begin on 28 July next year—I am sure we all hope they will be a huge success—the west midlands obviously needs a full and efficient public transport service. Will the Minister keep tabs on this issue and offer whatever assistance he can to ensure that the problem does not adversely affect the games?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** We have been monitoring the situation since Midland Metro Ltd first informed us of the problem back in June. MML then informed the Office of Rail and Road of the failure and the intended repair method. At that point, the cracks, and the risk they posed to long-term service disruption, were highlighted as minor, but as things have gone on, the situation has obviously become more serious. MML is reviewing the condition of its trams and reopened a reduced service yesterday. I guarantee the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to engage with MML and ensure that people can get to the Commonwealth games and celebrate the fun that everyone can have.

#### A1: Peterborough to Blyth

20. **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What plans he has to further develop the A1 from Peterborough to Blyth. [904803]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** The Government recognise the key importance of the A1 as a strategic north-south link across the country. Further improvements to the route, beyond those completed in 2009, will be considered as part of the National Highways route strategy process.

**Alicia Kearns:** Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker! I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for recognising the importance of the A1, but it shuts down at least once a week in my Rutland and Melton constituency patch because of accidents. It is a core artery for our nation and for goods, not least our Christmas stilton. Will the Minister please meet the A1 working group of MPs, so that we can explain why it is so important to upgrade the A1 to full motorway standard?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I appreciate my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for this issue, and I am delighted to offer her a meeting with my noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for roads, who would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and her colleagues.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [904771] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** I wish you and your staff a merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, along with the Opposition Front-Bench team, who will recall that I announced the integrated rail plan last month. Since then—last Thursday—Hitachi and Alston have been chosen for a £2 billion contract to produce trains in the midlands and the north; that will bring 2,500 jobs. Last Monday saw the introduction of a brand-new train service from Middlesbrough to London—the first in more than three decades. We are already delivering on the integrated rail plan.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The dualling of the A64 was first mooted in *The Yorkshire Post* in 1905, since when it has been promised and cancelled several times, despite being much needed. Its delivery would massively reduce the journey time between York, Malton, Pickering, Scarborough and Filey. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on plans to dual the A64?

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend has been a long-term advocate of dualling the A64 north-east of York. I can confirm that it will be one of my Department's options for consideration in the enhancements programme under the road investment strategy from 2025.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome Louise Haigh to her new position.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I wish you and your team a very merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Ahead of a tough Christmas, people across this country are paying the price of Tory inflation. In Dewsbury, for example, since the Conservative party came to power, the price of the commute into Leeds has risen more than three times faster than pay. Does the Secretary of State think that that is reasonable? If he does not—he failed to answer this point earlier—will he rule out the brutal 3.8% hike in rail fares rumoured for millions of passengers next year?

**Grant Shapps:** I am pleased that the hon. Lady mentions Dewsbury, because it gives me the opportunity to mention that it benefits much more from the integrated rail plan than the original High Speed 2 plan. She is right about inflation, but it is a global post-pandemic issue, rather than specific to this country. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a series of measures, including a big uplift in the living wage of 6.6%, which outclasses even inflation.

**Louise Haigh:** Rail passengers across the country will have heard that reply, and will know that the Secretary of State will not rule out the massive hike next year. It is not just rail fares that this Government are refusing to tackle. They have been told by the Competition and Markets Authority to tackle the scandalous PCR market, given that the Secretary of State requires hundreds of thousands of people travelling home this Christmas to take a test. Ministers claimed that many of those tests

are available at £20, but the truth is that just 0.4% of those advertised on the gov.uk website are available at that price. Why has he refused to take the action that regulators have demanded, clean up this racket, and help families with the huge cost of travel this Christmas?

**Grant Shapps:** I agree that it is very important that private sector providers stick to the prices that they are advertising; like the hon. Lady, I have checked the site and have been disappointed when that has not happened. The site is operated by the Department of Health and Social Care; I will pass her comments on to that Department. I did, though, check the site last night, and found that I could buy PCR tests for the prices being advertised.

T2. [904772] **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): I represent a commuter constituency in East Surrey, where reduced train services have been causing workers misery. We are still trying to unravel the situation that arose after previous work-from-home measures. Part of the challenge has been the number of drivers who went out of circulation the last time we told people to work from home; there was the challenge of getting them back in circulation. Will the Minister reassure me that he will work with the train operators this time to make sure that that does not happen again?

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Of course I can give my hon. Friend that assurance, and I thank her for raising the topic.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following the Chancellor's U-turn on sector-specific support, the sector hardest hit by covid is aviation, with the UK sector's uneven recovery being the slowest in Europe. Understandably, omicron may now wipe out Christmas travel, so does the Secretary of State agree that the sector needs support now, whether it through furlough, grants, or route development funds? We need to see that the Government understand the urgency of the situation, including by their extending the terms of the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme so that it covers aviation and travel businesses.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the aviation sector has benefited from approximately £8 billion of support from the Government's cross-economy measures. We are just about to announce the third iteration of the airport and ground handlers business rates support scheme to help with fixed costs. We will continue to listen to the sector to understand how best it may be supported.

T3. [904773] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): Despite Burnley having a premier league football club, a university campus, world-class engineering companies and an incredible spa resort, there is still just one rail service between Burnley and Manchester an hour. Will the Secretary of State look at that, and meet me to see what we can do to increase that frequency?

**Hon. Members:** Happy birthday!

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I wish my hon. Friend a happy birthday, and look forward to sharing his birthday cake later and discussing these matters. He is a persistent campaigner for better rail services for his constituents.

The constructive manner in which he goes about his business on behalf of his constituency will pay dividends for him. Future services will depend on demand, but of course I will continue to work with him on how we can get the best out of our rail plans, including the £96 billion integrated rail plan, for Burnley.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State assure the House that when he meets and gets into discussions with Transport for London, hopefully today or tomorrow, he will take into consideration the effects of rising fares, reduced services and possible closure of lines on the environment, job opportunities and air quality for the people of London? Will he also consider the effects on the mobility of young and older people who have campaigned for years for the ability to travel around their city, which has a higher use of public transport than many other places around the world because of progressive transport policies?

**Grant Shapps:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we want to see this resolved, and we are in constant contact with TfL and the Mayor's office. He is right to say that we want to ensure that TfL's rail service, bus service and all the rest of it are there for Londoners, and those who travel into London, to use. We are well on the case, and I look forward to a resolution.

T4. [904775] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Buckinghamshire Council recently refused to allow HS2 Ltd to use roads in my constituency for its lorry movements, because despite repeated requests, it failed to provide the amount of information needed to properly assess the impact of those truck journeys on local residents. Does my hon. Friend agree that if HS2 Ltd is to live up to its promise to be a good neighbour, it must provide all relevant information to local authorities, so that they can minimise the effect of HS2 on residents and businesses?

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** I agree with my hon. Friend, and I know how tirelessly he works for his constituents impacted by HS2. In this case, the Planning Inspectorate found that Buckinghamshire Council had been supplied with adequate information, and of course it is important that these decisions are not held up indefinitely, but I will of course continue to work with him and local residents in affected communities to ensure that we get the right approach.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The bus recovery grant expires in mid-March, and with notice to traffic commissioners required for any potential withdrawal of services, that leaves operators in Cambridgeshire and across the rest of the country facing a really difficult cliff edge on 19 January. Notice periods are important, but given the exceptional circumstances, can the Secretary of State Minister give us any assurance that action will be taken to avoid those difficult decisions and protect vital services?

**Grant Shapps:** It is absolutely true that the bus sector has required enormous support throughout the pandemic, and this Government have stood by it so far. We are of course seeing how omicron is affecting it, and will return to the House to provide additional information to operators.

T5. [904776] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I applaud the Government's decision not to go ahead with the eastern leg of HS2 through the Bolsover constituency. That gives huge relief to those in dozens of the villages that I represent. Can my hon. Friend give me the Christmas present that so many residents are looking for, and lift the safeguarding on the land across dozens of villages in the constituency?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on standing up for his constituents. One of the benefits of the integrated rail plan, of course, is that it will benefit many smaller places across the midlands and north, rather than just the big cities. On the issue of safeguarding, though, I must ask him for patience. We have committed £100 million to working on the best way to get HS2 trains to Leeds, and we must wait for the outcome of that work before lifting any safeguarding.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has not had a local plan for 67 years and has not had an upgrade of its local transport plan for over 10 years. I hear that the Liberal Democrat-Green council is now kicking proposals into the long grass. York Civic Trust is now grasping the nettle, but wants to know when the new instructions on local plans will be coming out, and what focus there will be on decarbonisation.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The hon. Lady will have to forgive me, because I do not know the answer to that question, but I will happily write to her with it.

T6. [904777] **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a fantastic early Christmas present that Melton and Leicestershire councils have come to an agreement on the Melton Mowbray distributor road, and that our bypass will finally be built, 40 years on? Will the Government continue to put their full weight behind the delivery of this crucial infrastructure for my constituency?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** Absolutely, and my hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Rutland and Melton. I know that she has been instrumental in brokering this agreement. It means that after 40 years, the people of Melton are much closer to getting the bypass that they want. The Government are showing support for the bypass through the housing infrastructure fund and the local authorities major schemes fund, and we look forward to receiving the final business case, so that we can conclude the approval phase and allow construction to begin.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The aviation sector has renewed its calls for Government support, as it remains one of the hardest-hit sectors and will continue to be one of the first industries impacted by travel rule changes—especially airports, which, as physical structures, have high overheads. Has the Secretary of State had any recent discussions with the Chancellor about what extra support could be offered?

**Grant Shapps:** I am pleased to report to the hon. Lady that we have indeed provided additional support—starting now—for those airport operators and ground handlers, who, in most cases, will have their business rates paid. I know that she sits independently, but as a

Scottish Member of Parliament she might want to approach the Scottish Government. According to Scottish airports including Edinburgh airport, the approach taken in Scotland, where the Cabinet Secretary and Ministers in Scotland have refused to meet them, has been in “stark contrast” to the approach taken by the UK Government, where engagement has been “proactive”.

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): Like everyone else, Mr Speaker, I wish you and your team a merry Christmas.

Do Ministers agree with me that the proposed Beeching reversals could be transformational for some of our communities? Ferryhill station is an obvious example. The Stillington line could connect communities on Teesside with jobs and days out on the coast, but also with the newly introduced Middlesbrough to London service. That could not only stimulate economic growth but, more important, give hope to our young people. When will it be given final approval?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** In the traditional way, I could “refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago”—to my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger)—but we are assessing all the schemes in the new year, and there will be answers then.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): A merry Christmas to you and your staff, Mr Speaker, and a ho ho ho.

The integrated rail plan was fantastic news for the people of Ashfield. Not only did it scrap the eastern leg of HS2—which created havoc and devastation in my constituency—but it allows for the investment of £12.8 billion in the east midlands. However, my priority now is the Maid Marian line, which will bring rail services to Selston for the first time in 60 years. Will the Minister meet me to see what a good case I can put for the return of that service?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Ho ho ho, Mr Speaker. I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, who is an incredible champion for his constituency.

**Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): I am delighted that the Government have accepted my ten-minute rule Bill as part of the transport decarbonisation plan. The plan has mandated that all new homes and office buildings that were due to have car parking spaces should have electric vehicle chargers, and I think that that makes a great deal of sense. Can my hon. Friend update the House on the timing of the likely legislation?

**Trudy Harrison:** I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has put in, especially while preparing her Bill. The Government have taken this on board and regulations will be laid early next year, which will contribute to the additional infrastructure available for the transition from fossil fuel vehicles to the zero emission vehicles of the future.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The Christmas and new year periods typically see significant work on our rail network. Will my hon. Friend tell us what is happening this year, perhaps with particular reference to the east coast main line?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, a former Rail Minister, for his question. It gives me an opportunity to thank all the rail workers who will be

out over the Christmas period delivering £131 million-worth of value with more than 370 projects, including—because we need to get ready for the trans-Pennine upgrade—nine days of major work in Leeds and a number of days’ work at Manchester Victoria, as well as renewal work at Skelton, near my hon. Friend’s constituency. So a huge amount is being done.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Jim Shannon

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am more than pleased to ask a question. It relates to delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. I know the Secretary of State has indicated that giant steps have been taken to address the issue, but what discussions has he had with the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure

to address the 1.4 million applications in Northern Ireland that have been affected by backlogs which have also affected the UK mainland?

**Grant Shapps:** I am delighted to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. We are, of course, in touch to make sure that the backlogs which have, understandably, built up during the coronavirus outbreak are being dealt with as quickly as possible. One of the best ways of doing that is digitising the services to ensure that more transactions take place electronically, online, and do not require pieces of paper to be sent around.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank everyone who has taken part in the questions session. Please have a good Christmas and a peaceful new year.

## Covid-19: Government Support for Business

10.34 am

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on economic support for business.

I want to begin by extending my best wishes to my hon. Friend—

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister will answer the question, and then you can say your piece.

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** It is clear that omicron is much more transmissible than other coronavirus variants, which is why, as the Prime Minister announced on Sunday, we are offering every eligible adult a booster dose before the end of the year. To get more jabs in arms, we have taken the proportionate and responsible step of moving to plan B in England to slow the spread of covid-19.

The rapid spread of omicron means this is a challenging time for a number of sectors, including hospitality. The Chancellor will be speaking to UK hospitality representatives this afternoon to understand their concerns. The Government continue to offer considerable support to businesses that might require extra assistance into next spring, as part of the £400 billion of direct economic help that we have provided during the pandemic.

For instance, we have reduced the VAT rate for hospitality and tourism businesses to 12.5% until March. Eligible retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England are also benefiting from 66% business rates relief until March. And at the recent autumn Budget the Chancellor introduced a further 50% business rates relief for eligible businesses into the 2022-23 tax year.

Businesses can continue to apply for the additional restrictions grant until March 2022, as part of more than £2 billion of discretionary business grant funding during the pandemic. Businesses can benefit from our extension to the recovery loan scheme, which helps small and medium-sized enterprises to build back from the crisis by providing guarantees to lenders on finance of up to £10 million. Firms are also protected from eviction until March 2022 if they fall behind on their rent.

Firms in the arts and culture sector, meanwhile, can access the £2 billion culture recovery fund, the sports recovery package and the film and television production restart scheme until the end of April 2022. And our £800 million live events reinsurance scheme is giving event organisers confidence to plan ahead. Furthermore, the devolved Administrations have received an extra £12.6 billion this year, including an additional £1.3 billion in the autumn Budget.

This Government are helping businesses in every region and nation of the UK during these difficult times. We are speaking to the most affected sectors, and we will continue to respond proportionately to the virus's changing path to support jobs, businesses and individuals, just as we have since the start of this pandemic.

**Mr McFadden:** Forgive me for my Christmas eagerness, Mr Speaker.

I extend my best wishes to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the shadow Chancellor, as she recovers from covid at home. We know where she is, but where is the Chancellor? Why did he decide to proceed with a trip to California on Tuesday, when it was already clear that UK businesses were struggling to cope with what the Prime Minister himself has called a “tidal wave” of omicron?

Even if the Chancellor is abroad, California is not exactly a communications desert. They have television, and I have even heard that they have the internet, but it is still radio silence from the Chancellor. There is tumbleweed rolling through the Treasury, which says he is in communication with officials, but what about some communication with businesses that are losing bookings by the hour and watching their December profits vanish into thin air? Last night the chief medical officer advised the public to deprioritise social contact. Adherence to that advice will have a clear and direct impact on the hospitality industry, live music, theatre and other public events across the country.

The Government documents for plan B say that the decision on economic support will be made “based on the data at the time.”

That time is now, so let me ask the Minister this: what measures will the Government take to ensure that those who have to isolate at home have proper sick pay that enables them to follow the rules? What will the Government do to help hospitality businesses affected by the chief medical officer's advice to deprioritise social contact? Will any support also apply to live music, theatre and other events?

What are the Government doing to maintain supply chains, should they be affected by staff absences in the coming weeks? What is the Government's response to the hospitality industry's call to maintain the value added tax rates for that sector at 12.5%? Will the Government also allow local authorities to release any unused funds they may have from previous covid aid packages to support businesses right now?

The principle here should be that the level of support should match the economic restrictions in place. It is not about a blank cheque; there has already been enough wasteful spending from the Government in the past two years. Any package should be timely, proportionate and properly targeted and must guard against fraud. That is why it needs the full and focused application of Treasury Ministers and officials.

We are not in lockdown, but it would be totally disingenuous to pretend that businesses can trade normally when the Prime Minister has used a special national broadcast to warn the nation of a “tidal wave” of covid infections and the chief medical officer has told us to cut back on social contact. The Government cannot pretend that nothing has changed. This is not the time to abandon businesses, so will the Minister commit to announcing a package of support by the end of today—I mean UK time, not California time—that matches the situation that British businesses and workers now face?

**John Glen:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. The Chancellor has been deeply engaged with business representatives throughout this pandemic and he will continue to be so. He was on a long-planned business trip to the United States, conducting Government

business, and he will continue to engage today with other Ministers, with representatives of the hospitality sector and others, to hear their concerns about what further support should be required.

However, I will not be taking lessons from the right hon. Gentleman on some of these measures. Last year, when we put in place the bounce back loans, it was the shadow Chancellor at the time, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who specifically engaged constructively with the Chancellor to agree the basis for those loans. We have continued to work constructively throughout on a range of interventions for multiple sectors. We put in a package of measures at the Budget offering additional support and as of yesterday the covid additional relief fund will provide £1.5 billion for those in the supply chain to deal with some of the additional challenges. Of course the Government recognise the additional pressures that these measures and this strain of the virus bring, and of course we will engage carefully and listen carefully to those business representatives this afternoon.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The Minister has talked about some of the costs that will be reduced. The problem with the reduction of Christmas cheer, especially in the hospitality and entertainment industries, is revenues.

If I listen to my publicans, restaurateurs and hoteliers, I know they will want to hear after the meeting this afternoon how their revenues can be lifted, how they can treat their staff properly and how the loss of revenue from those events that cannot be postponed will in some way be made up to them. That is what matters most in most constituencies, including mine.

**John Glen:** I thank the Father of the House for his comments, and point out that there is £250 million of funds still to be given to businesses through the additional restrictions grants. Three out of four local authorities have between 5% and 40% of their funds unallocated. However, I recognise that this is a distinct new challenge, and that is why I and the Chancellor will be having meetings with representatives from the affected sectors this afternoon to see what more needs to be done.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The omicron variant is now present in all Scottish health boards, so I am sure the Minister will congratulate Scotland on being the first nation in the UK to vaccinate 50% of the eligible population with the booster jab.

On Tuesday, during the First Minister's address to the Scottish Parliament, the Treasury sent out a press release indicating that more covid support was coming, but it later backtracked and pulled it. In response to those erroneous claims, the Scottish Finance Secretary has written to the Chancellor seeking clarification. When should the Scottish Finance Secretary expect a reply? Do we have to wait for the Chancellor to return from California? Does the Minister not believe that the Government's flip-flopping and flippancy of the last few days has undermined the devolved Administrations and that assurances of funding must be provided right now?

**John Glen:** Of course, the devolved authorities will secure £77.6 billion next year, which is £12.6 billion more than this year. Just yesterday, £430 million of additional money was agreed with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The hon. Member should contact the Finance Secretary in Scotland to clarify what he is talking about, because that money was allocated yesterday by the Chief Secretary.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Government policy has been clear that people can proceed with their Christmas socialising plans as expected. However, yesterday the chief medical officer said that people should limit social contact, which will clearly have a devastating effect on hospitality businesses. Can we have clarity about how people should plan their social contacts for Christmas?

**John Glen:** The advice is clear: one should get the booster as quickly as possible—I did so on Saturday—take lateral flow tests and act responsibly. On Monday, I shall take my Salisbury team out for lunch.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Public health messages need to be clear and consistent, but last night the Prime Minister's press conference was confusing and sowed turmoil in the hospitality sector. Another sector that is already hurting is small coach and bus operators, such as Stanley Travel in my constituency, who rely on Christmas and the new year for income to tide them over the fallow period of January and February. When the Chancellor comes back from his winter sun trip to California, will the Minister ensure that he does not forget the sector as we look at support in the coming months?

**John Glen:** The right hon. Gentleman legitimately raises a point about the whole range of businesses affected. That is why the Government's priority was to give local authorities maximum discretion in how to allocate funds. As the Chancellor has done yesterday, today and every day, he will continue to focus on the needs of the economy and businesses up and down the country.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I am reassured that my hon. Friend the Minister will take out his team on Monday. Like him, I took a lateral flow test this morning. However, is it not the case that when officials give advice, it has a massive capacity to herd the public into particular behaviours? Therefore, while the Government have formally allowed hospitality businesses in particular to stay open, the reality in my constituency is that fantastic businesses such as The Old Queens Head in Penn and Tylers Green have seen massive cancellations. What reassurance can he give me that when officials speak—particularly from podiums at press conferences—they stay within the bounds of the policy decided by Ministers, and that what Ministers have decided takes into account the broad spectrum of collateral harms that follow from, for example, encouraging people not to mix together?

**John Glen:** It is really important that we follow the best advice to get jabbed, take those lateral flow tests and wear masks. However, where we possibly can, we should also continue to engage with our local communities and support our businesses at this difficult time. Of

[John Glen]

course, that means that judgments have to be made, and people must take responsibility for their decisions in the light of that guidance.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Small and medium-sized enterprises make up a significant proportion of the UK hospitality sector, and in recent days they have seen their footfall decline by as much as 40%, with one business I know of having had 79 cancellations in three hours. This comes at a time when businesses also continue to face high energy costs, supply chain disruptions and dropping consumer confidence. If we know this, it beggars belief that it is not clear to the Government. We have been meeting hospitality businesses since last week. Why is this meeting happening only today, and are the Government going to commit to come forward with a package of support that will give confidence for Christmas and the months ahead by the end of today?

**John Glen:** As I have said, the Government are meeting a dozen representatives from the sector this afternoon to assess the latest situation and see what more can be done.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I sympathise with my hon. Friend and good neighbour in having to deal with data that is changing extremely rapidly. We know from South Africa and southern Africa that things may be changing, perhaps for the better, but we cannot rely on that, so the cautious words of Ministers and officials and the measures that we passed earlier this week are absolutely appropriate. Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time of change such as now, it is important that the House is convened to debate the issues and that we should seek an opportunity next week and the week after for us to meet again so that Ministers can update the House on the current situation and change what is required one way or the other, if that is necessary? The public expect that level of leadership.

**John Glen:** I thank my right hon. Friend and neighbour for his question. As I think he will appreciate from his time in government, some of those decisions come from those above me. It is critical that we are clear about what we are doing and why we are doing it, and the basis for the decisions that we are making.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): It is pretty obvious that during this crisis many workers have lost a lot of income, wages have gone down and living standards have gone down. For those who have to self-isolate or are sick and have to rely on statutory sick pay, SSP is wholly inadequate. Will he, in his consideration of business support, include an immediate substantial increase in SSP so that living standards can at least be maintained?

**John Glen:** The Government will always look at such matters. We have maintained the self-isolation £500 payment, means-tested through local authorities, but we will obviously keep all matters under review.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): Boosted this morning, Mr Speaker.

Listening last night to the Prime Minister's Downing Street conference, I could see why there was no statement to the House. No new Government policy was announced.

Then Professor Chris Whitty answered a question from the BBC, and at a stroke, the chief medical officer changed Government policy and put this country—certainly hospitality, and Winchester's hospitality bears this out from what I am hearing—into effective lockdown. May I ask—yes or no—whether what Professor Whitty said last night is now the policy of the Government, namely, that we should socialise carefully? What in practical legal terms does that mean?

On support, because advisers are now running the show—I bet none of them run businesses facing complete ruin as a result of what was said last night—the Treasury is going to have to do more. Otherwise, we risk wasting the amazing support that Her Majesty's Treasury gave last year. We are going to have to do more, whether or not we want to be here and whether or not I think we should be here, or businesses will face ruin and thousands of people are going to lose their jobs.

**John Glen:** I have been very clear that we should get boosted, encourage our constituents to get boosted, take the lateral flow tests, wear masks and engage in normal activity as far as we can. There will not be a legal definition of what every individual should do on an individual basis, but most people will use common sense, and that is really important. I recognise the core point that my hon. Friend makes. The sector will need engagement from Government, and that is why Ministers—not advisers—will be engaging with that sector this afternoon.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): As the Father of the House said, we will all be receiving emails from businesses in our constituencies. One has written to me saying:

“As with most businesses, a hospitality business is not run from one day to the next. Plans are in place for staff, events and orders.”

These are businesses that were struggling already with accrued debt and a staffing recruitment crisis before omicron hit. Does the Minister agree that, if businesses are facing the same set of circumstances they faced when they received support from the Government, it is reasonable for them to expect the same level of support again?

**John Glen:** We have put in a range of interventions, be that through loans, the furlough scheme, support through grants or support through reliefs from VAT and business rates. We will continue to look at what specific sectors are facing in these coming days and weeks, and we will act appropriately in light of those changed circumstances.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly we are all going to have to live with covid for a long time to come. Businesses in my constituency report a double whammy: people cancelling bookings for hospitality and shortages of staff as a result of people testing positive for covid, doing the responsible thing and not coming in. Can my hon. Friend look at ways we can promote business and encourage people to take on short-term roles in the hospitality industry to cover these gaps? We need to provide incentives for business to continue.

**John Glen:** As ever, my hon. Friend makes sensible points, and I will certainly look carefully at what he has said, and we will look at in light of the representations we receive this afternoon.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) is right: the Government are trying to sing two different songs at the same time, and the result is a cacophony of mixed messages in everyone's ears. This afternoon, the Chancellor needs not just to listen, but to act, because the taxes we are talking about are supposed to be taxes on business activity, not business inactivity caused by misfortune and Government mixed messaging. Will the Minister tell the Chancellor this afternoon when he meets him, albeit from California, that action is what is required now, not just listening?

**John Glen:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's points. I have constant contact with the Chancellor, and I will make sure he is very aware of the range and strength of opinion in the House today.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to the meetings this afternoon, but a common theme has developed on both sides of the House of reports, including in my constituency, of pubs losing 50% to 60% of their bookings. Like the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), I have a local coach operator that reported losing £40,000-worth of bookings yesterday alone. While advisers press the panic button way beyond what this House voted for a couple of days ago, can my hon. Friend give me an absolute assurance that there will be a decision by Ministers after his meetings this afternoon that will give businesses the clarity they need on the support they will get in this effective lockdown?

**John Glen:** What we will do is listen carefully and act appropriately. Just yesterday, we secured this covid additional relief fund to support the supply chain and city centre economies, but I fully recognise that we are in a very difficult and rapidly changing set of circumstances, and it is important that Ministers act and make decisions on the basis of that data and the evidence that is presented to this House.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): While it is important that we have a swift health response, it is equally important that we have a swift financial response to support that health response in tackling the impact of covid. What steps are being taken to ensure that these decisions are taken quickly? It is not good enough simply to wait until the Chancellor can wake up, whenever that is, in California. When will the Government finally ever do anything to support those who have been excluded from any support at any time throughout this entire pandemic?

**John Glen:** Clearly we have worked hard throughout to bring customised support to different sectors, with a range of grants, reliefs and direct support through furlough. The Chancellor was very clear from his earliest statements last spring that it would be impossible to protect every single job, but just this week we have seen unemployment at 4.2%, which is obviously considerably better than was anticipated. There is no complacency on behalf of the Treasury or the Chancellor, who is fully engaged in looking at what interventions are appropriate in addition to the comprehensive winter plan, which was laid out in advance to give reassurance over the coming six months. As I have said, circumstances have now changed, and we will need to look very carefully at the implications of that.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), I have had a coach operator on to me this morning, so may I urge the Government to look at the wider impact of what is happening? It is welcome that the Chancellor and his team are meeting the hospitality sector, but the closure or limited closure of that sector has a massive knock-on effect, for example, on coach operators and taxi drivers. Sadly, this is going to mean more online sales and another hit to the high street, so may I urge the Minister to ensure that the wider aspects of what is taking place are considered in the meeting later?

**John Glen:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to the wider impact across related businesses, which is why Ministers will this afternoon meet a range of representatives, to ensure that the full understanding of the Government is grasped.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I simply say to the Minister that unless he acts today to help hospitality businesses they will not be there next year to be helped—that is the simple reality. People choosing not to go to hospitality events, following guidance not to go to the office, is having a big impact on the revenues of public transport operators—bus, coach and Supertram operators in Sheffield. Will he have urgent conversations with the Transport Secretary about extra help for those operators—already we have seen massive cuts to services—and give the money to the transport authorities so that it can be best spent in the interests of passengers?

**John Glen:** Of course discussions will take place across government. The hon. Gentleman draws attention to the transport sector, where of course significant support has been given. However, I take on board his point.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Chancellor are meeting those in the hospitality sector this afternoon. There is no doubt that they are suffering because of some of the mixed messages we have heard in the past few days. The obvious places to help them would be by looking at VAT again, potentially reducing it back to the 5% rate until the end of March, and at the recovery loan scheme. As the Minister knows, the original schemes—bounce back loans and the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme—did not require a forward viability test, whereas the recovery loan scheme does. It is very difficult for those in hospitality at the moment to demonstrate forward-looking viability for their businesses, so will the Minister look again at the scheme and look to reform it so that businesses can access this vital financial support?

**John Glen:** As ever, my hon. Friend brings sensible and credible points to the Chamber on these matters. He is very familiar with the different aspects of small and medium-sized enterprise financing. The recovery loan scheme, operational until June next year, gives a 70% guarantee to lenders, but of course we will look at all those measures in the round, and I look forward to our meeting later today on other matters.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): I am acutely aware, having a constituency on the edge of the west end, of the impact that the pandemic has had not only on hospitality and tourism, but on the culture, arts and live performance sector. Last night, it was reported that 12 west end shows were unable to go ahead because of illness among the cast, many of whom are self-employed. Will the Minister confirm that he or fellow Ministers will be meeting representatives of the theatre and live performance sector to discuss the impact of this latest wave of the crisis on their finances?

**John Glen:** We will continue to engage with the sector. I just draw the hon. Lady's attention to the £2 billion culture recovery fund; the emergency resources support fund, which gives up to £3 million of support to charities and £1 million to commercial entities in that sector; and the £800 million to the live events reinsurance scheme. However, we will continue to engage across different sectors of the economy.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle has a fantastic night-time economy and the Chancellor should visit, as it is a lot closer than California. Those businesses will be seeing a real reduction in footfall and trade, as will their suppliers directly, because of the omicron variant. What support is the Minister offering to them directly as a result of the omicron variant?

**John Glen:** As I mentioned, there is outstanding support from the local additional restrictions grant, which local authorities have available. I would be happy to hear from the hon. Lady where Newcastle's local authority is on the disbursement of that grant. As I said, we are meeting representatives from across the economy this afternoon and we will look carefully at what can be done.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, to you and the excellent House staff.

It should have been a very busy Christmas period, but hospitality, entertainment and linked businesses in my constituency, on top of trying to contend with soaring energy costs, are being hard hit. They are losing bookings and events after the Prime Minister announced his recent plan. Where is the Chancellor? Why did he not announce a corresponding support package plan for those affected? What support package can businesses in my constituency apply for to help them in these difficult times?

**John Glen:** I have already set out a number of support measures that we have taken, which are ongoing through to next March, such as business rates relief, grants from local authorities, grants that we have already given and a concession on the lower VAT rate. Of course, I recognise the reality of behaviour at the moment. We have to assess that, look at the data and look at what the appropriate measure is. It is really clear: we have not shut anything down. What we have done is set out new conditions which people are finding it difficult to come to terms with. I understand that, which is why we have to work carefully with the sector to look at what sort of support we can bring in.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Sacha Lord, Greater Manchester's night-time economy adviser, just said:

"100,000's staff hours are being slashed up and down the UK, due to cancellations. A large proportion—

of those staff—

"are on a living wage."

He says that the silence from the Chancellor is "deafening" and it is, "Unforgivable and Unforgettable." Does the Minister agree?

**John Glen:** I don't.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I just asked the Secretary of State for Transport about support for aviation and was given the Department for Transport's greatest hits. The truth is that the aviation sector was hardest hit. Its recovery has been uneven and the weakest in Europe. It will need support. Measures already brought in, such as the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme, will have to be extended for some sectors, in the same manner as CBILS. Thousands of jobs have gone in my constituency. Does the Treasury actually understand how serious the situation is?

**John Glen:** Yes, we do, and that is why we have given £12 billion of loan guarantees through the covid corporate financing facility for the aviation sector. At the Budget, we put in the airport and ground operations support scheme to help with fixed costs over the next six months. Of course I recognise that the situation is having a significant impact on the sector and the Government will remain engaged to support where we possibly can.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): A number of different things have happened this week in the Government's messaging, but one significant thing was when the Prime Minister made his television statement on Sunday and told people to work from home if they can. Reinforcing that message has meant that, this week, an awful lot of people are not in the places that they expected to be, which has resulted in cancellations of bookings for hotels and restaurants. Rightly, reinforcing that message has had an impact that the Treasury needs to react to.

**John Glen:** I recognise that, which is why I have set out today the engagement that we are having to try to determine exactly what we need to do.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): For more than a week, hospitality businesses and workers in Nottingham have been contacting me desperately worried about falling custom at what should be their busiest time of year. I have also heard from hair and beauty salons in my constituency that are facing cancellations and wondering how on earth they will get by on a reduced income when they are already struggling to pay back the loans that they took out to survive lockdown. Why do the Government not seem to understand the urgency of the situation and what will the Minister now do to help?

**John Glen:** What I will do is ensure that the hon. Lady's point is passed to the Chancellor. I will also ensure that the engagement is as broad as possible across Treasury Ministers, so that the full impact of the evolving circumstances is reflected in our response.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): A few weekends ago, on Small Business Saturday, I was happy to host the first inaugural Ilford business awards. With about 1,500 nominations, it spotlighted the best businesses in Ilford. Recent research from the TUC, however, shows that 647,000 workers in hospitality, retail and entertainment do not currently qualify for statutory sick pay and many will be incredibly anxious about what that means, especially given the contradictory advice from Government scientists and the Prime Minister in the past few days. Why have the Government let down the industry so badly? What will the Minister commit to do to help to support those industries today?

**John Glen:** Today we are having meetings to discern exactly what the data is showing and what interventions we need to make going forward.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): I think I am now the sixth Member to mention the coach sector, and I hope the Treasury is listening to hon. and right hon. Members in that regard. Robert Black's of Brechin has contacted me to say that bookings have been disappearing like snow off a dyke since the omicron situation developed. I have also been contacted by The Townhouse in Arbroath, The Stag in Forfar and many others, and I am not taking my staff out on Friday because I am following advice. There are booking cancellations right across the board. It is an omicron support package that we need—where is it coming from?

**John Glen:** As I have said repeatedly, the Government are engaging across sectors. I recognise the depth and breadth of the impact of this variant, and we will look very carefully at what we need to do.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Despite the Treasury spin, last night's Cobra meetings only confirmed that of course there is no money coming to Scotland; the money announced by the Treasury on Tuesday was pre-announced money. The Scottish Government have already acted to deliver £100 million of funding to support businesses disrupted by health advice in Scotland. They want to give more, but they cannot, due to the restrictions in place on devolved borrowing. Does the Minister accept that this aspect of the devolution settlement is hampering the ability of devolved Governments to act as necessary?

**John Glen:** I am sorry, but I cannot accept that. The Government have given an additional £12 billion to the devolved Administrations, which also benefit from the reduced VAT, the recovery loans and the other UK-wide measures, and the additional £430 million that was agreed this week.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Two weeks ago, on a very frosty north-east morning, I met small businesses at my business forum. They told me of their concerns about what might happen over the Christmas period with covid-19. They included beauty businesses and businesses such as the Railway Tavern in Rowlands Gill in my

constituency. Will the Minister please urgently address the need to support our hospitality and personal care businesses throughout this situation?

**John Glen:** The hon. Lady makes a very reasonable case about businesses in her constituency. As I have said, we will be engaging with the sector to come forward with appropriate interventions based on the data and the experience across the economy.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): One thing is clear: we can trust the word of the chief medical officer more than that of the Prime Minister, as the Government sleepwalk into another covid crisis. In York, we have a significant hospitality sector. It is really struggling, as are many other businesses. What steps is the Minister taking with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, as the tax year comes to an end, to ensure greater flexibility for businesses so that they can have longer to repay money to the Treasury?

**John Glen:** As ever, the hon. Lady makes a reasonable point. We have to look at the range of interventions and ways that we could support the economy at this time. She raises an interesting area for us to focus on, and I am sure that will be a substantive area of considerations with the Chancellor.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The music industry has been hit hard. The industry trade body LIVE—Live music Industry Venues and Entertainment—has concerns that while venues can technically stay open, they are haemorrhaging money and that will lead to permanent closures. Will the Chancellor maintain the current rate of VAT beyond March 2022? In addition to support packages, will the Government fix the insurance scheme for cancelled events to include pandemic-related cancellations?

**John Glen:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Government worked very closely with the sector in the determination of the parameters of the live events reinsurance scheme—I was involved in it myself—over late summer. That £800 million scheme will give events across the country confidence, but I obviously recognise that that needs to be kept under constant review, as all the measures do.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions and, clearly, for the commitment to financial support to help businesses, but may I ask him a question on behalf of travel agents and tour operators, which are again taking a very specific hit, not simply from cancellations but from frightened people being afraid to book for the future? Will he explore urgently a financial aid scheme alongside the one that is so clearly needed for the hospitality industry as a whole?

**John Glen:** Throughout this pandemic, we have received representations from many sectors, we have introduced a range of interventions to deal with the challenges, and we will continue to engage with sectors across the economy, including travel operators, which have been reflected a number of times in the concerns of Members across the House this morning.

## FCDO Staffing

11.15 am

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary, or rather the Minister in his place, about staffing cuts in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly)**: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for the question. Let me start off by saying that the Foreign Secretary has made it clear—and, indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also made this clear at questions yesterday—that there will not be a 10% staff cut to the FCDO.

Internal work has taken place that has not been signed off by Ministers, but I remind the House that we are still investing massively in our overseas aid. At £10 billion this year, the UK remains one of the largest ODA spenders in the world, as well as being well above the OECD average. The FCDO must continue to promote a positive, confident, outward-looking global Britain, deploying its diplomacy and development expertise to advance freedom, democracy and sustainable enterprise around the world.

We remain a highly ambitious Department, supporting the integrated review and the aspirations set out within it. To do this, the Department needs to ensure its resources—both its funding and its most valuable resource, its people—are aligned to its priorities. Over the next three years, some areas of the Department will see staffing resources of course increase, reflecting the need to align our people to the nation's priorities. The FCDO will continue to retain one of the largest overseas diplomatic networks of any nation, while also ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. There will not be a 10% staff cut and Ministers will make the final decisions on workforce changes in the spring.

**Tom Tugendhat**: May I first pay enormous tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work that he has done in his own part of the world as a Foreign Office Minister? The bilateral relationships that he has helped to build, along with his impressive command of Arabic, have transformed some of the relationships and moved them to a whole new footing, and that is enormously welcome. In that work, what he has seen is some fantastic envoys of this country representing what is best about us and achieving what we really need to see, which is a transformational attitude following the revolution that Brexit put into our foreign policy. That is enormously welcome. I am sure the Minister will agree with me that, looking around the world and trying to find staff cuts—even if not 10%, even if only a few—is still going to be challenging, because the reality is that we need more people now, not fewer.

We have found that the policy we had before 2016 of over-centralising on international institutions such as the European Union or others around the world that have caused such challenge has not always served Britain's interests best, and we have decided—quite correctly, in my view—to invest very hard in the bilateral relationships that matter. This is indeed the policy of the integrated review that the Minister has so rightly cited. It is also the policy of the Foreign Secretary, who has spoken about BII—British international investment—to challenge

China's belt and road and to secure more opportunities for British trade around the world. But that means more staff in Kenya, more staff in Nigeria, more staff in capitals around the European Union—not in Brussels—and more staff around his own network in the middle east that he has done so much to transform. This is not just a question about a 10% cut. This is a question about what investment is going to be made in staff numbers in high commissions and embassies around the world to achieve the aim, interests and ambitions of the British people and the stated aim of this Government. Surely that is not fake news.

**James Cleverly**: To respond to my hon. Friend's kind words about my command of the Arabic language, shukran jazeelan. Actually, I will accept his compliment on behalf of the members of the FCDO across the network in my region and beyond, who are of course the primary means by which we deliver both diplomacy and development. He is absolutely right that the Government's foreign policy, as set out in the integrated review, remains highly ambitious. Diplomacy and development are delivered primarily through people. While we are very proud of being a top tier ODA-donating country, with the commitment to go back up to 0.7% set out in the spending review announcements, the integrated review does mean we will need to ensure that our posture globally reinforces that. So changes are inevitable. I absolutely take the point he makes about the value of the people as part of that. When Ministers make the ultimate decisions about this, we will absolutely take the points he makes, with which we very much agree, into consideration.

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this important urgent question.

In the last year, we have seen just how vital Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff are to the UK's operations abroad. While the previous Foreign Secretary relaxed on a beach as Kabul fell to the Taliban, Foreign Office staff were absolutely integral to the evacuation of British citizens and Afghans from Afghanistan. But no one could have heard last week's devastating whistleblower testimony about a Department that was overstretched, under-resourced and badly led by Ministers, and concluded that the remedy was to actually cut our diplomatic staff. The truth is that the Government have overseen a series of damaging blows to our international influence. The Government have slashed development aid, cut the armed forces and overseen the closure of British Council offices. Many international development staff have left, taking with them their expertise and experience. Now, the Government plan to cut our diplomacy.

Does the Minister recognise that the Government are overseeing a downgraded role for Britain nationally? These cuts could not have come at a worse time. Alongside the pandemic, we face challenges from an aggressive Russia and a more assertive China. We see persistent poverty and conflict, as well as climate change running out of control. We need a properly funded diplomatic and development Department to take on those challenges.

When the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee asked the Prime Minister about the cuts, he called them fake news. I would like to ask the Minister whether he

believes that is because it is not a 10% cut, but actually a 20% cut. Did the Prime Minister mislead the House? If so, will the Prime Minister come back to this House to correct the record? Can the Minister also tell the House which regions of the world will be most affected by these cuts and how he believes they will impact on the world's most vulnerable people, such as the women and girls of Afghanistan, who now face the most appalling and serious oppression from the Taliban?

With major cuts like this there will inevitably be consequences for the efficacy and the performance of the Department. Does the Minister agree with the former British ambassador to Germany, Sir Paul Lever, who has said that the planned cuts would affect Britain's "presence and performance" on the international stage? So much for global Britain. The reality is cuts, downgrades and a diminished international role. It is a disgrace.

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a huge degree of respect for him. However, his questions are predicated on a starting point which I have just said at the Dispatch Box is not the case. He starts throwing around figures like 20% in terms of staff reductions in a clear attempt to generate scaremongering. I have said, and the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have both said, that there will not be 10% cuts, as has been brought up—[*Interruption.*] There will not be. Therefore, his whole line of questioning is predicated on a statement that is incorrect.

The hon. Gentleman said that we have had to spend less on ODA this year and, of course, that is the case. I remind the House that that is because we have experienced the largest economic contraction in three centuries as a direct result of the pandemic. Nevertheless, we still remain one of the largest ODA-donating countries in the world. We maintain one of the largest diplomatic networks in the world. The Foreign Secretary hosted G7 Foreign Ministers in Liverpool, showing global leadership on a range of issues, including girls' education and humanitarian issues. At COP26, we saw the UK demonstrate global leadership on the existential crisis of our generation—climate change. We will remain a top-tier diplomatic powerhouse.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can we just remind ourselves that the UK diplomatic service is in fact part of our vital capability to maintain the competitive stance of this country around the world? The cost of the diplomatic service is a minute pinprick in the overall scheme of public expenditure, well within the margin for error of many other Government Departments' expenditures. Why would we want to squeeze this capability when it is so vital for our global future? Can we also think about what the diplomatic service is for? We value real subject knowledge and expertise, and country knowledge and the ability to speak the local languages more than perhaps we have recently. We value our history and understanding of our place in the world and the intelligence that those in the service gather and feed back to the centre. It is the centre that has to value that if our diplomatic service is to produce value for money.

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important and accurate point about the value that our diplomatic network and our diplomats around that network provide. We are all incredibly proud of the level

of expertise of the FCDO staff, and I know the Foreign Secretary has said this to them directly. Our diplomats are an absolutely top-tier team. We retain a high ambition for our international relations, as set out in the integrated review. We will continue investing in our people, including in language skills and other skills, to ensure that we retain that position. He is right that they are the primary means by which we exercise soft power around the world, and they will continue to be very much at the forefront of our thinking when it comes to planning for the future.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): It should come as no surprise that there are reports that the FCDO is facing job cuts of up to 20%, although I have not yet heard from the Minister what those cuts will actually be. Over the past two years, the Prime Minister has frequently talked about global Britain, but the reality is that it has been nothing but a nasty little Britain. For example, we have seen the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office—a merger that has yet even to integrate the IT and email systems—the ideological death sentence cuts imposed by reducing the aid budget and breaking the 0.7% manifesto commitment and the chaotic response to the Afghanistan crisis in the summer. People there will be facing the consequences this winter. This UK Government have routinely reneged on their commitments, and this staff cut, whatever the percentage will be—I look forward to hearing it—will further erode the UK's diplomatic and development capabilities. Given the huge cuts to aid, and now the direct hit to the number of diplomats carrying forward the Government's incoherent vision for the UK abroad, is it not the case that the global Britain slogan has been laid bare as simply a fig leaf covering up the UK's retreating and ever-diminishing role in the world? Can the Minister confirm the actual percentage of the cuts as staff face Christmas with job insecurities?

**James Cleverly:** Once again the hon. Gentleman throws around the figure of 20% staff cuts. I can tell him that it is nonsense. The UK remains a top-tier global diplomatic powerhouse. I pay particular tribute to the FCDO staff based in Abercrombie House, whose invaluable work adds to the huge diplomatic output of the FCDO. Were his party to fulfil its dream of isolationism, I cannot believe that those jobs at Abercrombie House would be maintained. We support the fantastic work that Scots do within the UK's global posture. We intend to make sure that they are supported and retained and their work enhanced.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the assurances that the Minister has given, but speaking as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, may I emphasise the important work that the FCDO contributes to the work of envoys not just through the briefings that it gives here in London, but in our embassies? I urge the Minister to give a reassurance that that aspect of the work of FCDO staff will be taken into account in any structural changes.

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. When I visit our posts around the world—around my region—I am incredibly pleased to see the seamless integration of various Departments that are represented on those platforms. Trade is an incredibly important

[James Cleverly]

part of our global posture. He is absolutely right that maintaining the FCDO's ability to support the foreign-facing work of other Departments will remain a top priority for us.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): I have a great many constituents with family members trapped in Afghanistan who are living in hiding and fearing for their lives. One family member writes:

"It's such a struggle to be here, we have no idea what to do...we are literally running out of everything and it's getting cold".

Surely this is not the time to be considering cutting resources when we desperately need more action to help those left behind in Afghanistan and increasingly desperate when we know that the country faces a humanitarian crisis.

**James Cleverly:** The situation in Afghanistan remains terrible, which is why we have doubled our financial support to it, for the very reasons that the hon. Lady highlighted. We will continue to work through diplomatic channels both internationally in support of stability and improvement in Afghanistan and with the countries immediately neighbouring it. Our commitment to Afghanistan remains undiminished, notwithstanding the fact that we no longer have a military presence there, and we will encourage the Taliban to do the right thing to abide by the commitments they have made with regard to such things as girls' education, women's freedom and not being a home for terrorism. We will judge them on their actions, not their words.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing his urgent question and thank the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa—my successor—for the reassurances that he has given. There can be little doubt, however, that over time, the FCDO has been diminished, although it remains formidable. Given that the talent base has been reduced over time, what thought has the Minister given to widening the net from which senior appointments overseas are drawn, noting particularly the need to promote trade and commerce as part of our international effort and the actions and appointments of countries with which we can reasonably be compared, such as France and Germany?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my right hon. Friend and predecessor for that point. Diplomacy and the nature of international relations are changing. We have to invest in future-facing resources, which means things like IT, most obviously, as well as ensuring that we have a network of experts across a wide range of fields, including commerce. In response to his former point, we already see a very close integration in London and around our overseas network of trade, development, aid and diplomacy. I can only assume that that will continue to be the case when it comes to our people.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for securing this urgent question. It is more than a year since my urgent question when the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for

International Development was announced. Despite what the Minister says about this being seamless, we are hearing lots of reports that it is not going well at all, and surely that must create a degree of inefficiencies. Although we have maintained the International Development Committee, we have seen further cuts to aid. In my urgent question last year, I sought an assurance that there would be no forced redundancies. The Minister may not be willing to give us a number or a percentage of cuts, but can he assure us that the review in the spring will not involve compulsory redundancies?

**James Cleverly:** As I have said a number of times, the decisions about the future structure, prioritisation and orientation of the Department will be made by Ministers in due course and the details will come out in the new year.

I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Lady's point about the merger: some of the most successful ODA-donating countries have merged Foreign and Development Offices. Prior to the merger of the Departments, I was a Minister across both of them, and I have found it easier to work with one set of civil servants in one Department than I did working across two sets of civil servants across two Departments. Our commitment is to retain our standing as a top-tier donor country, in respect of not just the scale of what we give but the sophistication of how we do it, and that will be enhanced through the merged process.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): At a time when we see an increasingly aggressive China, a resurgent Russia and the United States' strategic withdrawal from the world platform, it is important that we continue to project global Britain and our soft power around the world. When we restore our overseas aid budget to its previous level, we will need people to monitor that spending to make sure we get good value for money for taxpayers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is the worst time to reduce staff because we will want them in place when we go back to providing the aid?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes the important case that we need to ensure our aid is spent effectively. That is why we value so much the experience of our professionals not only in King Charles Street but around the globe. I assure my hon. Friend that the effective deployment of aid—ensuring that it does not fall into inappropriate hands and gets to the people who need it most—will remain a core priority for the UK. That commitment will remain undiminished and I assure my hon. Friend that I will take his comments to heart as we go through the process of ensuring that the FCDO is oriented to support the integrated review priorities.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): If, as the Minister has said several times, we are a top-tier diplomatic nation, why is a family in my Cardiff West constituency facing yet another Christmas at which their relative, my constituent Luke Symons, remains held captive in Sana'a by the Houthis, when other nations, including America, have succeeded in getting their citizens out of that same situation and that same prison? My constituent Bob Cummings, Luke's grandfather, recently met some of the Minister's officials and was confused by their account of what is going on. Will the Minister now commit to a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, as soon as possible, to get some real traction and attention on to this case?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman has raised the case of Luke Symons previously, and directly with me, and I commend him for his work in support of his constituent and his constituent's family. He will know that the situation in Yemen is incredibly difficult and it is hard to maintain anything like normal diplomatic relations at the best of times. Indeed, it is incredibly difficult to interact with the Houthis, who are responsible for Luke's ongoing detention. This case remains a priority not just for the Department but for me personally. I raised it on my most recent trip to Oman, which is geographically one of the closest countries to Yemen, but even Oman is limited in the influence it can exert. Nevertheless, I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to prioritise this terrible case.

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): Having just returned from a trade visit to Brazil, I can confirm that our staff in country are absolutely first class. Will Ministers and the Secretary of State consider further prioritising our efforts in a country that is the size of Europe, that dwarfs all other South American economies, that produces 25% of the planet's food, and that was one of the first to show us a hand of friendship post the Brexit referendum and is therefore well placed as a strategic ally?

**James Cleverly:** I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised his recent trip to Brazil. He is right to say that that country plays an important role commercially, agriculturally and environmentally, and I have no doubt that we will continue to make the most not only of our bilateral relationship with Brazil but of his language skills and experience in that incredibly important country.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): FCDO staff need only to look at the experiences of the staff at the British Council, a departmental agency, where there have been massive cuts and job losses. Will the Minister tell us what is being done to minimise redundancies at the British Council? Also, why was the decision taken to outsource the Turing scheme, which will undermine the jobs, skills and experience of the British Council staff?

**James Cleverly:** I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that we have gone through an unprecedented financial contraction because of covid. The British Council, which derives a significant proportion of its income from tuition, has been hit because of the difficulty in providing tuition in the era of covid, but it has done genuinely fantastic work using technology to continue to provide those services. The Foreign Secretary and I recently had a meeting with the senior leadership of the British Council to discuss what we could do to protect the things that we value highly in terms of its delivery of soft power, to ensure that it not only survives but thrives, once we are able to get past this covid situation.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this urgent question. I am not reassured at all by the Minister's statement. I have seen the email to the FCDO staff. It says, "We are planning on the basis of just under 10% reduction in our overall workforce size by March 2025". So is that actually a 9.9% reduction, or something else slightly different from 10%? The Minister was careful to say that there would be no

10% reduction, but will it be a figure that is close to 10%, but not 10%? The aid cuts are a disgrace, and it is easy to spend that money on big multilateral programmes, on the World Bank and on the United Nations, but not on those local projects on the ground that the former DFID staff are so good at supporting and that result in real poverty reduction and real peace building on the ground. Can the Minister reassure the House that the cut will not be anywhere near 10%, and that local staff who know the projects on the ground and who can really effect poverty reduction will not be cut?

**James Cleverly:** I remind the hon. Lady and the House that there is a difference between the figure that is used internally by officials for planning purposes and decisions that are made by Ministers. The decision around these issues will be made by Ministers. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have made it clear that that figure is not a ministerial figure. With regard to the balance between multilateral and bilateral, the hon. Lady makes an important point. We very much value the work that is done bilaterally in the sometimes small but incredibly highly effective projects that are delivered by the British Government underneath the British flag to some of the most poor and dispossessed people in the world, and that will remain a priority for this Government.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Cuts have consequences, and it is really clear that there will be serious consequences as a result of these cuts. It seems that this has been Treasury-driven, rather than looking at our strategic aims. Can the Minister confirm exactly where these cuts are going to fall and tell us what impact they are going to have?

**James Cleverly:** I repeat my point that these decisions will be made by Ministers in the new year in line with the timetable set out in the spending review.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Members were taking bets here on the Back Bench as to who would be called first—me or the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). I am not sure who won. I want to put on record my praise and thanks to the ministerial team at the Department, who I have found to be extremely courteous and helpful at all times. I want to put that on record because that is something that I have experienced in my contact with the Department in the last period of time. Covid has shown the sheer magnitude of the pressure on FCDO staff, with consular staff being asked to cover many areas and in some cases many countries. No matter how good and capable the staff are, there simply are not enough of them. Will the Minister consider a graduate scheme to make use of young and intelligent people who wish to experience life abroad? Would he be happy to commit to providing a five-year contract or five-year stint, and can he tell us what incentives could be provided to entice those graduates in?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman invites me to make spending commitments at the Dispatch Box, and sadly I am not able to. He raises an important and interesting point. I will pass on his thanks to the ministerial team and to our team of civil servants, both here in the UK and around the network. He is right that they have gone through an unprecedented period of pressure. The

[James Cleverly]

repatriation of British nationals around the globe when covid hit, the evacuation from Afghanistan, and a number of other, less high-profile things have put huge pressure on them. I commend their work, and I thank him on their behalf for his kind comments.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The UK has world-class civil servants who are not often given due respect as public servants. Their pensions have been cut, and their salaries have risen below inflation. Morale is already low in the Foreign Office after the merger with the Department for International Development due to substantial pay discrepancies. Fewer staff means more work for those who are left, and even less incentive. As that will inevitably lead to rising stress levels, how will the Minister support staff?

**James Cleverly**: The integrated review sets out our priorities. The Government will ensure that our diplomatic teams and our civil servants, both in the FCDO and in other forward-facing parts of Government, are aligned to support the integrated review, which will give direction, purpose, structure and parameters. That is how we will ensure that the workflow of our civil servants is managed.

I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about our civil servants, both in our Department and more broadly. They are excellent and world-class, and we value them very highly.

## Business of the House

11.46 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg)**: The business for the week commencing 3 January will include:

MONDAY 3 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 4 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

WEDNESDAY 5 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 6 JANUARY—General debate on Russian grand strategy. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 10 January will include:

MONDAY 10 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill.

TUESDAY 11 JANUARY—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

We will rise for the Christmas recess at the close of business today, and I would like to offer my best wishes to all Members and staff for a peaceful, safe and merry Christmas and a happy and prosperous new year. The thanks of the whole House, and of the Chamber, go to the staff of the House, including our magnificent Doorkeepers. Before the Division on Tuesday, I opened the windows in the Division Lobbies, and one of the Doorkeepers offered me his coat on the basis that I was doing his job for him. They even put up with the Leader of the House interfering in their business, and they do so with enormous grace and kindness.

I also thank the cleaners, who have been here throughout. Not a day has gone by during the whole pandemic when the cleaners have not been in, doing their job.

I thank the Clerks, who know everything. There is no knowledge in this universe that is not in a clerkly head. Clerkly heads may no longer be kept warm by a wig, but they none the less contain all the wisdom the world has ever found.

I had the opportunity to thank many of our catering, police and security staff this morning.

The small broadcasting team has done a truly fabulous job during covid. The magnificent *Hansard* Reporters take my gobbledegook and turn it into fine prose, for which I am eternally grateful.

I thank our constituency staff and civil servants who work so tremendously hard, and those in the Box are first class. I am not meant to mention people in the Box, am I, Mr Speaker? If I were allowed, I would say the lady in the Box has provided me with all the answers I will give later, and she does a magnificent and glorious job. We should be proud of the contribution of our civil servants. I also thank the lady who gives them such great leadership, Marianne Cwynarski, who has done a brilliant job throughout the pandemic and continues to do so.

And, of course, I thank you, Mr Speaker. Without your leadership, guidance and kindly wisdom, this House would not be the great place that it is. So, ho, ho, ho, merry Christmas and a happy new year!

**Thangam Debbonaire:** Oh, Mr Speaker, that “Ho, ho, ho!” will go into my memoirs.

I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. On behalf of the official Opposition, I join him in wishing all staff who work for Parliament and for MPs—he made a fantastic and comprehensive list—a peaceful, safe and joyful Christmas. I look forward to seeing everyone in the new year.

I pay great tribute in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and his fantastic staff, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and her staff, welcoming them to my small but perfectly formed shadow Leader of the House team. I thank the team of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton for their wonderful contribution.

It is astonishing that this week, we voted to place sensible limits on crowded indoor events with hundreds of people by having a crowded—whatever window-opening the Leader of the House did—indoor event with hundreds of people. We could have had proxy voting, or any of the voting that we had last year. It was not necessary, and it was reckless when we know that we have more cases of covid on the parliamentary estate every day. That is gone, but will the Leader of the House please commit to preparing for a return to covid-safe practices in Parliament, if necessary, so that we can do our democratic duty without risking the health of the staff to whom he has just so warmly paid tribute?

Four years ago, the Government promised a draft Bill to establish a public register of beneficial ownership of overseas legal entities. That is an important anti-corruption and anti-tax avoidance measure on which the Government have delayed and delayed. The fourth anniversary of that promise came and went last Friday, despite the Prime Minister’s recent words. When will we see that important Bill?

That is not the only Government commitment missing in action—I have a Christmas list. In October, the Prime Minister said that the draft Online Safety Bill would have completed all stages by Christmas; then it was just Second Reading; and then it was just some vague commitment that the Bill would be presented at some point. I welcome the statement later by the prelegislative scrutiny Committee, but will the Leader of the House please give us the early Christmas present of just an indication of a date?

Secondly, Ministers seem to have developed an unacceptable habit of prioritising pressers over Parliament. Despite the Leader of the House’s efforts, answers to written parliamentary questions and ministerial correspondence are still too often inadequate, delayed, or frankly just missing. Will he please ask his Cabinet colleagues once more for a new year’s resolution to do better?

Thirdly, after rail betrayal, we have still not heard from the Secretary of State for Transport, despite a commitment to update us before the end of the year on the cost-benefit ratio analysis for the revised High Speed 2 line. I know he is here, because there were Transport questions this morning. How will he keep that promise before the end of today?

Fourthly, as the urgent question just now reminded us, it seems from a leaked email that there will be a 10% cut to Foreign Office staff. This morning, the *i* newspaper provided some evidence for that, in what appeared to be a copy of that email to staff. The Prime Minister yesterday seems to have confused staffing with aid, but the Minister who has just left his place, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, seemed to deny that it was a 10% cut without saying that there was no cut. A yes-or-no question to the Leader of the House: will there be a cut? Does he or anyone else know how much that cut will be, because the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa did not say that there would not be a cut?

This week, we learned of the all-too-predictable humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, yet the Government chose to row back even further on their promised, but again missing-in-action, Afghan resettlement scheme. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to come to the House to give a statement in the new year on what action the Government will take?

Finally, a Christmas Brucie bonus question round. First, on rule-breaking parties in No. 10, this is a second chance for the Leader of the House to tell us exactly who assured the Prime Minister that no rules had been broken, and when they said that. Secondly, on the ministerial code, why did the Prime Minister say that he did not know who paid for the Downing Street refurbishment when the Electoral Commission found messages to Lord Brownlow that seemed to show that not only did the Prime Minister know, but he was the one apparently asking for the donations? If the Prime Minister is found to have inadvertently misled the House or Lord Geidt, what actions does the Leader of the House think he should take?

On the cost of living, does the Leader of the House understand the struggles that working people face this Christmas with Tory tax rises, risks to jobs in hospitality and other industries, and everything costing more? I am sorry to end like a Grinch, but this is a Government who ignore the rules, break their promises and have lost their grip. It is working people who are paying the price, and if I have to be the Grinch, I am afraid it is the Leader of the House and his colleagues whom I hold responsible—but merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I wondered how long our Christmas cheer would last. I see the hon. Lady, in the absence of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who has generously and kindly sent me his apologies for missing this session, has had to model herself on him and become as grumpy as he sometimes is. Let me try to answer her multiplicity of questions, though the ones that really relate to the Foreign Office were answered in the previous half hour, and the hon. Lady was here, so may I suggest she listens, when she is sitting in the Chamber, to the brilliant answers given by the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, who answered everything she could possibly have wanted an answer to and more?

Let us go back to why we have to be here. Being here, in a democracy, is important. The work we do in Parliament is crucial. Holding the Government to account and ensuring that people can express their views is fundamental. The House authorities have been brilliant in running a covid-safe environment. There are tests

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

available, and people have been testing themselves like billy-o, as is their responsibility, in order to try to keep us all safe. The idea that we should run away from—our democratic duty is for the birds. We should be here, we should be proud to be here, and we should not want to run off home; I think that would be most unsatisfactory.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) asks about the online harms Bill. When Bills do not have prelegislative scrutiny, she says, “Well, why haven’t they had prelegislative scrutiny?”, and when they do, she says, “Why is the Bill taking so long?” That is trying to have her cake and eat it, which we know is a difficult thing to do in terms of physics. I am delighted to see here my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who chaired the Committee with such distinction; the online harms Bill is much improved, and will be much improved after consideration of the work he has done. I am sure it will be brought before Parliament at the appropriate time for us to debate it.

Then the hon. Member for Bristol West then mentioned railways. For the past couple of weeks, we have thought she was a reformed character—indeed, we thought she might be becoming a Tory, because she kept on referring to taxpayers’ money. It made the Government side of the House really excited—joyful even; Christmas spirit was arising—that there might be someone coming over to us. But alas, this week it is back to socialism, and £96 billion of taxpayers’ money is pooh-poohed—pooh-poohed, Mr Speaker!—when in fact it is an enormous amount of money, and will be the largest amount of expenditure on the railways in real terms since the Victorian era, that era that we look back to with fondness and admiration for the great things that were done.

Let me go on to all this stuff about what may or may not have gone on in Downing Street last year. That is being looked into by the Cabinet Secretary. I ask the hon. Lady to have a little patience, and to wait and see what comes from the Cabinet Secretary.

On the cost of living questions, yes, inflation has risen by 5.1%. I have a feeling that the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee will meet, or announce its decision, at midday, so we are moments away from the witching hour when we will know what the Bank thinks it necessary to do. The hon. Lady may have forgotten that her socialist friend, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, gave the Bank of England independence on monetary policy in 1997.

Finally, let me conclude on my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. We are lucky to have such charismatic, incisive and thoughtful leadership; we are led by one of our truly great leaders. I am proud of the fact that he is leading us, and I see that the hon. Lady looks pretty proud too, though that is hidden behind her mask.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): If the Leader of the House had been in our Lobby on Tuesday, he would not have had to open the window; we were much more socially distanced. In my experience, crowded Lobbies full of Labour and Conservative MPs are seldom a very good thing—I am talking about not covid, but political damage. May I give the Leader of the House this early Christmas present? I am trying to be helpful.

If we have another vote on a measure that is inimical to civil liberties, and that the Conservative party in its heart profoundly opposes, can it be a free vote? Then only one in 10 Tory MPs will vote for it, and nine out of 10 Labour MPs will vote for it, and the Government might get the same result. My next question to him is important: will he guarantee that if the Government decide to impose any further restriction on civil liberties, even over the Christmas period, Parliament will be recalled?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** First, I note my right hon. Friend’s helpful advice. Of course, whipping is not a matter for me as Leader of the House, but I would argue that the Government are given leadership by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who is one of the most civil libertarian leaders that the country has had in well over 100 years. He really believes in the liberties of the people of the United Kingdom and that people make better choices for themselves than the state makes for them. It is this leader who has felt obliged, in the face of a health crisis, to make the decisions that he has. How pleased we should be about that. Just think: we could have had a socialist leader joyfully taking away our liberties and loving locking us down. The Opposition would have kept us in complete lockdown forever and ever—in saecula saeculorum, as my right hon. Friend will quote regularly. This leader—our Prime Minister—has always restored freedoms as quickly as possible and taken them away with reluctance. We should be pleased about that.

As regards recall, Parliament is always recalled when there is a really serious matter to discuss. Sometimes, when we go away on a Thursday, the matter that leads us to be recalled is not what we were discussing when we went away but events that overtake what we were discussing at the moment of our departure. The Government will always listen to calls for recall if the issue is serious enough.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I bring in the SNP spokesperson, may I also wish everybody all the best for Christmas and a peaceful new year? I thank all the staff of the House for the tremendous job that they have done. Without them, the House would not work, so it really is appreciated. I must also put on record a big thank you to my team in Speaker’s House. I hope that the Speaker’s secretary is soon fit and well and back at my side, but I have certainly got good cover at the moment. Just to gently tease the Leader of the House—I have a very good working relationship with him—he is absolutely right that this House matters, so let us make sure that Ministers come here to be held to account.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I join the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House in sending Christmas wishes to all staff of the House, all Members and, in particular, my team in Midlothian and the SNP Whips Office, who have done a remarkable job over the past year. It has been a difficult time for many, and we are lucky to have so many willing staff really looking to go that extra mile to support all of us in everything that we do. So many in this place and beyond—I think of all the public services and local government—have done so much over the period. With that, I wish everyone a happy Christmas and a good new year.

On how this place works, though, I agree with the shadow Leader of the House that we must look at how we can take account of the current covid situation. I know the Leader of the House's views about the need for us to be here, but we must look very closely at how we work, because having so many Members in one place at decision time while trying to maintain the highest possible level of safety for Members is challenging. Beyond that, with the rise in cases of the new covid-19 variant, a number of Members will have to be isolating because of either contact or having tested positive. This week alone, a significant number of Members have had to withdraw questions—three SNP Members had to withdraw questions from Prime Minister's questions—so an extraordinary number of Members will be affected. Apart from my personal thought that it would be far better if we were much more flexible anyway, we need to look closely at that, given that Members will have to isolate and the significant impact that that will have on how the business of the House can be conducted, even with testing in place.

The earlier Treasury statement seems to have caused a wee bit of confusion. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) asked about the questions sent by the Scottish Finance Secretary Kate Forbes to the Chancellor to get clarity about Scottish Government funding, and he did not receive a sensible answer, if I can put it that way. If the Leader of the House can do anything to encourage a response from the Chancellor to Kate Forbes, that would be very much appreciated.

Finally, let me take advantage of the season's goodwill to make a pitch for my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). Come on! He should be the right hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. Can we please do what we can about that? With that, I wish the Leader of the House all the very best in the inevitable leadership contest that is upcoming.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. What he is asking for for the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is not within my gift, but may I wish him particularly a very happy Christmas. He is a great sparring partner in this Chamber, even if somewhat grumpy at times. He is also very good company privately. I hope that he is in good health.

The key issue that the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) asks about is funding for Scotland. It is worth pointing out that there is: a £4.6 billion per year average funding boost to Scotland through the Barnett formula; the announcement of a more than £170 million levelling-up fund for eight Scottish projects; £42 million for Scottish fisheries; £1.9 billion for farmers and land managers over the next three years; £1.5 billion for 12 city and growth deals, including more than £500 million for Glasgow, £300 million for Edinburgh, £125 million for Aberdeen, and £53 million for Inverness and the highlands; and new funding for the British Business Bank to establish a £150 million fund for Scotland. This is really important in showing the strength of the United Kingdom together and the amount of money that, as a United Kingdom, we have been able to afford, which is in addition to the £1.7 billion that the Scottish economy has benefited from, dealing with 620,000

self-employment scheme claims and 910,000 jobs that have been on the furlough scheme. This country is better and stronger together. Working together, having the strength of the UK taxpayer, has been essential to the benefit of Scotland, but also to Wales, Northern Ireland and England. We all benefit through our United Kingdom.

As regards issues around the workings in this House, every effort is made to ensure that this House is working safely. We are in the same place as the nation at large. We are people who need to come to work, so we are therefore right to come to work. As the hon. Gentleman will remember, at the very beginning of the pandemic, when there was a total lockdown, we did things differently, but I do not think that that is the current situation.

**Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** Yesterday, we heard the sad news that Linda Whetstone had passed away. Linda dedicated her life to spreading the ideas and values of freedom and classical liberal economics around the world. She was not in frontline politics, but, through the Atlas Network, the Institute of Economic Affairs and Mont Pelerin Society, undoubtedly had a huge impact. As the director-general of the IEA said yesterday:

“We may not see her again, but we can be grateful for the incredible legacy she leaves us.”

Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House join me in sending condolences to Linda's family and friends, particularly her brother, Mike Fisher, and pay tribute to this champion of freedom?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes, of course, I pass the condolences of the House and my own condolences via my hon. Friend to Mike Fisher. It is indeed with great sadness that we mark the passing of Linda Whetstone. She was chairman of the Atlas Network, an international association of free market think-tanks, and of the Network for a Free Society. She was the daughter of Sir Anthony Fisher, co-founder of the Institute of Economic Affairs, which has to be said is one of the finest think-tanks that there is and an absolute bastion of good sense and thoughtfulness. She followed his legacy as a dear friend of the IEA and member of its board of trustees. She has also served as a board member and president of the Mont Pelerin Society. My hon. Friend quoted what Mark Littlewood said about her, and that shows how greatly she was admired by an important institution in this country, and we pray for the repose of her soul.

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

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** As always, I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I wish you, all Members across the House and all staff in the House, a very happy Christmas, a very peaceful and restful Christmas, and a very happy new year in 2022? We all deserve a better year.

I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and let him know that we already have pre-allocations for every Thursday in January if we are awarded the time, but that includes, as he has already announced, that important debate on 6 January on Russian grand strategy and a very heavily subscribed set of applications to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day on Thursday 27 January. They are in, and we have pre-allocated that if we are given the time.

[*Ian Mearns*]

I could not help noticing that when we return on Wednesday 5 January, the sitting in the Chamber will begin at 2.30 pm, as it does on Mondays, but the Westminster Hall sitting will begin at 9.30 am, which will make life extremely difficult for those travelling from further afield. Could the Leader of the House look at that as a matter of urgency? I am sure it is just an oversight, but I am thinking particularly of our colleagues in Scotland—members of all parties—who will find it difficult to travel given that 4 January is a bank holiday in Scotland.

Since the inception of the hotel quarantine policy, I have received a number of complaints from my constituents who have been forced to pay significant sums, often at short notice, to return home via hotel quarantine. I readily accept that on public health grounds, but I had hoped that 10 months after the introduction of these measures, the Government would have taken steps to ensure that all hotel quarantine stays were fit for purpose. Many of those constituents who have had no choice but to pay those significant amounts of money have been given very poor provision in return. I was incredibly disappointed to learn just this week that a number of my constituents staying at different hotels around the country have paid thousands of pounds for the privilege, and are still being left without adequate food, access to exercise and fresh air, a laundry service, or even fresh bed linen. One couple paid £3,500 for 10 nights, and had to put up with that sort of provision. May we have a statement so that a Minister can come to the House to explain just what the Government will do to rectify this dire situation? Our constituents are being ripped off and neglected.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I had a feeling, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you were getting a bit nervous about the over rate. I am worried that we will be fined our total match fee if the over rate becomes too slow, so I shall try to be quick, but I thought Members might like to know that the bank rate has risen from 0.1% to 0.25%, although they have all probably heard it already on their Sky News alerts.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for his thanks for the business that has been provided. I very much noted his request for a Back Bench debate on 27 January, Holocaust Memorial Day; I heard that loud and clear. I know that the debate will be well subscribed, so I will do my best to prevent statements, as I did last year, but I cannot guarantee that, because sometimes there is a strong demand for a particular statement.

On the hotel quarantine policy—which, as the hon. Gentleman fairly pointed out, was necessary on public health grounds—I would say to him that if he has particular issues involving individual constituents, I will happily help, and will take them up for him through my office.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I, in passing, thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating the debate on Russia's grand strategy? A proper debate on the subject is long overdue, along with a fuller understanding as we respond to the Ukraine crisis and the other crises that the Russians are provoking.

May I issue a plea not for more or fewer restrictions in the House, but for the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission to use as their lodestar the question of consistency? Public confidence in whatever measures the Government are recommending rests on consistency between what people see their leaders doing and what they are being asked to do. If we have to introduce further measures—whether or not Parliament is recalled—we should ensure that our practices here are consistent with what we are asking other people to do.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The fundamental point that we must always bear in mind is the absolute, unequivocal constitutional right of Members to attend Parliament. Whatever rules there may be—we saw this at the height of the pandemic, when people were saying that they were not allowed to travel under restrictions in certain parts of the United Kingdom—there is no law, unless we were to legislate for it specifically, that could ever change the fundamental right of a Member of Parliament to come to Parliament. It is essential to our constitution. Whatever laws there are, that right must be retained.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): On 23 September, following an urgent question on the energy crisis, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy offered to meet me to discuss a particularly complex constituency case. The meeting was scheduled for 16 November, only to be cancelled at the last minute. The rescheduling was pushed to another Minister, who has still not found time in his diary. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could make a statement to remind his colleagues of their responsibilities and to encourage them to keep commitments made in the Chamber.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I will take that up immediately after. A meeting with a Minister that was asked for on 23 September and that was agreed to ought certainly to happen well before Christmas. I can only apologise to the hon. Lady. It is quite easy for people who want to come and see me—my office is very nearby and they can just bang on the door, which sometimes short-circuits cumbersome interlocutors who get in the way of arranging meetings.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Knaresborough is a thriving market town in my constituency, but nevertheless all its bank branches have closed. Next year, however, it will be one of five locations in the country where a shared banking hub will open. That new initiative will be funded by the major banks and will be open for personal and business customers. As banking changes, it is good that the financial services sector is working with other top companies such as LINK on what the next generation of service provision will look like. Can we please have a debate about local banking services to enable us to explore that new initiative and perhaps give some publicity to that positive news?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I heard about that initiative on the news. It is really important, because the Government recognise that access to cash remains important to millions across the United Kingdom. I think that the report I heard, although I would not swear to it, said that 5 million people still depend almost entirely on

cash. The UK has committed to legislating to protect access to cash, but it is impressive that the banks are doing it for themselves. It is a private sector initiative, prior to any legislation being brought forward, that will help people have access to cash. My hon. Friend is right to try to give it further publicity so people know that it will happen. I encourage him to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for a further debate on the subject, because I think it will command the interest of many hon. Members on both sides of the House.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I welcome the Government's appointment of Baroness Hallett to chair the inquiry into covid-19, and the Prime Minister meeting his own deadline for a change. Much remains unknown about the inquiry, however, so can the Leader of the House tell me when we can expect the terms of reference to be published, when the inquiry will formally begin and when the Government will begin to meaningfully engage with the bereaved families?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the appointment of Baroness Hallett. I looked her up yesterday and I believe that it is her birthday today, so I take the opportunity of wishing her many happy returns.

The inquiry is set to begin its work in spring 2022. It will be established under the Inquiries Act 2005 with full powers, including the power to compel the production of documents and summon witnesses to give evidence on oath. Additional panel members will be appointed in the new year to ensure that the inquiry has access to the full range of expertise needed to complete its important work.

The inquiry will play a key role in examining the UK's pandemic response and in ensuring that we understand what happened in the past so that we can do it better in future. The Prime Minister will now consult Baroness Hallett and Ministers from the devolved Administrations on the precise terms of reference for the inquiry and will publish them in draft in the new year.

Those most affected by the pandemic, including those who have sadly lost members of their family and their friends, must have an opportunity to play their proper role in the process. Once the terms of reference have been published in draft, Baroness Hallett will take forward a process of public engagement and consultation, including with bereaved families and other affected groups, before the terms of reference are finalised. The hon. Gentleman is so right to ask that their concerns are taken into consideration, and I am glad to be able to confirm that they will be.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Rural crime should be treated as serious organised crime. I am proud that Rutland and Melton is home to more than 400 farmers, but they are suffering from livestock theft, trespassing, hare coursing equipment theft, and even vegan militias that go on to dairy farms and carry out crimes against dairy farmers. That is why Leicestershire needs a rural crime strategy and why 101 operators should have training on rural crime issues. Can we please have a debate in Government time to show how much it matters to the Government to tackle rural crime and how seriously they take it?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** As I also represent a rural constituency, I know how serious these matters are and the effect they have on people's livelihoods and wellbeing. My hon. Friend is lucky, as am I, to live in an area represented by a Conservative police and crime commissioner, who will be able to set the priorities of policing for the people of Leicestershire. This is something that we should be doing more about, but we are doing more about it. Police forces are recruiting. We have another 11,000 new officers, and Leicestershire is leading the way: it has 13% more officers than it had in the year ending March 2021. Things are going the right way, and more police are going to be on the beat, but it will really be up to crime commissioners to set the tone for their forces and to emphasise the importance of tackling rural crime.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): First, I thank the Leader of the House for his correspondence in relation to my question last week, although I am disappointed to report that there is still no statement forthcoming from the Department for Education on the future contract for the Turing scheme.

The Leader of the House will be aware of this morning's urgent question on business support, when the Economic Secretary to the Treasury indicated that the Chancellor is meeting with business groups this afternoon. The variant is putting businesses everywhere at risk, and the House needs to be prepared to give support. How can we tell our own local hospitality businesses that we broke up as they went under? The Government can choose to recall Parliament if they want, so will the Leader of the House therefore advise whether he will use all the measures available to him, including virtual participation, to recall Parliament to pass the right emergency measures to support our hospitality businesses?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is inevitably difficult for hospitality under the current circumstances. It is worth reminding people of what has been done already, with £400 billion of taxpayers' money spent on dealing with covid and helping businesses with rate relief and a lower VAT rate. Obviously the Government are aware of what is happening. There was a statement made earlier and the Chancellor has said he will have meetings. As regards recalling Parliament, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). Parliament is always recalled when there is a matter of sufficient seriousness to recall it, but forecasting what that will be is not always a successful effort.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am delighted to be able to wish a very merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone here. However, there are some people who will not be celebrating quite as much this Christmas as many of us would hope: taxi drivers. Those who are driving for Castle Cars in Tonbridge or Relyon in Edenbridge have already seen a dip in trade over the past few days, and I know that many of those running cab firms have also seen an impact on the wider use of their business. This is not just a matter for some incredibly hard-working small businesses; this is actually a very important matter, as I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree, for those of us with rural communities, because those taxis provide a much-needed service for getting many people to hospitals and to visit family and for keeping the community together. Could he look for time in the Government's

[Tom Tugendhat]

agenda to have a debate on this matter, because we not only have that pressure, but the pressure of the rise in interest rates, which he announced to the House? That will put an increased impetus on many to seek an income that will be chasing a higher cost of living.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I think Disraeli called London taxi drivers “the gondoliers of London”, and I certainly take that view myself. They are fantastically hard-working and entrepreneurial, as are taxi drivers up and down the country. They are almost all individual small businesses. They work the hours that are required of them and they provide, as my hon. Friend says, a service that is absolutely essential. I encourage hon. and right hon. Members to support the taxi trade as far as they can. While I am at it, I encourage the Mayor of London to be nicer to London taxi drivers and not spend his whole time trying to make their lives more difficult by closing roads to them.

There are obviously difficulties at the moment with people cancelling things because of the pandemic, but I am confident that taxi drivers will be able to get through this. They have got back to work, and trade did pick up prior to the omicron variant coming through. We should thank them for what they do. As regards a debate, I think that will be more in the bailiwick of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns).

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): The covid pandemic has shown us the importance of our parks, green spaces and country parks everywhere in getting us out in the fresh air and for recreation. The public health benefits cannot be ignored. So I wish to congratulate my constituents who have formed the Save Our Derwent Walk Country Park campaign group, a non-partisan group seeking to protect the Derwent Walk Country Park in the face of a “Restoring Your Railways” bid. So may we have a debate in Government time about the importance of green spaces and parks to public health?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady continues a noble tradition in this House; I believe it was William Pitt the Elder, known as “the Great Commoner” for his devotion to this House, who called the London parks the “lungs of London”. That was right then and it is right now; open spaces are so important. What the hon. Lady says about the Derwent Walk Country Park support group is really important; people really mind about their country parks. I suggest that in the first instance this is a matter for an Adjournment debate, but I congratulate those in her constituency who, on a cross-party basis, are working for the health and wellbeing of all her constituents.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Over the summer, we had a spate of thefts of catalytic converters in my constituency. That is bad enough for constituents, but just recently this has turned into an even more ugly situation, with gangs of thugs arriving with baseball bats and forcing residents to give up their cars and catalytic converters on pain of severe bodily harm. May we have a statement in Government time on what action the Government can take to prevent the sale of precious metals from catalytic converters for cash? If they are registered, it is much more challenging for these thugs to carry on their evil practice.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend makes a good point, and this was an issue with scrap metal some years ago. Her Majesty’s Government are committed to tackling the theft of catalytic converters. We are working closely with the police and motor manufacturers, through the national vehicle crime working group, which was established by the National Police Chiefs’ Council and is overseen by the Government’s Crime and Justice Taskforce, to see what more can be done. In December 2017, the Home Office published a review of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013, which I happen to remember because it started as a private Member’s Bill that was given very widespread support. How that Act is enforced is key to tackling this crime.

I can give my hon. Friend some good news: the British Transport police, through the national infrastructure crime reduction partnership, has conducted two national weeks of action, which resulted in 64 arrests, 1,400 stopped vehicles, and 1,000 catalytic converters and other items of stolen property being recovered. However, these threats of violence are appalling and I encourage people who see anything like that happening to dial 999 as a matter of urgency.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I echo what the Leader of the House said in praise of the staff of this House and, in particular, the cleaners? When I was first elected to public office in 1991, on Cardiff City Council, I took my mother Beryl, who is now 92 and who was a cleaner, to Cardiff city hall to see its opulent marble splendour. Her reaction to that was to say, “Imagine having to clean this.” We should all bear that in mind in politics. So may we have a debate on the vital work that cleaners do, often in the wee hours of the morning, to clean our hospitals, shops and offices, and even to clean up after No. 10 Christmas parties, and on the need not just to praise them, but to pay them decent pay so that they are the ones who do not have to go in search of second jobs?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** May I pay a warm tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s mother, Beryl, for ensuring that her son is always so well turned out, among other things? Clearly, he is calling to mind the fact that cleanliness is next to godliness. I am so grateful that he has picked up on this point, as I was really impressed, and to some extent felt rather guilty, that the people working throughout the pandemic in this House every day were the cleaners, who are probably among the lowest-paid in this House. We should be grateful to them. I can also reassure him that by raising the national living wage to £9.50 next year, and giving nearly 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year through our cut to the universal credit taper and the increase to work allowances, exactly the sort of people we are trying to help will be helped.

**Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): Building safety is very important to me and my constituents. I have been shocked and dismayed by some of the revelations coming out of the building products industry, and since March I have been calling for a tax on that industry to pay partly for cladding remediation. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the timing of the Building Safety Bill, and does he agree that we need to find a solution for leaseholders?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question and note very carefully her concerns about this important Bill; I will make sure that they are passed on to the Secretary of State. The Building Safety Bill remains a clear priority for the Government. It will deliver a world-class building safety regime and help drive up standards across the industry, built on the principles of safety and proportionality. We will proceed with the remaining stages of the Bill as soon as practical. I appreciate that this issue is of great concern to many Members, who have pressed it in the House on multiple occasions.

While we legislate to bring forward important reforms, homes are being made safer. The Government are delivering the building safety fund, providing an unprecedented £5.1 billion of taxpayers' money to remove unsafe cladding from high-rise buildings, and delivering the waking watch relief fund, which helps reduce the use of costly interim measures. As my hon. Friend knows, the Secretary of State is looking at our work in this area to ensure that we are doing everything we can to protect and support leaseholders, and he will set out his proposals in due course. However, as I said, I will make sure that her comments are brought to his attention.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Yesterday, I met Ali Mushaima on day 21 of his hunger strike outside the Bahraini embassy to raise the cases of his father, imprisoned opposition leader Hassan Mushaima, and Bahraini academic Dr Abduljalil al-Singace. These cases have received unanimous international support from bodies such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, but this Government remain silent. Can we have a debate on political freedom and human rights in Bahrain? Given the UK's close relationship with Bahrain, when will Ministers meet Ali and issue a statement urging their allies to unconditionally release Hassan Mushaima and Dr al-Singace?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this case and Ali Mushaima's hunger strike. The Government attach great importance to freedom of religion or belief and view it as a fundamental human right. Her Majesty's Government remain deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world. We remain committed to the global effort to support the most vulnerable members of society, irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity. I am not informed about the individual case, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman would expect me to be, but I will certainly ensure that it is passed on to the Foreign Office shortly after business questions, and will ask that a detailed response be sent to him.

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): May I extend a happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all the team who so ably support you?

Today, the average price at the pumps in Dudley and elsewhere is about £1.48 a litre. That is about 29p a litre higher than in 2015, since when crude oil has been at today's price. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is an unjustifiably high price to pay for ordinary hard-working working-class people, the self-employed and businesses? Does he also agree that oil giants should stop taking advantage of everyone in this way, and will he please agree to a debate on the matter?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This is the great fiddle of litres, is it not? That works out at not far short of £8 a gallon. When we put it like that it sounds even more shockingly expensive than in metric measures that make it sound unduly low compared with the real cost. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to be concerned about this. The price has risen very significantly over the past year, and we have seen the latest inflation figures. It is important and fair to motorists that, when the price of crude oil falls, it is passed through the system as quickly and as fairly as possible. It is worth pointing out that the freeze on petrol duty has had a very significant benefit for people in this country—I think it saves them on average £15 every time they fill up with fuel—although saying it could be much worse is not necessarily a great comfort to people when they fill up at the pumps.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all Members and staff of the House.

I know that the Leader of the House will agree with me about the importance of the local high street, especially in these uncertain times. At the beginning of December, I visited the owners of Steve's Cycles on Chanterlands Avenue and Macs Tools on Newland Avenue in Hull, both of whom have really gone above and beyond in the service they have provided to their local community while also dealing with the effects of the pandemic on themselves and their families. Could we have an urgent statement from a Minister about the support that will be available to small family businesses while we are under plan B?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** First, I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her election yesterday as Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, which shows how widely respected she is on all sides of the House.

I agree with the right hon. Lady about the importance of local high streets, and may I pay tribute to those at Steve's Cycles and Macs Tools? I obviously do not know them individually, but I know what she means because, across our constituencies and across our high streets, we all have businesses like those that are doing their extra bit for their communities, and they deserve thanks and praise. There was an urgent question earlier today about the support that is being made available. There are funds available to help high streets and to help regenerate high streets, which councils have been bidding for, so there is a great deal of activity in this area. However, if the right hon. Lady wants an Adjournment debate on the specifics of her own high street, I suggest she refer that to Mr Speaker.

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): Merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all the staff here.

Friends of mine in business are saying that the ability of the Information Commissioner to levy large fines is having some unintended consequences, in that cyber-gangs are stealing businesses' data and threatening to publish it if a ransom is not paid. That ransom is almost always less than the potential fine they might get from the Information Commissioner, so to save both money and embarrassment, they are quietly paying it. I appreciate that there is no easy answer, because data breaches are serious, but can we have a debate on the regulation in this area, because none of us wants to see more money going to criminal gangs?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** No, indeed. My hon. Friend is right to raise this, and he poses an interesting question. The Information Commissioner's Office has published guidance on responding to a cyber-security incident. It uses information on reported data breaches to identify data security incident trends, and it will share information with the National Cyber Security Centre and other law enforcement or cyber-crime agencies, as well as with other regulators, such as the National Crime Agency or the Financial Conduct Authority. Personal data, as my hon. Friend says, has to be processed securely, but if somebody is having to pay money to a criminal gang to avoid a sanction, and thereby avoids a sanction that would be higher than the bribe to the criminal gang, that just has the effect of encouraging criminality. As he says, the solution is not a simple one.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I recently raised the case of my constituent, Mr Lafferty, involving Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs maladministration that led to an unexpected tax liability, and I am grateful to the Leader of the House for his intervention on Mr Lafferty's behalf. Jim Harra, the permanent secretary, has written to me describing the case in detail and defending the ongoing imposition of interest, but failing to mention that it was HMRC's fault in the first place. Can the Leader of the House please arrange for his previous letter to be forwarded to the Financial Secretary, as the person who should deal with it, so that we can at least look at removing the interest from the amount due?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has at least received a reply from Mr Harra of HMRC. I view my role as trying to get replies for hon. Members, rather than necessarily being able to get them the replies their constituents want—that is not always within my capabilities—but I will of course pass on the correspondence to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all House staff and people on the estate a merry Christmas.

I listened earlier to the urgent question on Government support for business. After Tuesday's vote and the characteristically confusing messaging from the Prime Minister, untold damage is being caused to our entertainment, hospitality and taxi industries. It is clear that neither the Prime Minister nor the Chancellor understands the urgency of this situation. Throughout the pandemic this Government have consistently introduced restrictions without publishing clear guidance for the industries affected and have provided support only after desperate pleas. Will the Leader of the House use the Christmas break to reflect on and discuss with his colleagues how a good Government should operate so that they come back in the new year ready to govern responsibly?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady entirely mischaracterises what the Government have done. There has been over £400 billion-worth of support for businesses, including the furlough scheme and the recovery loan scheme. There has been a terrific amount of support to businesses. There has also been the reduction of VAT initially to a 5% rate to help businesses, the suspension of business rates, and business rates then going to a discounted level. This has been fundamental support for employment

and businesses, which is why we now have more people in payroll employment than we did before the pandemic began. The other point she makes shows a fundamental difference between the socialists and the Conservatives. The Government make rules, laws are passed that people have to obey, and then people make decisions for themselves. Conservatives believe that people are capable of making better decisions for themselves than they are by being lectured and nannied directly by the state. The socialists always want to control every aspect of people's lives, and that is not a good way to operate.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): Merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On 7 September, the UK Government announced the new national insurance levy to fund social care. Following this, on 8 September, HMRC issued an email to my constituent Robert Millar saying positively that the draft legislation would have this effect or that effect, even though it was not approved by this Parliament until 14 September. Can we have a debate on whether it is normal for Government Departments to jump the gun on parliamentary debate and voting in this way, and, if it is, whether that practice shows sufficient regard and respect for parliamentary process?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's question, because it would be improper for a public body to take a vote in Parliament for granted. On the other hand, it would not be improper to use the word "if". Without seeing the precise details of the correspondence, I would be very reluctant to criticise anybody, but I would say very clearly that no public body should pre-empt Parliament.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Happy Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The covid bereaved families across the country will not be having a happy Christmas; it will be a really difficult time. I welcome the appointment of the covid-19 inquiry, just in time before Christmas. I listened carefully to the Leader of the House's outlining of the process going forward and welcome the fact that in January there will be an appointment of panel members and the terms of reference will be drawn up. The bereaved families community is very interested in those terms of reference, understandably. Can I have an assurance that there will be engagement with the bereaved families community before the drawing up and publication of the terms of reference, and on how that will happen, particularly with the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Let me make this as clear as I possibly can. Those most affected by the pandemic, including those who have sadly lost friends and family, must also have an opportunity to play their proper role in the process. Once the terms of reference have been published in draft, Baroness Hallett will 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 hope that gives the hon. Lady the assurance she is looking for.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all the House staff.

Christmas should be an exciting and fun time of year, but for too many children it simply is not. Since my question in the House last week, we have heard of another tragedy involving a child. I therefore ask the Leader of the House not if, but when, will we have a debate in this House about the safety of children, the overloaded casework of social workers, and the revolving door of leaders of children's services, which also adds to the risks?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** There is so little that I can add to what I said last week to the hon. Lady. I am grateful to her for raising these just tragic, tragic cases. I read in the newspapers about this little baby, and it is unbelievable that fellow human beings can behave in this way. I am sympathetic to her request for a debate. She knows that I cannot promise debates like this in Government time. They are essentially matters for the Backbench Business Committee, but it is a matter of importance to us all and anyone who has any emotion within them when these terrible things happen to those who are so entirely unable to defend themselves. When the state fails to defend the defenceless, it is perhaps the greatest failing of the state.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** May I, too, wish you and all Members of the House as well as the staff a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

This Saturday 18 December marks International Migrants Day. While asylum law in the United Kingdom makes provision for persons fleeing persecution because of their religion or belief, the sad reality is that many of those who are in desperate need of refuge simply cannot access these pathways. For example, Pakistani Christian

Sawan Masih is in hiding with his family in Pakistan after being accused of blasphemy. As we approach Christmas, will the Leader of the House issue a statement of support for those Christians around the world who cannot celebrate without fear of persecution and join me in sending a petition to grant Sawan Masih and his family safe asylum in the United Kingdom?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As always, he brings the most important issues to the attention of the House. I understand that the International Migrants Day theme this year is harnessing the potential of human mobility. This country has a long tradition of welcoming those in need of sanctuary, and this will continue. Since 2015, we have resettled more than 25,000 people seeking refuge from persecution across the world. As I said earlier, freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right. No one should feel unable to celebrate Christmas or any other holiday for fear of being persecuted. It is clear that many Christians have faced awful persecution in Pakistan, suffering spurious accusations of blasphemy. At Christmas it is vital that we try to ease their plight. I will pass on the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

On the specific case that he raises, I am afraid the hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot give commitments in individual cases, but I am always willing to help right hon. and hon. Members get answers from the relevant Departments.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Leader of the House for that statement, and I add my best wishes to right hon. and hon. Members and House staff.

## Point of Order

12.47 pm

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I gave best wishes to Mr Speaker earlier, and I pass them on to you as well, for the coming season.

This is a time of year when many of us expect and think about the presents that we might get at Christmas. It is also a time when local councils up and down the country wait with concern to find out how much the Government intend to give them in revenue support and other grants for next year. It is an even more important time this year due to the covid pressures on councils, on top of an already difficult financial situation.

We would normally have an oral statement in the House today about local government finance for next year. We did not have one in 2019, for particular reasons associated with EU legislation going through, but every other year we have had an oral statement. This year, we are supposed to be getting a written statement, although it was still not in the Vote Office when I checked. Can it be anything to do with the fact that a story appeared in the *Local Government Chronicle* the other day that said:

“The Government is thought to be in ‘active discussion’ with between 20 and 30 councils about offering extra financial support to help them avoid effective bankruptcy”?

That is a serious situation. Very clearly, the Secretary of State ought to be before the House today explaining his financial proposals for next year and allowing Members to question him about them. As that is not the case, once we have had a briefing from the scrutiny unit, the Local Government Association and others, I hope there may be an opportunity after the recess to find a way to get the Secretary of State to come to the House to answer questions about this important matter.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. The Government have not informed the Chair of any intention to make an oral statement on the local government

financial settlement. He is correct to say that, in recent years, there has normally been an oral statement on the matter. The Leader of the House has heard that point and I am sure that he will take that back and that we will return to this, perhaps as the hon. Gentleman said, in the new year.

**Mr Betts:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I can write to Mr Speaker as well to see whether he can help in finding a way to get the Secretary of State back after the recess.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is well aware of all the routes that may be pursued through Mr Speaker to address some of the points that he has made.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The media today is full of stories relating to interest rates. Has there been any indication that an oral statement on this issue will come from the Chancellor or Ministers at his Department? I am ever mindful of the food price increase in my constituency of 20% and the energy price increase of 30%. The cost of living has increased by 5.1%, so these things will have a great impact on each and every one of us across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Perhaps I am wrong to think this, but given the importance of this issue, I thought that the Chancellor's Department would make a statement today. Has there been any indication of that?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I understand that interest rates have been increased. Again, the Leader of the House will have heard that point. The hon. Gentleman just asked a question to him, so he might have chosen to ask him that at that point. The hon. Gentleman has now had two bites of the cherry and the Leader of the House will have heard his comment.

## Online Safety Bill

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT ONLINE SAFETY BILL

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** We now come to the Select Committee statement. Damian Collins will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call him to respond to those in turn. Front Benchers may take part in questioning as well. I call the Chair of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill.

12.52 pm

**Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con):** May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all Members of the House and all members of House staff a very merry Christmas?

Following the publication of the Joint Committee's report on the draft Online Safety Bill on Tuesday, I want to take this opportunity to inform the House of its publication and the key themes that we have addressed. The Joint Committee was formed as a pre-legislative scrutiny Committee by order of this House and the House of Lords on the last sitting day before the summer recess. Anyone who has been involved in a Joint Committee of this nature knows that, because it has a clear deadline to hit, it is inevitably a race against time. Although we had the summer recess to plan and prepare for our hearings in September, we effectively had around 11 to 12 sitting weeks, including some of the conference recess, to produce our report. The report was concluded on the last day of the Joint Committee's existence last Friday and then published on Tuesday this week.

Before addressing the report, I thank the members of the Joint Committee, who worked so hard throughout the inquiry and produced a unanimous report. It was genuinely a very collaborative process to which all members of the Joint Committee contributed. To have completed that and produced a unanimous report without division among the members shows the strength of feeling and the importance and strength of working closely together through that.

I also thank the staff of the Joint Committee, particularly the Commons Clerk, David Slater, who led a very impressive team of Clerks and advisers. Without their herculean efforts, we would not have completed the project within the timeframe that we were given by the Government. The Joint Committee held oral evidence sessions with 50 witnesses, received 200 written evidence submissions and produced a report of 192 pages, totalling around 60,000 words, so it was a huge effort to produce what I think is an important report.

The draft Bill has been of considerable interest to Members of the House. We organised a roundtable to enable Members to contribute directly to the work of the Joint Committee, as well as other roundtables working with the University of Cambridge and the London School of Economics. The high number of written evidence submissions also demonstrates the high level of interest in this issue. For those of us who have been following the debate closely over a number of years, the

Bill feels like it has been a long time coming. I think that is because it is anticipated and wanted, but we should still remember that this Parliament will be the first in the world to introduce such a comprehensive piece of legislation to create regulation for the online world. Other Parliaments in the world are discussing that and the European Union is discussing it, but we have gone further. When the Bill is introduced before the end of this Session, as I believe the Government intend, it will be the first such comprehensive Bill in the world to seek parliamentary approval.

In addition to my thanks to the members and the staff of the Joint Committee, I thank the ministerial team and the Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, as well as the Bill team officials, with whom we had a very constructive and open dialogue throughout the inquiry. It was good to see them stand by the commitments Ministers made that they wanted the scrutiny process to be open and genuine. The Bill was by no means locked down when it was given to us and the Secretary of State herself has gone on the record to say that she expects the Bill to change as a consequence of the work of the Joint Committee. That is good to hear and important.

The reason the Bill has been so anticipated is because the online world has become central to our lives. It is where we work. It is where we stay in touch with our family and friends. It is where people play games. It is where people get their news and information. It has become our public square. But people are rightly asking, "What kind of place is that public square?" It is increasingly an environment where, for too many people, it is the forum in which they are abused. It is the forum in which their vulnerabilities are targeted and exploited. It is the forum through which hate speech has become normalised. We are seeing a disturbing trend of that affecting offline behaviour, too. People are more likely to be subject to attacks because of their race, sexual orientation or gender. People are more likely to become victims of scams and frauds through the internet. People are more likely to receive egregious disinformation that could damage public health, or interfere and undermine the integrity of elections. We see that taking place around the world, but we experience it at home as well. As Members of Parliament, we are often subject to abuse. We often have constituents who come to us who have been the victims of abuse. They say, "What can be done about this? What can the social media companies do?"

There is a presumption that the law applies equally in all areas, but I think we all know that the law being applied online has become a very difficult place. It is difficult to get social media companies to take responsibility for the systems they have created and the activity of the users on their platforms. We have to recognise that the Bill does not just address content moderation. We are not just looking at harmful and abusive content that has no place on the internet; we are looking at the systems that create an audience for that content, too. The bigger area of harm is done by the amplification of content on these platforms. If abuse was being directed by someone shouting in the street, ultimately that person would probably be arrested and moved on, but it is difficult to control it when that voice of abuse is being amplified to millions of people. That is what the systems of social media companies do and they should be accountable for those systems. They have designed and built those systems to hold the engagement of users,

[*Damian Collins*]

because the more often they visit the site, the longer they are on it and the more engaged they are, the more valuable they are to the platforms and the more advertising they can sell.

Too often, the platforms work on the assumption that all engagement is good, that engagement in itself is a positive metric, because people would not go on the platforms if they were not enjoying it. But we all know the nature of addiction is that people return to things they know are harmful and damaging to them. It was interesting to hear Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower who gave evidence to the Joint Committee, cite research from within Facebook showing how vulnerable teenage girls were suffering heightened anxiety and depression as a consequence of their experience of using Instagram, but felt, at the same time, that they could not not use the platform because all their friends were on it and they could not miss out. It is disturbing not just to see those problems discussed in cold research documents, but to know that the companies themselves know that and are still not doing enough to act on it.

That is why we now have to move to a regulatory regime for social media companies, big search engines and other big online firms, where it is the laws passed in this Parliament that apply and terms of service written in silicon valley are not the guiding principle for regulation. The Joint Committee's central recommendation for the online safety Bill is that Ofcom, as the independent regulator, should set mandatory codes of practice, based on existing laws in this country, that will deal with the worst kinds of illegal content, such as child abuse and content that promotes and glamorises terrorism. We should also bring into force the equalities legislation—people expect to be respected and not to be abused because of their race, sexual orientation or gender, and that should apply online as well. The regulator's job should be to set the standards for the companies and explain to them what they are expected to do.

We greatly welcome the work of the Law Commission in suggesting specific new offences, particularly in respect of knowingly sharing false information on social media platforms with the intention of causing physical harm or severe psychological harm to other users. The commission suggests making the promotion of self-harm, which is a particular problem with vulnerable younger users of social media platforms, a specific new offence. We also should create new offences around cyber-flashing. The law needs to keep up to speed with new technology, and people who use new technology to abuse others should know that the law will come for them.

The report also addresses the issue of anonymity, about which many Members have spoken. Anonymity can play an important role in helping victims of abuse and people who speak out against oppressive regimes to speak truth to power when they might be fearful of doing so in their own name, but it is also used by some as a shield to abuse others, in the belief that anonymity will protect them and allow them to commit acts for which they would otherwise be charged and face prosecution. The Committee believes that in such circumstances people should be traceable: we should be able to identify people who abuse others and a request from law enforcement to get that information readily and speedily should be complied with. There should be

traceability and people should know that, even if they do not post in their own name, they can be traced if they abuse others and break the law.

Age assurance is another important issue that the Committee considered. We are particularly concerned that children can be vulnerable and can access content—particularly adult content—to which they should not have access all too easily on the internet. Companies are not doing enough to address that, so we say that they should have effective age-assurance policies in place.

Finally, the key principle that underpins the Bill as it stands and that we think is very important is that the regulator has the power to inspect and audit the companies. We will not be reliant on self-declared information and reports from those companies but will have the ability to get for ourselves information that is too often supplied to the outside world only by brave whistleblowers and investigators who speak out about it. We should have access to that information and know on what basis the companies make decisions, and the companies should be liable for big fines if they do not comply with the legislation. We agree with the Secretary of State that individual named directors should also have liability if the companies are in flagrant breach, and there should be redress for individual users.

I encourage all Members to add the report to their Christmas reading list.

**Dean Russell (Watford) (Con):** First, as a member of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill, I thank my hon. Friend for his words.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill will have a profound impact on real people—especially vulnerable people and young children—like Zach Eagling? He has cerebral palsy and epilepsy and was targeted with cruel flashing images, as many people have been on social media to trigger seizures, cause harm to their lives and potentially even risk death. The Bill will, in its own small way, not only help those people but make sure that people like Zach are supported through our support of the proposed Zach's law. It will also make sure that tech firms are held to account for the harm that they may do.

**Damian Collins:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has spoken out strongly on the targeting of people with epilepsy both in Committee and elsewhere. That is a clear example of how some people can be badly abused: people who are known to have epilepsy are deliberately targeted with flashing images that the sender knows will trigger a seizure and cause them physical harm. This practice should have no place on the internet and the companies should be working to stop it and close it down, and they should make sure that action is taken against the accounts that do it. That is one of the clear recommendations in our report and I completely agree with my hon. Friend on that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Just a little reminder: Members should ask questions.

**Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the report, along with all who served on the Committee. I will certainly add it to my reading list for the Christmas recess.

I have a specific question on whether the Committee was able to look at the issue of pimping websites, on which individuals, often trafficked, are advertised for sex. They make large amounts of money for websites such as Vivastreet. Did the Committee feel able to make any recommendation about how that should be covered in the draft Online Safety Bill?

**Damian Collins:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and I congratulate her on her election as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

The Joint Committee received evidence on this important issue, and we discussed this and other issues with Interpol. We believe that the general principle behind the online safety regime should be that illegality should not exist in these online spaces and communities. If links to such sites are being shared by special interest groups on broader social media platforms, the companies should have a responsibility to address that. The basic principle is that encouraging illegality should not have a place on social media.

**David Johnston (Wantage) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend and his Committee for their work on this issue. Does he agree that, as big tech companies can analyse our search histories to suggest purchases and can even read our messages to suggest a reply, it is ludicrous for them to say that the sorts of things we want them to do to keep people safer are too difficult?

**Damian Collins:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These companies are engaging in mass surveillance and data gathering to target their users with ads. The same technology and data they use to target people with ads and other information, such as recommending content through recommendation tools, could be used to stop bad things happening. We discussed this throughout the inquiry and in the report. He is right that it is not that it cannot be done; it is that there has not been a requirement in law for it to be done, and that there has been no regulator with proper investigatory powers checking whether the companies are actually doing it.

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab):** I welcome the Committee's work. I am not a member of the Committee, but I have followed its work closely. I know how important it is, and I will certainly make this report my Christmas reading. I am glad the Committee looked into age assurance, but how convinced is it that the social media platforms can put age assurance measures in place? How much will it have to be enforced? Is it possible to stop the appalling increase in the amount of porn being seen by such young children?

**Damian Collins:** I agree with the hon. Lady. We address this issue in the report, which goes further than the Bill currently does by saying that the companies do not seem to have an effective policy. They have to deliver on this, and there are various technologies they can use. The Bill does not mandate a particular technology, but it says there should be an effective system, and it will be the regulator's job to check.

The regulator can also insist on much better research on a platform's audiences. Ofcom says that 50% of 10-year-olds are on social media. I believe the companies know this and can identify it. Indeed, reports have shown that some advertising is targeted at people who

are known to be under 13. Again, the regulator should have access to such data and information to bring more light to this problem.

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** One of my gravest concerns is about the way in which disinformation is being used as a weapons system by our adversaries, and particularly hostile states. How much did the Committee consider whether this Bill is an appropriate legislative vehicle to tackle such activity by hostile states? I am not convinced the hostile states Bill will allow us to tackle it adequately, because we are under threat every single day in the online arena due to disinformation from hostile states, which is a major concern.

**Damian Collins:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are familiar with disinformation from Russian agencies targeting voters during elections in countries around the world. It is an offence in UK electoral law if a foreign entity buys adverts targeting UK voters, and the report says that the offence should apply. The platforms should not accept such ads, and they should take them down once it is identified that they have been placed by a foreign state with hostile intent.

The regulator also has the role of applying a company's own terms of service to its systems. A lot of the activity my hon. Friend describes is being done by networks of inauthentic accounts. These accounts should not exist on some platforms, and therefore they should be taken down. The regulator should use its powers to identify fake accounts and networks of fake accounts.

We took evidence on this from another Facebook whistleblower, Sophie Zhang, whose job was to identify such foreign state interference and such networks of inauthentic accounts, which again have no place on platforms such as Facebook.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** I welcome the Committee's work. Like many Muslims, I face Islamophobic racist abuse online, which has skyrocketed during the pandemic. Did the Committee consider the definition of Islamophobia suggested by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims?

**Damian Collins:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In the report, we address the issues of Islamophobia, antisemitism and any form of religious hatred, and that should be considered one of the harms that the regulator can take enforcement action on against the companies.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on the report. One of the challenges relates to where these social media companies are based, where their servers are and where international accounts are held. What account has the Committee taken of how we can control the international aspects, as well as the national aspects, of harmful social media content?

**Damian Collins:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The rules apply to content that is accessed by users in the UK; it does not matter where in the world that is coming from. For example, we have recommended in the report that frauds and scams should be within scope, including when they appear in adverts as well as in organic postings. Google is already working with the Financial Conduct Authority to limit people advertising

*[Damian Collins]*

unless they are FCA-accredited, but what about organisations elsewhere in the world that are not accredited? They should clearly be in scope as well. We are asking the companies to take responsibility for content that is accessed by users in the UK, and they will have to comply with UK law if we set that law. We can see how this is already being done in legislation elsewhere in the world, and we can set laws, even for global companies, that have to be applied for users in the UK.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): With reports that children as young as nine years old have smartphones, that the internet is essential to their learning and that their homework is almost all done online from the age of six, can the hon. Gentleman tell the House what will be done to filter out the trash to ensure that those smartphones do not turn into a tool to disrupt our children's healthy development?

**Damian Collins:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the impact on children. Important work on this has already been done and this Government have passed legislation on the design of services, which is known as the age-appropriate design code. In our report and in the Bill, we stress the importance of risk assessment by the regulator of the different services that are offered, and of the principles of safety by design, particularly in regard to services that are accessed by children and products that are designed for and used by children. I spoke earlier about the regulator's power to seek data and information from companies about younger users and to challenge companies whose platform policy is that those under 13 cannot access their content and ask whether they have research showing that they know

people under that age are using it but allow them to keep their accounts open anyway. Keeping children off the systems that are not designed for them, and from which they are supposed to be deliberately excluded, could be an important role for the regulator to take on.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): I add my own party's grateful thanks to the Committee for the diligent and thorough way in which it has gone about compiling the report, and we hope to see that feed through into the legislation that eventually comes forward. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with the enhanced role that is envisaged for Ofcom, it is all the more important that, whoever heads Ofcom, the regulator can act as a genuinely independent regulator?

**Damian Collins:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are also grateful to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), who is a member of the Committee. He is not in his place today. The question of the next chair of Ofcom was not one that the Committee was asked to consider. The Government will run a process, and the DCMS Committee will hold a hearing for the pre-appointment scrutiny of the new candidates. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that online safety will be a big job for Ofcom. The world will be watching, and we have to get the legislation right and ensure that Ofcom has the resources it needs to do the job. It believes that it has, and that it has the powers to do the job, but it should be an ongoing role for this House to scrutinise that process and ensure that it is being run effectively.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Chair of the Joint Committee for that statement. We now come to the Backbench debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

# Backbench Business

## Christmas Adjournment

1.13 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

This is the first pre-recess Adjournment debate to take place without Sir David Amess. It will not be as good a debate because he is not here. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] His performances at these debates were always remarkable: a lesson for every Back-Bencher, and an ideal opportunity to raise matters far beyond his own constituency and across the world and to raise every item of his casework with Ministers prior to our going on recess. We mourn his loss and, on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, we have asked the Leader of the House if the pre-recess Adjournment debate in the summer can be retitled the Sir David Amess debate.

I start with some issues local to my constituency. The first is that we have had a number of planning applications to build new homes on station car parks. At Canons Park station, the Mayor of London applied for planning permission to build high-density, multi-storey blocks on the station car park, vastly reducing the amount of car parking space available for commuters. I am pleased to say that Harrow's planning committee turned down the application, and the planning inspector, after the appeal by the Mayor, rejected it comprehensively. It is the most comprehensive rejection of a planning application I have ever read. That is good news for my constituents.

On Stanmore station, I have raised in many pre-recess Adjournment debates—my hon. Friend the Minister is smiling already—the issue of the required lift. The Mayor of London has applied for planning permission to build all over the station carpark, which accommodates 3,500 cars. I am pleased to say that the Harrow Council planning officers proposed that the council's planning committee reject the application, and the committee unanimously turned the application down—but now, of course, the Mayor of London, who is the applicant, has called it in, so that he can determine whether it should be allowed to go ahead. I have asked Ministers to keep a watchful eye on this matter and, if the Mayor is marking his own homework, to call it in and hold a proper independent planning inquiry before anything else happens. That is important.

I also raised at business questions the epidemic of thefts of catalytic converters from cars in my constituency. Over the summer, I was given information about many of the thefts, and took action with the local police to try to combat this epidemic. Sadly, as I mentioned, recently we have had gangs of thugs with baseball bats turning up at people's offices and homes, in broad daylight and late at night, threatening residents. If residents come out to examine what is going on, the thugs say to them, "Do you want to try it? I've got my baseball bat and I'll sort you out."

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The thefts of catalytic converters across the country is seriously concerning. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Home Office and Crown Prosecution Service need to treat this as organised crime by gangs, and that it should be dealt

with by the Serious and Organised Crime Agency? Only then will we deal with it, because these catalytic converters are stolen from Melton, or from his patch, one day and are in Poland the next.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Clearly, we need action. The problem is that the catalytic converters can be removed in two minutes, so by the time the police arrive, it is too late and the thieves are gone. The Government need to take action to ensure that precious metals that are taken from catalytic converters cannot be sold for cash. That is one of the first measures that must be undertaken. There must also be prompt action by the police to prevent these thugs from continuing to commit crimes.

I turn to points about immigration casework. My constituency is the most multi-ethnic in the country; there is someone from every country in the world, every language under the sun is spoken, and every religion on God's earth is practised in my constituency. There are two points I am concerned about. One is that the Afghan refugee settlement scheme still is not published. I am dealing with 656 constituents with relatives who think or hope that they and their family will qualify under the scheme, but still no scheme is available. That is causing angst and anxiety among many of my constituents.

In my casework, I see a huge increase in the number of biometric residence permits being sent to the wrong address after lengthy delays by government. It is an outrage. I understand that Home Office officials are working from home and that they have backlogs in their work, but when they get basic addresses wrong, particularly after they have been emailed to them, it is doubly bad, and that may encourage criminal gangs to get hold of those cards.

My constituency office has also experienced a huge increase in benefits casework. I do not know about other colleagues, but when the pandemic first struck, my office dealt with roughly 250 cases a month that required my intervention. Last summer, we peaked at 1,300 such cases in July; there were a further 1,300 in August, and cases are still running at 856 a month. I am therefore glad that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is doing the right thing and increasing the money in our budget for staffing; I welcome that decision.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Like the hon. Member, I have a very diverse constituency, and I deal with a heavy immigration caseload. Does he share my disappointment about the fact that delays in those cases are getting worse and worse? How does he feel about the Afghan scheme, which we still do not have, so many months down the road? It is also being narrowed down. How is that acceptable?

**Bob Blackman:** I agree that it is not acceptable. I think most hon. Members across the House will be sympathetic to people fleeing Afghanistan. We rightly made promises and commitments, but unfortunately the resettlement scheme is still not available. As I said, that is causing a lot of angst and anxiety.

I turn to two local issues that I am sure are seen across the country. There has been a huge spike in concerns about planning matters, as well as concerns about fly-tipping and potholes, which are appearing once again in Harrow. Those potholes need to be fixed,

[*Bob Blackman*]

because they cause damage and all sorts of unnecessary and unacceptable problems on the roads. We have also seen a large spike in casework about illegal houses in multiple occupation—not registered ones—which, when they spring up, give rise to a lot of noise, nuisance and antisocial behaviour. I am sure that I am not alone in experiencing that.

I turn to important international events. Sir David Amess was a great supporter of the Iranian opposition, the Maryam Rajavi and the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which represent a democratic alternative to the current regime. In Iran, there are huge demonstrations against the Government, which are not well publicised. In many cases, people are being severely oppressed with terrible consequences across the piece. It is time that Ministers in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office took action. We know that discussions with Iran are ongoing over the so-called nuclear deal—I think they may not be going anywhere—but we must be clear with Iran about its attempts to foster terrorism and further incursions around the world; that is vital. The appeals of the terrorists who tried to bomb the 2018 NCRI will come up shortly in Brussels, and I hope that FCDO Ministers will have a lot to say when those appeals are dismissed. I was at the conference, and I would not be here now had the terrorists succeeded. Many others from across the political spectrum are in the same situation.

We will commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January in this place. We are still looking to build an education centre and museum adjacent to this mother of Parliaments. I look forward to that happening, and to further progress in the new year.

On Equitable Life, the Government have still failed to pay the total sum of £2.6 billion to the people who are owed that money due to the worst case of Government maladministration that there has ever been. I will continue to press them to pay that money—that debt of honour—because more than 1 million people have still received only 22% compensation. Given that we have compensated other schemes to the level of 80%, that seems grossly unfair to all those who have suffered loss.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Let me back up my good and hon. Friend. I think the Government promised to sort out Equitable Life a long time ago, did they not?

**Bob Blackman:** My right hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right. It was almost the first piece of legislation passed in the House when the two of us were elected in 2010, and it still goes on; some 11 years later, we have not supplied full compensation.

As hon. Members will know, one of my great passions is combating homelessness and rough sleeping. At this time of year, we must think of those who are forced to sleep rough. I played a major part in the Kerslake commission on homelessness and rough sleeping during covid-19, and I supported the Government on the Everyone In project, and on every other aspect of enabling people to be taken off the streets and into appropriately secure accommodation, yet Housing First has still not been rolled out across the country. It would build the network of support that rough sleepers need to rebuild their life. I hope that in the new year, we will see a big step forward on that.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman's points about Everyone In, but over the last 10 years, pre-pandemic, rough sleeping doubled under Conservative Governments. Everyone In showed that there was political will to get everybody off the streets. Why can we not have that outside a pandemic as well?

**Bob Blackman:** Under Everyone In, the Government took 37,000 people off the streets. At the time, the rough sleeping accounts were of the order of 8,500. That demonstrates the problem of data on people who are sleeping rough and on people who have been assisted. We also know that 300,000 people across the country are sofa surfing at any one time; they are tomorrow's rough sleepers.

At the same time, debts for private rents are increasing. The Government are slowly but surely allowing the courts to decide that evictions can take place, which will mean that more people will become homeless and will potentially be on the streets. Action is required. My solution is to build between 90,000 and 100,000 new social homes every year that people can actually afford to live in, as opposed to overpriced accommodation that they cannot. That is one of the things that has to take place.

The challenge before the Government—the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have agreed; everyone seems to agree—is to abolish the Vagrancy Act 1824. There is an opportunity to do precisely that in the House of Lords. The Government need to accept the amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill—if I have got that in the right order—proposed by my good friend Lord Best, which would remove that Act from the statute book. I hope that we will see action on that.

I will turn to the important all-party parliamentary groups that I am involved in. I had the opportunity to visit Azerbaijan during the short November recess. I met the President and my MP counterparts in Baku. I also visited the newly liberated lands, and joined the celebrations of the Azerbaijani people on their recovering Karabakh from Armenia. I look forward to the redevelopment of that region enabling everyone, across the piece, to live in peace and harmony. It is British company Chapman Taylor that is involved in the restoration of Susha, one of the biggest centres, which was destroyed by the Armenians during their occupation. I had the pleasure this week of joining the ambassador of Azerbaijan when he presented his credentials, virtually, to Her Majesty the Queen.

There is a whole host of other matters that I would like to raise in this debate, but I know that time is pressing and that many other Members wish to participate. I end by wishing you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the speakers, all the staff and all the people who keep us safe a very happy Christmas, and, above all else, a happy, peaceful, prosperous and healthy new year.

1.30 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Even with the spectre of omicron hanging over us, this time of year is very special. For the first time in two years, I have been able to join communities across my constituency as they switch on their Christmas lights. These community events are deeply heart-warming,

and it is wonderful to see local families enjoying the lights. I wish all my constituents who celebrate it a very merry Christmas.

Like colleagues across the House, I find it particularly enjoyable visiting people and places across my constituency, and I remain immensely proud to represent Manchester, Gorton.

I recently visited Circus House in Longsight as it celebrated its 10th anniversary and heard about the fantastic work that it has done over the past decade. I was given a crash course in circus tricks, and I recommend that hon. Members try their hand at spinning plates or juggling—it is not too dissimilar to our day-to-day job.

Visiting schools is always a particular highlight of my work. Ahead of COP26, I joined Year 6 at St Margaret's Primary School to discuss climate action. The pupils were full of insightful questions and ideas. They gave me hope that the future of our planet was in good hands.

Black and Asian community groups, such as the Caribbean and African Health Network and Longsight's Bangladeshi Women's Group, continue to make an incredible contribution to life in Manchester, Gorton. It was a pleasure to meet them and to learn more about the outreach work that they have undertaken to engage their communities in the vaccination drive.

This year marks the end of an era in the City of Manchester, as Sir Richard Leese departs as leader of our council after 25 long and dedicated years. Richard's contribution to our city has been immense, and I have been proud to work with him over the past two decades. He leaves big shoes to fill, but I have no doubt that his successor, Bev Craig, will be a force to be reckoned with. I also know that Manchester is immensely proud to have its first woman and first LGBTQ+ city leader.

Another era in this House ends, too, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has said, as we sadly will not hear from Sir David Amess in this debate, in which he always enjoyed participating. He remains sorely missed by colleagues across the House.

I want to take this opportunity once again to plead with the Government to support my campaign to secure the long-term future of the covid memorial wall. Each person who left a message to a loved one on the wall, including myself, wants an assurance that the covid memorial wall will be allowed to remain.

Finally, like other colleagues, I want to finish by thanking all my staff—Tom, Alice, Yasmine, Sam, Naeem, Anisa and Josephine—who continue to make my life easier. This pandemic has been so difficult for all of us over the last couple of years, and my staff—and those of other Members—have done a tremendous job as our workload has more than doubled. May I also say merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to Mr Speaker and to all the team for the wonderful work that they too have been doing?

I hope that everyone enjoys a restful recess, and has a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

1.35 pm

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), whose predecessor was of course a friend of many of us on both sides of the House. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member

for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I support his suggestion that the next set of Adjournment debates, in the summer, should take place in memory of our great friend Sir David Amess, who, although he was not my geographical parliamentary neighbour, was my parliamentary neighbour at 1 Parliament Street for nearly a decade.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a matter of great importance to us in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, which has caused the deepest possible sadness. My young constituent Louis Watkiss, aged 12, tragically died at the Snow Dome on the indoor ski slope in Tamworth on 24 September this year. Louis's brave parents, Natalie and Chris, are here with us in the Gallery to hear what I am going to say. They are bravely working tirelessly to promote the wearing of helmets to ensure that no other family suffers as they are suffering today.

On 24 September, Louis attended a friend's birthday party to go tobogganing. A terrible collision occurred on the slope. The full extent of Louis's injuries was not apparent until his dad Chris arrived at the scene. He saw Louis still receiving treatment from the paramedics, but he was pronounced dead shortly afterwards. Both parents had 20 minutes to lie with Louis at the bottom of the indoor ski slope. I am not going to rehearse the details; the torment of those last moments will live with Louis's parents, and other relations, for the rest of their lives.

The coroner's post-mortem report states that Louis suffered a head injury with fractures involving the base of his skull which caused his death instantly. Although such deaths from tobogganing and sledging activities are rare in the United Kingdom, research has shown that children are more vulnerable to brain injury and even death from collisions. That is because their skulls are still developing and strengthening, and are not fully protective of the brain within until they reach the age of 17 or 18. Research referenced in Louis's report from the coroner states that the most prevalent method for reducing traumatic brain injuries is the use of a helmet. Helmets have been shown to reduce the risk of head, neck or face injuries in skiers, particularly those under the age of 13, as well as the severity of injuries.

There is clearly a case here for mandating the use of helmets for snow sports activities in the United Kingdom. To my surprise, although the issue of cycling helmets for minors has been raised in the House—most recently, with great eloquence, by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) when he introduced a private Member's Bill last year—I believe this is the first time that this particular issue has been raised.

In recent years, some indoor snow sports venues have made it obligatory for participants to wear helmets, but it is entirely voluntary, and there is currently no guidance or legislation in place for operators. Looking abroad for guidance and relevant examples, we see that in New Jersey, in the United States, it has been compulsory since 2011 for minors under the age of 17 to wear a helmet if participating in such sports. In Europe the debate about the use of helmets is certainly active, and I submit that it is time for, at the least, a serious discussion in the United Kingdom. There is little doubt that a helmet would have saved Louis's life. His death was not only tragic, but wholly avoidable.

It is clear that Louis was a remarkable young man, talented, bright and intellectually curious. He was in his second year at Plantsbrook School in my constituency,

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

and among his many interests and skills was playing the saxophone, reaching grade 5. That included playing in a jazz ensemble at Symphony Hall in Birmingham.

I believe the House should consider whether or not we now take the significant step of changing the law to insist that in these and similar circumstances children's heads should be protected by a protective helmet. If there are issues with either introducing legislation, or bringing forward an amendment to a Home Office measure or other relevant Bill to provide for this change, perhaps it may be possible to secure rather more rapidly a code of practice entered into by all operators of indoor snow sports and similar activities, which would mean that operators insist on such protective headgear when people are taking part in these activities.

**Bob Stewart:** This is appalling. May I ask my right hon. Friend whether the Tamworth ski slope now insists on children wearing a helmet when they operate there?

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend raises an important point. My understanding is that it does, which shows the House and, in particular, those in my constituency who are now campaigning for this move, how quickly such a measure could be introduced.

As we gather for Christmas, I am deeply conscious of this tragedy, and of the suffering of a lovely family, of a wider school and music community and of Louis's friends and relatives, who will be remembering his life and mourning his loss at this terrible time. I know that the House and the Minister will want to send Louis's parents, Chris and Natalie, George and Louis's grandparents our deepest sympathies. They have every right to expect and believe that this House can be relied upon to look seriously and speedily at a safety measure that the family so bravely and so compellingly want to secure, which will stop other families from facing the grief and misery that they are suffering at this awful time for them.

1.41 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today, and for all the opportunities I have been given to speak by all the Chairs this year. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I have a running competition to see who will get in first, and he would be here today but for his being in Westminster Hall at the moment, leading on another debate. I also wish to thank the Leader of the House for seeking to answer my endless list of questions in the most charming of ways and always making sure to follow up after business questions. Most importantly, let me say a huge thank you to all the House staff, from those in the Libraries to those in the kitchens, from Committee Clerks to Doorkeepers: you are the glue that keeps this place together, and we would not be able to carry out our duties without every one of you.

This has been a big year, and when I reflected on how I wanted to approach my speech today one person immediately came to my mind, Sir David Amess, whom the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned in his speech. Sir David was a seasoned professional when it came to these debates. He loved to recognise all the good people, organisations and charities

in Southend West, and I know colleagues from across the House will still be feeling his absence. I hope we can emulate his enthusiasm and dedication to our constituencies today.

It has been a very busy year in this House. The excitement and privilege of securing a private Member's Bill has still not lost its novelty. I am incredibly honoured to have brought such an important piece of legislation, no matter how small or technical, to this Chamber. I am grateful to my colleagues who helped me secure its Second Reading, and am excited to usher it through the remaining stages of its passage next year. It is a similar feeling of excitement and privilege when we manage to secure a good outcome for our constituents. This year, that has been especially true in a particular case I had. I refer to a constituent who is a veteran of the armed forces and whose time in live action has left him with scars, physical and psychological. He and his family have become well-known to my office, and it was a shared delight when we were able to successfully liaise with the Ministry of Defence to resolve a pensions issue that had been rumbling on for more than a year. It was just one of a few issues that we continue to help him find a resolution to. It has been a journey that has opened my eyes to how difficult a return to civilian life can be. I must express my gratitude to the many people who helped along the way, including Veterans First Point, which works tirelessly to provide a wide range of services for veterans in Scotland, and the veterans champion at our local health board, who has helped so much with casework.

I could not speak about the armed forces without mentioning an event that saw an avalanche of casework for every one of us—the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I do not want to labour points that have been made so many times already in this Chamber over the past few months, but I must recognise the toll that has taken on us and our staff, but most of all on the constituents who have been desperately trying to help their families left behind. I think many of us are on the same page about how events played out. I would add “and how they continue to play out”, but the Government have become somewhat quiet on the matter. That has not gone unnoticed.

A constituent of mine has decided that he can no longer wait for the support promised by Ministers. He told me this week:

“I feel that the Government isn't working on any Afghan cases at the moment and it doesn't seem like it'll be high on their agenda anytime soon.”

I raised this case with the Foreign Office and the Home Office in August and unfortunately did not hear back. I raised it again in the Chamber in September, and the Secretary of State for Defence promised to investigate it. Despite repeated chases, we have not heard back.

I do not want to spend too much time focusing on the lows, though; despite a difficult year, there is much to celebrate. This autumn, Glasgow hosted COP26, which I was lucky enough to attend. I can proudly attest to the inspiration that it sparked in my constituency, which lies a little outside the city centre. The children from St Charles' Primary School decided that they wanted to encourage people to travel greener, so they sought to make Newton station more attractive. Not only did they create a beautiful growing space for plants, but they were out and about chatting with the community and undertaking random acts of kindness.

We have also seen a huge increase in volunteer litter pickers. I have mentioned before the Cleaning up Cambuslang campaign, which saw volunteers collect 26 bags of litter for 26 days in the run-up to COP26. Bonnie Blantyre and pals are another fantastic group working on everything from litter picks to creating and maintaining community gardens. SOC—Supporting Our Community—is another I have to pay due recognition to. The group in Hillhouse are active and well known, supporting people of all ages and pulling together lots of community events.

Blantyre Soccer Academy opened a community garden of its own, which is open to anyone in the community free of charge. It is a beautiful space for quiet reflection and has been put to good use by locals. The provision of these spaces cannot be taken for granted; they have become ever more essential to our mental wellbeing.

That brings me nicely to other groups working to better our mental health. I met the head of the local Samaritans branch this year. It was quite a heavy conversation, but it was invaluable. The work the volunteers there do is emotional and sensitive, but I know we are all grateful for their resilience. They provide not just the crisis line, but a whole host of prevention work, educational resources and funding. The Hamilton branch has had volunteers that have committed decades of their lives to the cause. I admire them greatly and wish them good luck for the future.

I also met the charity Place2Be, which takes a holistic “whole school” approach to mental health. It recognises that to help children, the whole system must be in a good headspace. I was grateful to hear that the charity is currently providing some counselling in schools in my constituency, and I encourage all colleagues to get in touch with it to find out more.

The Beacons, with hubs in both Blantyre and Cambuslang, is a commendable organisation. It helps people through their recovery from addiction and is staffed by volunteers. Crucially, it actively seeks volunteers with lived experience, who have a unique insight into addiction and how to help. It is an organisation that helps people rebuild their lives and take back control.

There are so many organisations I want to highlight that are real pillars of the community. I will start with the big name—the citizens advice bureau. Our local branch has taken many a phone call from my office and from constituents. The team there are fantastic, working away at helping people out of difficult situations. Food banks, too, have become a necessity across the UK. It is a sad reality that they should need to exist at all, but I am very grateful and thankful that they do, and I pay tribute to Rutherglen, Cambuslang and Hamilton food banks in my constituency for the work they do. They took the brunt of the universal credit uplift cut and did a sterling job.

My constituency has also seen an increase in new residents’ and tenants’ associations, which is excellent. I have liaised with quite a few and the community spirit is outstanding.

I have just a few more people to thank. First, I thank those at South Lanarkshire Council for their continued engagement on casework matters and for making themselves available. Next, I thank the community councils throughout my constituency that work so diligently for the communities they represent and achieve so much. Finally, I thank my

staff, Lynne, Laura, Gillian, John and Kim, who have made it possible for me to support my constituents and represent them here, for their hard work. All MPs know that they could not carry out their role without the support of their hard-working staff.

I am not quite finished yet, as I have been lucky enough to land the final Adjournment debate of term after this debate, but I am very much looking forward to returning to business in the new year. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the Speakers and all my colleagues a very good and well-deserved break, and a happy Christmas when it comes.

1.50 pm

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** Last week I took part in a Back-Bench debate on Bosnia, and I warned that the situation there was deteriorating sharply. My great concern was that very shortly we would see again conditions like those that started the Bosnian war in the 1990s. But over the past seven days the situation has become even worse. Now the leader of Republika Srpska has set a short timeline of six months before he intends to quit the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thus I feel I must warn the House again about what could easily happen in Europe, and within two hours’ flying time of London. The situation in Bosnia today is extremely fragile and very dangerous. It could be likened to what happens when you pick up a lemonade bottle. It looks calm. Wriggle it around a bit, put it down; it still looks calm. Undo the top, and everything spews out. Well, in Bosnia the lemonade top is getting very loose. Having been the first British UN battalion group commander in Bosnia in ’92, what happens in Bosnia matters to me. It is not just me. The Army lost 57 soldiers in the last Bosnian crisis, and they died trying to save people’s lives.

At one stage, I witnessed what might happen again if Bosnia is allowed to split up. The Vance-Owen plan of 1993 allocated various regions of Bosnia to the various factions. Cantons were designated primarily as Serb, Croat or Muslim. Immediately the plan was announced, various sides took matters into their own hands. In particular, I watched as Bosnian Croats attacked Bosnian Muslims to take immediately the areas allocated to them by that political plan.

**Afzal Khan:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his moving speech and his tremendous work on this issue, not only here as a parliamentarian but when he served in the British Army. I share his serious concern about what is happening in Bosnia. I hope we can all agree that when the history of our generation is written, Britain must stand on the right side of history. Does he therefore agree that the UK must ensure that there is no return to the violence and suffering of the past and that we secure the gains made for the people of Bosnia?

**Bob Stewart:** The hon. Gentleman, who should not be called an hon. Friend but is, is right. I am going to come to that.

In the fighting around Gornji Vakuf, no quarter was given to man, woman or child. I recall watching tank fire destroying house after house. I remember watching people being mown down.

[Bob Stewart]

I tried for several weeks to stop the fighting, often by trying to get ceasefires. All day I sat in rooms trying to get ceasefires, often by putting my wonderful soldiers in the middle of a battle between two sides, which is a very dangerous thing to do. As an aside, may I pay tribute to my escort driver, Lance Corporal Wayne Edwards, who lost his life on 13 January 1993 in the fighting around Gornji Vakuf? I had agreed to him being used to escort three women through the fighting—through the town—and I still feel guilty, because I had the responsibility of giving him the order to do that. Wayne was shot dead through the front of his vehicle while trying to get three women who needed to get hospital to a place of safety. Truly, Wayne Edwards gave his life so that others could live. That is about as noble a soldier's death as there can be.

The main lesson of my tour in Bosnia was that it cannot be split up and it must remain a coherent state. My time there occurred in perhaps the most torrid period of the Balkans war, but I left the country two years before an appalling genocide. This was without doubt the foulest atrocity of the war. It occurred in July 1995 at Srebrenica, a small town in eastern Bosnia, where 8,372—as far as we know—men and boys were murdered by the Bosnian Serb army in what was undoubtedly one of the worst acts of genocide since the second world war.

**Mr Mitchell:** I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is making an extremely compelling speech. I have been in the recent past to Srebrenica, and I stood in stunned amazement at the extraordinary example of man's inhumanity to man. Will he emphasise to those on the Front Bench that this is a region of the world where Britain has deep roots, real knowledge and the ability to help move the dial with many of the disputatious parties? Will he take this opportunity to emphasise that to the Foreign Office? There is a big role for Britain to play at this point.

**Bob Stewart:** My right hon. Friend is so right; we can make a really big difference here. In my time in Bosnia two years before Srebrenica, we managed to get to Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia. It took us four days. The only reason I went there was because I heard people pleading on commercial radio for someone to come and help them and stop them being killed. The Bosnian Serb army had just about surrounded Srebrenica and Konjević Polje. We got there. I recall about 20 people killed around us. A couple of my soldiers were wounded, but no one was killed. After a few weeks, when we got about 2,000 people out, mainly women and children, we were ordered to withdraw. I did not want to withdraw, but we were ordered to withdraw. Now, is it not weird that if Republika Srpska splits away, Srebrenica will be in that part of Republika Srpska?

**Alicia Kearns:** I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for the point he is making. Does he agree that one of the most important reasons why Republika Srpska cannot break away, and why we must maintain the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is that if it does, that would be officially to mandate ethnic cleansing? It would be to say that if someone ethnically cleanses and commits genocide, they can wait 20 years

and we will allow them to break away and celebrate their ethnic cleansing, because they will have succeeded in their goal. That would be utterly wrong, and we must stand firm against that.

**Bob Stewart:** I entirely agree with my very good friend; she is so right.

Paddy Ashdown once saw President Tudman draw a map on a menu and divide it in half, saying "That half is Serb and that half is Croat." Paddy Ashdown asked, "Where do the Muslims go?" I will come to that.

It would be a bit rich if Srebrenica were in a breakaway section of Bosnia. What happened at Srebrenica was the catalyst that caused the international community, led by the United States, to take Bosnia seriously, and the Dayton peace accords were the result. They were signed in November 1995 and they achieved their immediate objective—they stopped the killing and they preserved the territorial integrity of the state—but the political arrangements for Bosnia were diabolical.

Dayton bequeathed an unworkable constitution and a hugely complex, multi-layered system of government presided over by, would you believe, a triumvirate of Presidents—Bosnian, Croat and Muslim—who adopted the primary role of lead President once every eight months in rotation. That system was meant to last for only a few years, but it has now stumbled on for 26 years.

All this is unravelling at an exceedingly fast pace. The President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has put plans in place through the Parliament of Republika Srpska to quit the federation and thus reduce Bosnia and Herzegovina in area by 49%. On Friday 10 December, after our debate the previous day, Republika Srpska formally adopted a set of resolutions to initiate the process of withdrawing from Bosnia and Herzegovina's state institutions, including the armed forces, the taxation authorities and even the intelligence agencies.

It is for that reason that I come back to the Chamber once again to talk about Bosnia. I hope I am not being too much of a pain in the bottom, but we have to know what is happening and we have to stop what might happen. I am sorry if I keep banging on, but someone has to, and many hon. Members agree with me.

Dodik's move represents the first step towards formal secession, and it establishes a timeline of six months. We are talking about June next year, which is very soon, and a Greater Serbia could result. I get that a lot of Serbs would like that, but it would be a disaster for the area. I firmly believe that such a move would have a domino effect on the remaining Bosnian territory. It would certainly embolden Croat nationalists such as the leader of the main nationalist HDZ party, Dragan Čović, who would very much like to see Bosnian Croat independence, too.

It seems there is some sort of close collaboration between Čović and Dodik, who have been pressing very hard for changes to electoral laws that would favour the Croats and the Serbs and would give them disproportionate representation in Bosnia. Everyone in Bosnia is South Slav, but by religion 30% are Serb, 15% are Croat and more than 50% are Bosnian Muslims. That is 1.8 million Bosnian Muslims. Bosnia matters to us because, if the Croats and the Serbs were to divide the country in half, I suspect we would find thousands of Bosnian Muslims

seeking an alternative home in Europe, and I am pretty sure which direction they might well take. It matters to us in a practical way. We might find we had a heck of a lot more refugees—and they would be refugees; they are not displaced persons if they are fleeing their homeland because of persecution.

In the early 1990s, the international community, including our country, suffered from a paralysis about the Bosnian situation, underpinned perhaps by the fact that people just could not or did not want to get to grips with it. We cannot allow that to happen again. For me, there are two lessons from the 1990s that are directly applicable to what is happening now. First, dividing Bosnia will not work, and secondly—this is where we come in, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) have said—the only way to get a solution is for the international community to be involved.

What can we do? I will largely repeat what I said in last week's debate, with a few changes. First, we have to sustain Dayton at least until we get something to replace it. It is not great, but it has stopped people dying, and we need to keep it limping on until we get a better arrangement. Secondly, Mr Christian Schmidt, the High Representative, requires our absolute and unequivocal support. He must be given all the power we can allow to help him to stop the country going backwards—that means from everyone in the international community.

Thirdly, we need another Dayton. Maybe we can call it Dayton II. I would not mind it being in Lancaster House, because that is a good place to sort out the international community. It requires the involvement of the United Nations, yes, and that would be a problem on the Security Council, since Russia is not being particularly helpful and China is mixing it a bit too. It requires the United States, it requires the European Union and of course it requires Serbia and Russia. We must also have the presence of the Bosnian Serbs. Representatives from Republika Srpska have to be there. They were not there at Dayton I, as I recall.

Fourthly, a point I totally agree with, we should lead. The European Union is at sixes and sevens over Bosnia. Some of its members openly support Republika Srpska, and it has given Republika Srpska quite a massive subsidy. That has encouraged the Bosnian Serbs to believe they will have support from the European Union, or elements of it. On the subject of Bosnia, the European Union certainly does not speak with one voice and it is largely hamstrung—it can do nothing. Take the United States, which as far as I can ascertain has largely gone back to its traditional, isolationist-type approach: "Europe, sort yourself out," might be the maxim. So we must lead. This country must and can lead.

Fifth and finally—I have a right to say this—we must be prepared to send our soldiers to stop people dying in Bosnia; to support any political initiative, of course. Politics comes first, but sometimes peacekeeping requires someone on horseback. We have a great man to help us in the Balkans now. Air Chief Marshall Sir Stuart Peach was appointed as the Prime Minister's special envoy to the western Balkans last week. He has recently finished as chairman of the military committee in NATO headquarters, and as such was the highest ranking officer in the alliance, even above Supreme Allied Commander Europe. I cannot think of anyone more

sued to help Bosnia than Stuart Peach. We also have a very distinguished ambassador in Sarajevo. Matthew Field has been there since August 2018. He is hugely respected. People in Bosnia have told me how much they respect our ambassador. I know Matt well, and his experience and wise counsel should be used. Messrs Peach and Field are extremely well qualified to help Bosnia, and I urge the Government as well as this House to totally support them in their de facto and most crucial mission, which is to save Bosnia from another disastrous war.

**Alicia Kearns:** As my right hon. Friend mentions what the Government could do, is he aware that Republika Srpska has raised £30 million on the London stock exchange to fund their debt since April? That is something that the Government can look at. That is something that the Treasury is doing. We know that Serbia is funding guns and arms to go into Republika Srpska. We know that Serbia gets those arms from Russia. So clearly there is something going wrong when we are enabling Republika Srpska to fund itself from within London.

**Bob Stewart:** I did not know that. It is very important. I am finishing very shortly, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. For the sake of clarity, there is no need for the right hon. Gentleman—just for once—to consider that he ought to curtail his remarks. He is making a moving and appropriate speech, and the whole Chamber appreciates that he is the only person qualified to make it. We are listening to him and we are happy to go on listening to him for a while.

**Bob Stewart:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. "For a while" is about to end.

In summary, there is no doubt that Bosnia cannot sort out its own problems. It requires international help. Where there's a will, there's a way. About 100,000 people were killed in the country between 1991 and 1995. That must not be repeated. We, the United Kingdom, could and should—we are the only country that can really do it in my view—lead the initiative to save Bosnia. I ask the Government please, please, to put this as a top priority of this Administration. Please God, let us not stand by and watch huge numbers of innocent people die again.

2.14 pm

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He made such a considered speech, and I did enjoy listening to it. May I also take a moment to reflect on the speech from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on the tragic circumstances of the death of Louis Watkiss—and my condolences to the family? I hope we will all support the efforts being made by the right hon. Member.

This Christmas will be difficult for many families. It could be the first Christmas without loved ones, and people may have lost their jobs or simply be struggling due to the worsening cost of living crisis. I want to take this opportunity to talk about how local charities in Luton and all their committed volunteers have stepped

[Rachel Hopkins]

up over the last year. They have stepped in to address Government failures and have supported many people's lives in Luton South.

Level Trust has helped families overcome the costs of education, ensuring that children in Luton have the chance to enjoy learning, by running the clothing exchange, delivering home learning packs and managing the emergency home school fund. Level Trust has also helped to set up Luton Learning Link, a partnership with the Luton Council of Mosques and the high sheriff of Bedfordshire, to provide computers to children to tackle the digital divide.

Discover Islam also works with Level Trust, but among its other great community initiatives it has set up the Curry Kitchen, in partnership with Community Interest Luton, to provide hot food to Luton residents in need. It was great to see so many Lutonians join the Luton Lions to run the Luton 10K, including my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), to raise vital funds for the Curry Kitchen.

As one of the volunteers at Luton food bank, it is right for me to mention the great work it does in providing free nutritionally balanced and culturally appropriate food parcels to people in distress or financial hardship, including hot meals for families on Christmas eve next week.

NOAH has provided support to the homeless people in our community through offering food, clothing, medical and dental care, outreach support and specific advice on accessing accommodation and income support, as well as skills and employment training. Signposts in Luton delivers temporary accommodation for people who are homeless and provides psychological support to those for whom it provides a roof.

The Luton Homeless Partnership represents over 20 local services, including Mary Seacole Housing Association, Luton Council, the Luton business improvement district, ELFT—the East London NHS Foundation Trust—and the University of Bedfordshire. It has set up the Big Change initiative, which asks Lutonians to donate some spare time, items or some spare money to help people experiencing homelessness, including through contactless touchpoints in Luton town centre.

Women's Aid in Luton, which is part of that group, supports women and child victims of domestic abuse. Its refuge delivers peer support, education and access to legal advice. I would like to take this opportunity to give a mention to Luton rugby club, which has again this year put together a huge number of Christmas shoebox gifts for the women who use Women's Aid services. Similarly, Stepping Stones supports vulnerable women, as does the Luton All Women's Centre, which I was very pleased to visit just last week.

Keech hospice delivers free specialist care for adults and children in Luton who have life-limiting and terminal illnesses. Significant funds were raised recently for the hospice through the big trunk trail, where large model elephants were sponsored by local businesses and decorated by many different people—including famous Lutonians such as “The Great British Bake Off” champion Nadiya Hussain and former Turner prize nominee Mark Titchner, before being auctioned off to raise a fantastic amount of funds. For children and young people struggling with

their mental health and emotional trauma, CHUMS delivers outstanding accessible support that is tailored to individual needs.

I could go on about so many of the brilliant charities in Luton and the excellent volunteers who support them, but I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister to pass on to the Leader of the House my request for a debate on the contribution of grassroots charities to our local communities and the importance of increasing Government support to secure their resilience through this very difficult time with the pandemic.

Talking of volunteers, I would really like to take the opportunity to congratulate Dr Waled Mannan from Luton, who is the winner of the BBC sports personality of the year's unsung hero 2021 award for the east of England region. He has been the lead person in promoting community-based sports and fitness group Revolution, which has motivated hundreds of Lutonians to take up physical activity. Understandably, due to the spread of omicron, the BBC is not having any audience members at its awards event on Sunday, so I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all here today will join me in congratulating Dr Mannan and all the other unsung heroes involved in grassroots sports and physical activities.

Finally, we in Luton were very sad to have lost our friend Lord Bill McKenzie of Luton just recently. He was passionate about our town, Luton, and served it all his life as a local councillor, the leader of the council, a Minister in Government when he was elevated to the Lords, a shadow Minister and a vital member of the parliamentary Labour party. Our thoughts are with Lady Di McKenzie and family, and I hope that we can all take a moment to reflect on his contribution in this place and to us in our home town of Luton. I wish everyone a very merry Christmas and a good new year.

2.20 pm

**Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins). It is also a pleasure to speak in the Christmas Adjournment debate, except for one element, which is, as has already been mentioned, that we are without our dear friend Sir David Amess. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that this traditional pre-Christmas debate should be called the Sir David Amess memorial debate. All hon. Members present perfectly accept that they will always play second fiddle to him in their ability to bring up constituency issues.

I was with Sir David, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), in Qatar a couple of days before he was sadly taken from us. I could see how well thought of he was there when, after the news had come through, it was the lead story on the national news. We all miss him; I miss him. He will forever be felt in this place.

It is great to see the Deputy Chief Whip in his place. I have been telling him all week that I would give him quite a hard time in this debate, as I did last year and as I intend to do next year, but in the spirit of Christmas, I will be nice. I did notice, however, that I still have not received a Christmas card from him—[Interruption.] which is shocking. No doubt—I ask him to comment—that is an indication of my standing in his little black book in the Whips Office.

I place on record my thanks and appreciation to all our health workers, particularly those in Eastleigh who, over the last few days—as well as the last few years—have been asked to make contributions and go further than they have in the last few weeks because of the announcements. All those in GP surgeries, hospitals and vaccination centres have worked tirelessly, and will continue to work tirelessly, so I thank them for that.

Traditionally, these debates are a place to raise constituency issues, which is predominantly what I will do. I will talk about some things that are going on in Eastleigh and other things that need to change in Eastleigh. I do not think the Deputy Chief Whip will be surprised that I will raise housing first.

The housing development continues unabated at the behest of Eastleigh Liberal Democrats who control Eastleigh Borough Council. The council has built 49% more housing than is required by Government targets despite its claims that the Government are forcing them to build at that level. It is planning to build 22% beyond Government targets for the next four years.

The Deputy Chief Whip knows that I have raised the issue at previous Christmas debates; in ten-minute rule Bills, where I have made suggestions on how planning reform and legislation could change some of that; and in questions. I must declare, by the way, that I am not against local authorities building housing if they want to, particularly social housing. Specifically, however, I want to raise the situation in which Eastleigh Borough Council buys land, awards itself planning permission and builds the development itself against the wishes of local residents.

An example of that happening in the last few years is the One Horton Heath project in Fair Oak, which was originally 900 homes and has now gone up to 2,500 because it was taken over by the council. It is not wanted by local people. Councillor Steven Broomfield and I have consistently raised with the council that the lack of consultation, and the lack of checks and balances when it awards itself planning permission as well as building its own developments, is not acceptable.

The council is doing that because it has a £600-million borrowing amount, which is not sustainable for a local authority with an annual budget of £32 million. I have raised this matter with what was the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—stating that it really needs to look at local authorities that are borrowing way beyond their means, because in the end, local residents in my constituency will have to pay when Eastleigh Borough Council goes bust.

I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to make changes in respect of local councils building developments without those checks and balances. Will the Minister ensure that the Department looks at my proposals? I suggested that if a local authority wants to build on land that it owns—particularly large-scale developments of the type that we are seeing in Horton Heath—the neighbouring planning authority should take that over. The host planning authority could pay that neighbouring authority, but this is about the independence of a planning department in a neighbouring local authority checking and looking at whether the planning application lives up to the standards that it should. That should be done by an organisation that does not own the land and does not

build out on its own land. That is what we expect from private housing developers and I hope that the Government will look at taking that forward.

I also want to mention Southampton airport, which, as the Deputy Chief Whip will know, I have raised consistently in the two years that I have been the Member for Eastleigh. He will also know that Southampton airport was desperately affected by the collapse of Flybe, as it was by the impact of covid on the routes that it could operate and the number of passengers that it has been able to serve. Two years ago, it submitted an application to extend its runway by 164 metres, within the footprint of its current existence, and I am in favour of that. The local borough council made the correct decision in the way that it should—there was a marathon planning application, with proceedings that took place over two days; I spoke at 1 o'clock in the morning—to grant planning permission for the runway extension to go ahead.

Of course, an appeal went to the High Court, but it refused to overturn the decision. A small group of green activists—I call them that politely—then appealed the decision again and we now face a judicial review. I absolutely understand that the Deputy Chief Whip will not be able to comment on a live legal case, but there is a wider element that we need to take away from this. If this country wants to be global Britain and wants large-scale infrastructure projects and inward investment in this country to go ahead, we must look at the legal processes relating to how many times infrastructure investments or large-scale projects can be affected by a small group of people who keep taking matters to court time and again. It is affecting my local economy. It could affect the outcome of the freeport bid, which the Government announced for the Solent region, and it would desperately affect the number of jobs and the rejuvenation of my town centre in Eastleigh, which has struggled during the period of covid. Will the Government look at the wider planning process and how we can ensure that planning applications that are backed by 70% of my local constituents cannot keep being delayed by a small group of people with lots of money who keep using the courts to delay them?

This is a bit of a planning debate for me today, because this is an issue that affects my constituency widely. I have spoken about housing and the airport and I now want to raise an issue from the Hamble peninsula of my constituency, on the southern parishes end. I want to talk about the actions and proposals of a company called Cemex, which wants to open a quarry and a mineral extraction facility in the southern half of my constituency. Last month, I was made aware that Cemex was proposing and consulting on a gravel pit—a quarry, essentially—in a village called Hamble, which is accessible by one road, Hamble Lane. Traditionally, Hamble was a very small village that was accessible by that country road. The amount of housing development over the past 10 years has meant that Hamble Lane is becoming incredibly congested. At rush hour, it can take an hour to travel a mile. It is on the peninsula and peninsulas are often quite inaccessible, which is why we have one road. The housing development has added to this. The plan that we were made aware of will mean that 144 lorries a day will go up and down Hamble Lane taking out gravel over the next seven years. After that, the number of lorries going up and down Hamble Lane

[Paul Holmes]

each day will go down to around 90. That is on a small country road that the county council cannot improve. It is impossible to improve it, despite the—how do I say this politely?—literature that Cemex sends out to my constituents, saying that it will mitigate the effects. The plan is just not acceptable.

I wish to raise with the Government the way in which a so-called consultation was carried out. The consultation lasted for two weeks. There was a virtual exhibition and letters were delivered to people who live in the area. In those two weeks, Cemex received around 200 returns, with 100% of people opposing the proposal. I would of course like to see Hampshire County Council remove the site from its mineral extraction plan. I say to the Deputy Chief Whip that when I put a survey on my website, I got 360 returns within seven days, and 98% of people were opposed. If Cemex would like the 1.2% of people who were in favour to make their consultation look like it was worth the paper it was written on, I am more than willing to provide details.

The level of engagement Cemex is offering is unacceptable. Not a single constituent in Hamble has met a representative of Cemex physically. Not a single physical exhibition or consultation exercise took place within the 14 days, and no Cemex representative has physically met representatives of a single parish council. Cemex has refused to offer public meetings and told the leader of Hamble Parish Council—a democratically elected representative of the Hamble community—that the company will answer his concerns only by email. We are talking about such a large piece of proposed infrastructure in an inaccessible part of my constituency, and I find the company's actions wholly unacceptable.

Why do I raise this issue today? Because Hampshire County Council has allocated the site. I am working with the council to find out whether we can mitigate some of the effects, but I say to the Government that the level of consultation that there has been is unacceptable for such a large-scale development. We need to look at what role the Government should have when it comes to quarries and such large-scale developments.

Cemex says that after seven years it will make this piece of green land green again, and will provide a park. It says that will provide a benefit to my constituents. The literature says that jobs will be created; I can tell the House, and my constituents in Hamble, that the number of jobs created would be seven—seven jobs for the amount of disruption the quarry will cause to the people of Hamble. Cemex says it will make this place a green space, but it is already a green space. I say gently to Cemex that it might think that the project will be beneficial, but leaving behind a giant hole after the work is done is not the added benefit that the community wants to see. I therefore stand opposed to the plan, alongside the leader of Eastleigh Borough Council, the county councillor for Hamble and the parish councils. I would appreciate it if the Deputy Chief Whip raised that with the relevant Department.

Finally—many colleagues will be delighted to hear me say that—I wish to bring up with the Deputy Chief Whip the topic of Great British Railways, which is a fabulous opportunity for Eastleigh. I do not know whether the Deputy Chief Whip knows or remembers my maiden speech, in which I said that Eastleigh was

created because of the building of the London and South Western Railway from around 1838. It truly is a railway town; the ancestors of the people there built that massive infrastructure project during the Victorian era. Eastleigh built not only locomotives, trains and carriages but gliders for the D-day landings in world war two.

Our town centre has an airport just up the road, a deeply willing and committed population, and a huge railway works site that still provides some of the exact same services that Eastleigh provided in the 1830s, so it would be a fabulous site for the new headquarters of Great British Railways. The Government have announced the competition, and I heard this morning that Southampton, just next door to me, has announced a rival bid. I would just gently say that it should stick to the maritime and leave the railways. The railways belong to Eastleigh. I know there will be friendly competition with the leader of its council, but I just say, “Hands off! It’s Eastleigh’s turn.”

Eastleigh has some of the same issues as many northern towns. Essentially, it is a northern working-class railway town on the south coast, next to what I would call a working class ex-industrial city, Southampton. I know there will be many rival bids from areas represented by my colleagues on the Conservative Benches. I do not expect my hon. Friend the Deputy Chief Whip to announce this from the Dispatch Box today, but certainly my constituents would like the early Christmas present of hearing the Government say, “Let’s do away with the competition—Eastleigh is perfect for this.” That would provide jobs, an economic boost, and the town centre regeneration that I am so passionate about; as I say, the town centre has suffered during the pandemic.

As we are here, the Deputy Chief Whip will remember that I have brought up time and again the fact that at Hedge End station, we do not have accessibility for disabled people. This is an issue not just in Hedge End, but across the country. I would be deeply encouraged by any feedback on whether the Treasury is reallocating accessibility funding, and whether Members of Parliament could bid for it. Disabled and less able-bodied people still have to alight five miles away at Southampton Airport Parkway and travel up the M27 just to get home. That is deeply, deeply unacceptable, and I will continue to push the Government on getting that accessibility funding awarded as soon as possible.

Finally—[Laughter.] I said that before—sorry! Finally, finally—this is the nice bit—I wish all House staff a merry Christmas. The Doorkeepers are incredibly patient with all of us. They sometimes see us in perhaps not the best light as we run to and from meetings, but they are incredibly patient and encyclopaedic—they know everything that is going on. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker a very merry Christmas. I thank my staff, Emma, Sue, Ben, Charlie and Steph, for their unwavering loyalty to me and, moreover, to the people of Eastleigh, who often hear their lovely voices at the end of the phone when they are trying to get in touch with me. Indeed, I thank all Members’ staff across the whole House; this goes back to a point raised by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). They have had a terrible couple of years working for us; that goes particularly for those working for a new Member of Parliament. I wish everyone in this House a very merry Christmas and, hopefully, a safer 2022.

2.37 pm

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), and to find out so much about his lovely constituency. I, too, feel happy to be part of this debate. I am delighted to not have the clock, but sad that Sir David Amess is not with us. He was such a formidable part of these debates, and I really enjoyed hearing from him. He took a deep breath at the beginning of his speech, and rattled off about 50 points. It was always a pleasure to hear. We mourn him. We miss him.

**Bob Stewart:** One of the reasons why I miss Sir David Amess is that he reminds us all of what an assiduous Member of Parliament should do. I was always in awe of that. I felt totally inadequate when he gave his speeches and I heard about everything he had done. Does the hon. Lady agree with me?

**Fleur Anderson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As a new Member of Parliament, I have a lot to learn, and I have learned from Members on both sides of the House. I learned from Sir David Amess.

This week was my two-year anniversary of being elected. It is an absolute honour every day to represent the people of Putney, Southfields and Roehampton, and a huge responsibility that I do not take for granted for a single second. The end of the year is a good time for us all to reflect on that.

I thank all the volunteers and NHS staff who are stepping up their work to deliver the booster as we speak. I also thank the volunteers in other organisations such as The Scrubbery in Putney, which has made 30,000 surgical scrubs since it was set up before the start of covid—they saw it coming. They have just made Christmas bags for all Age UK Wandsworth day centre clients. They do an amazing job. I also thank the Roehampton community box project, who since the start of covid have delivered tens of thousands of boxes to local families in need. When they started, they thought it would be for just a few weeks—maybe six weeks—but it went on, and they are still delivering those boxes every Wednesday, week in, week out. It is amazing.

I also thank all the Roehampton Response Network community organisations, which have come together through covid and provided strength in our community in Roehampton. They are doing an amazing job. I also thank Regenerate-RISE, an amazing older people's centre that does an amazing job to stem and curb loneliness for older people, which is an issue across my constituency, as it is across the country. It had a great Christmas lunch this week, which unfortunately I was not able to attend. I could go on, but I wanted to pay tribute to some of our amazing volunteers at this time of year—I know that they will step up again in the next couple of weeks.

I want to give an update on wet wipes. As colleagues know, I am officially the MP for banning plastic for wet wipes as well as the MP for Putney. It was an honour to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill earlier this year, and I thank the many hon. Members in the House who have supported my campaign so far. It is the campaign that no one disagrees with. I welcome the constructive discussions and meeting that I have had with the Minister. I also welcome the recent call for evidence on commonly

littered single-use plastics, which was launched following my Bill. I agree that it does not have the most snappy title, but in that call for evidence, there is an opportunity for everyone—every Member, everyone working in the industry producing wet wipes, all retailers and all members of the public—to get involved and have their say in a Government consultation. It closes on 12 February. I will contribute to it, and I encourage other Members to do so, and to say, “There shouldn't be any plastic in wet wipes.”

I hope that the outcome of the call for evidence will be firm and tough action. The industry is already going in the right direction, but banning plastic in wet wipes would push it to go further and faster. That is what we need, given the number of wet wipes bought and used in the UK every year—and that number went up considerably because of covid. We need a date for the phasing-out of plastic in wet wipes, clarity on which wet wipes would be exempt due to medical and clinical need, and agreement on the principle that the consumer—and, importantly, the NHS, which is a main user of wet wipes—will not pay extra. We also need the Government to adopt labelling measures contained in the EU single-use plastics directive. The change in labelling is an easy win that could be made very quickly. It has already been done across the EU, where the industry has already changed the labelling on its plastic packaging. If any hon. Member—or you, Madam Deputy Speaker—goes to a supermarket, they will see that some labels have a sad turtle on them, or say, “Don't flush.” That could easily be adopted for our labelling of packaging. It would really help consumers to know what is in wet wipes and what they should do with them. In short, the answer is: do not flush.

I was glad to hear the speech by the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), because Bosnia is another serious issue for me. Bosnia is close to my heart, because I lived there during and following the war as an aid worker. I rebuilt villages and worked with the wonderful people of Bosnia, who looked the pain and suffering of the war in the face and decided that they wanted to build peace. They have done that—precariously—for 26 years. However, I agree with the right hon. Member that there are serious concerns about a slide once again into conflict. There is growing nationalism and tension, and moves towards conflict, in Republika Srpska under its leader, Milorad Dodik. There is hate speech and genocide denial, and the Dayton agreement is under threat.

I add my support for the territorial integrity of Bosnia as it is, and for the need for the UK to take the lead in diplomatic action now. It would break my heart to be standing here in the future saying, “We knew what was happening, but we didn't take enough action, so now we Members of Parliament must work out what to do, in terms of military intervention.” We do not need to do that. It is diplomatic action and action with community organisations in Republika Srpska and across Bosnia and Herzegovina that will make a difference. Long-lasting peace can come only when the population wants peace. We saw that for ourselves in Northern Ireland. What made the difference was when women's organisations, community groups and schoolchildren said, “We will not have conflict any more”. Such action does not give political legitimacy to leaders who might want to move towards conflict, so it is really important to be working with community groups on the ground. I have urged the

[Fleur Anderson]

Foreign Secretary to do that, and I encourage other Members to do so as well. I ask those on the Front Bench to take that away with them from this debate.

The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, or the lack thereof, has already been mentioned in this debate, but I would like to add my concerns. There is huge anxiety among so many people writing to me who have relatives in danger in Afghanistan. What is happening with the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme? The fact that this has not been announced is a symptom of the chaos in Government. As far as I can tell, it has been passed between Ministers for months. There has been no clarity on what will be in the scheme and what its terms will be. In short, where is it? My plea is for the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme to be agreed, announced and to be made very clear so that people know that they can start coming and have the support that they need during these terrible times in Afghanistan.

A big issue for many residents in my constituency is the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim population in Pakistan. I have a large Ahmadiyya community in Southfields, and an absolutely beautiful mosque—the first in London. Recently, I was able to hold the first MP surgery in the first mosque in London. It was a wonderful experience. Many people came to my surgery and I was able to speak with them. I know very well the concerns that so many have about discrimination, not being able to vote for the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan—if they cannot vote they cannot stand for office, and if they cannot stand for office, they do not have a political say in the country—forced detentions, summary detentions, and discrimination throughout education, work and life. The Ahmadiyya people must worship in hidden mosques and they cannot live their life as they do here. I stand in solidarity with them. I was glad that, this year, I was able to ask the Home Office to recognise the Ahmadiyya marriage certificate in immigration applications, and that rule has now been changed and the Ahmadiyya marriage certificate is now recognised.

Let me move on to a very different issue. The Transport for London settlement is a major concern in Putney. We are now two days away from a weeks-long extension on the funding of the whole of Transport for London, and yet there seems to be a deadlock. I urge the Transport Secretary to meet the Mayor of London today—as soon as possible—so that we can clear this funding deadlock. We need our public transport to be as wide as it is now, and we need to make sure that people who are over 60 will still have access to free transport—I have had many people writing to me about this in the past couple of days.

I cannot miss the opportunity to mention Hammersmith bridge. I have raised this issue 15 times in Parliament now. The bridge has been closed to traffic since April 2019—it is a major traffic route in our capital city and it is still closed to traffic. It is causing chaos in Putney, as all the traffic comes down our roads, causing congestion and pollution and making cycling more dangerous. The council cannot afford to pay for it. At £160 million, it is way beyond its annual budget. TfL can no longer afford to pay for it, because it has had a huge loss of income, as we know, and, with fewer people travelling because of the omicron variant, that loss will only increase. Only the Government can fund the rebuilding of Hammersmith

bridge and open it again. I raise the matter on behalf of all residents of Putney, Southfields and Roehampton who cannot get on a bus and go over the river to work, to the hospital, or to meet up with family, because of the closure of the bridge.

With the two-year anniversary of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 now close, last week I asked a perfectly reasonable question of the Leader of the House about Brexit: whether the Government would let us debate the impact that Brexit is having on our economy, society and daily lives so far, and whether the Government would commission a region-by-region report. His response contained the following words:

“Brexit prayer...the Brexit song, beginning, “Gloria in excelsis Deo”... happy fish”.—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 591.]

It was not a serious response to a very serious request. In the absence of a grown-up debate in the House, will the Government at the very least mark their own homework and publish an impact assessment of Brexit?

Housing is a subject that has been raised in this debate before and it is a very big issue in Putney. On homelessness, the Everyone In programme showed that if there is political will, action can be taken. All those who were homeless in my area of south-west London were housed very quickly. I pay tribute to the Putney hotel, which switched overnight from being a hotel to being a homeless hostel, as it still is. Its staff are fantastic and I was able to meet them recently to thank them for all they have done. They do not yet know how long the funding for that will continue, but every person in that hotel should be assessed and a place in suitable accommodation should be found for all of them as soon as possible.

The other issue that we face is damp and shoddy housing stock; so many families write to me about damp issues, as they live in houses where the spores are so thick that you can smell them. I have doctors' letters about the impact that has on their children as well. In this day and age, we should not be facing that in our country. Councils are not tackling it adequately. Wandsworth Council is certainly not tackling the amount of houses and homes that are suffering from damp, where children and whole families are suffering ill health as a result. That issue needs to be taken far more seriously.

Finally, on housing, I come to the issue of children in temporary accommodation. Shockingly, the number rises every year, but this Christmas 3,300 Wandsworth children are in temporary accommodation, often far from their schools, with their parents having to get up early, in the darkness, and take several buses to get them back to the school that they went to. Their family life suffers immensely. Temporary accommodation should be close to schools, but there should not be so many people and families in temporary accommodation—it is an absolute housing failure. I know that the Mayor of London is building more affordable homes, and they cannot be built quickly enough, because this is a major issue for my constituency.

Also connected with housing is the cladding crisis. I have been campaigning on the issue for nearly two years, yet thousands of leaseholders in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton are still trapped in, to quote the new Secretary of State, “an invidious vice” of unsafe homes, life-destroying safety costs and ever-increasing insurance costs. The Building Safety Bill still does nothing to protect leaseholders, which is extremely disappointing

to constituents. Will the new Secretary of State work with us and ensure that the Bill delivers for victims of the cladding crisis on Report? Labour members of the Public Bill Committee have tabled many amendments that would have strengthened and improved that Bill, but they have been rejected. At the last housing oral questions, the Secretary of State said that he would shortly be updating the House on a “series of measures” that he hopes will “help bring some relief” to leaseholders facing costs. He said that he will do that before Christmas. Does that mean it will be today or are we to expect it within the next 10 days? We are holding our breath. We are waiting for those, as the victims of the cladding crisis across the country have heard that and are expecting these measures, and I want to know what will be in them.

Let me finish by thanking my staff team; people in Putney may not know how hard they work. They are an amazing team of people who are working day in, day out to support local constituents. They absolutely care as much as I do for every single person who contacts me, be it by coming to my surgery or emailing me, or when they bump into me in the street or in the shops and at all the Christmas events I go to. I want to say a huge thank you to them, to all the Speakers and to all the House staff, who support us so admirably day in, day out, so that we are able to stand up here. As I have said, I am the only Putney resident who is allowed to come in here to speak on behalf of Putney residents, and I do that with a huge sense of responsibility, honour and enjoyment.

2.54 pm

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): Let me begin by expressing my sadness that Sir David Amess is not here today. I have spoken in these Adjournment debates on pretty much every occasion since I was elected—albeit only two years ago—and the joy of them was not getting to speak in them oneself, but getting to see Sir David’s tour de force. Most of us decide which of 30, 40 or 50 issues we will raise, but he just raised them all. It was a sight to behold, and I think we will always miss that contribution in these debates as in so many others.

When I thought about the 30 or 40 different matters I could raise, from my campaign for the reopening of Grove station to housing and planning issues, which have already been touched on, I decided on three, all of which happened to begin with A. The first is the issue of the AEA Technology pensioners. As some Members may know, a group of pensioners—predominantly in my constituency, although some are in other parts of the country—transferred to a new company in the mid-1990s when part of the UK Atomic Energy Authority was privatised. They were given all sorts of assurances about their terms and conditions, including the assurance that it was very unlikely that anything negative would happen to the value of their pensions—and guess what? The company went bust less than 20 years later, and their pensions are now worth between a quarter and a third less than they were. A unique aspect of the case is that they were given the advice not to worry about their pensions by the Government Actuary’s Department.

For several years those people have been pushed from pillar to post and from Department to Department, being told, “This is where you should go to seek redress”, “No, it’s that Department”, “No, it’s another Department”, or “Don’t worry, the ombudsman can look at your case”.

We have, however, established—and I pay tribute to my predecessor, now Lord Vaizey of Didcot, who worked on this for a while as well—that it is not within the ombudsman’s remit to look at advice given by the Government Actuary’s Department, and the pensioners therefore have no redress whatsoever. The reason I have presented a 10-minute rule Bill on the issue, and the reason I chair the all-party parliamentary group for AEA Technology pensions, is that these guys did the right thing. They were given assurances, and—for want of a better phrase—they have never had their day in court. There has never been someone to look at what happened here. I am also a member of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders, and we all know what went wrong there.

This is a unique case involving more than 1,000 pensioners, and I will keep going on it because it is so important. I have met the relevant Minister, and I am told it is still the case that the ombudsman cannot investigate. I hope we can either change that or obtain another form of redress, because we should all be entitled to some form of redress to deal with our complaint, even if it does not go in the way we wanted it to.

The second A is the Appleford relief road. Appleford is a small village in my constituency, and as part of a housing infrastructure fund bid by Oxfordshire County Council, it is going to have a relief road very nearby to help to ease some of the traffic congestion in other parts of my constituency. The problem is that until very recently my constituents did not realise how close to them the relief road would be. I have seen images of relief roads, including this one: it is 30 feet high, and it will be right up by their houses.

I have met members of the campaign group, and I think that they have a compelling case. They would be dismissed by some as nimbys, but far from it, they are not opposed to the road itself. They have simply made the very reasonable request for the county council to move it by about 200 metres. It would still be close to them, but not as close as is planned, so the noise, the traffic and the pollution that it will bring would have less of an impact than it would otherwise. The work has not started yet. I think that this is an entirely reasonable request, and I am urging the county council to address the concerns of the residents again. None of us would want that road near us, and even if we have to delay the completion of the works, I think it right that we should do so.

The third A is the A420, on which I held an Adjournment debate last year. The road snakes right across my constituency, and many of my constituents find it very dangerous. The crash data backs them up on that; there are very regular crashes all the way along it. There are bizarre situations where people who live near the A420 have to get a bus down it to be able to cross it, and then get the bus back. They simply want to cross a road that is directly in front of them in their village, but it is too unsafe for them to do so. My constituent Jo is one of the people most recently injured on the road; she is in a neck brace at the moment.

Again, the road is the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council. We need a bunch of different things, from a proper bus service to safe crossing points, bike lanes, walkways and so on. The road is used an awful lot by heavy goods vehicles; part of what we need to do is to try to deter them from using the road, because it

[David Johnston]

should not be used in the way it is. It is used by lots of vehicles that speed, and it is used as a shortcut when it should not be. It passes a lot of what should be very quiet villages, where people should not experience their houses shaking and all the difficulties of getting on or off or across the road. Again, I hope this is something that we can make progress on, and I will keep pushing on it on behalf of my constituents.

What these three things have in common, along with the many other things I could have raised today, is that they are all about people feeling that their voices are not heard. They have legitimate grievances and complaints, but they feel that the authorities, whoever they are—their local council, a Government Department, a business; it can be anything—are not listening to them and do not give them the time and attention or deal with things that should be relatively straightforward to deal with if there was the will to do so. I constantly tell my constituents, as I am sure a lot of Members do, “I don’t have the power myself to change the situation you find yourself in.” I wish I did, but my role is to keep making sure that their voices are heard in this place, and that is what I will do week after week.

With that, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas, and likewise all the staff in the House of Commons—the Doorkeepers and everybody else. Without them, we would be in a very bad place indeed.

3.2 pm

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston); I now know so much more about the roads of Wantage. All joking aside, having campaigned on the dangerous smart motorways that we see being rolled out across our country, I know how important it is for many of our constituents that representations are made in this place about the safety of our roads, and I commend him for doing that. I also praise the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his immensely passionate and informed speech; I am grateful to him for his expertise in that area. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) mentioned the Putney Scrubbery; my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and I were able to deliver scrubs to the Luton and Dunstable Hospital that were produced in her constituency.

We know that these last two years have been incredibly dark times, but I always think that we must look for the light in the darkness, and that is what I want to focus on today. One of the darkest times has already been mentioned by many Members on both sides of the House, and that is what we saw in August in Afghanistan. Sixty-nine families in Luton North contacted me and my team, desperate to get members of their family, their loved ones, their friends, to safety. We were able to get some people back home, but not all. I echo, and put on the record my support for, all the calls that have been made from across the House for the Afghan resettlement scheme to get started and for those people to be given hope in the darkest of times.

I want to start where many Members finished their speeches, by thanking my team, who worked 24/7 to get people back home to safety and to give them hope. Now my team are asking for details about the Afghan

resettlement scheme so that they can pass that hope on to the people who remain in danger in Afghanistan. I thank Mohammad Qudri, Francis Steer and Georgia Marcantonio—members of my team. We all know we cannot do our jobs without them. I want to put on record a special thanks to Jamie Ali, whose last day it is working for me. Jamie has worked for nearly four years for different Members of Parliament, and he embodies everything you would ever want in a member of your team—diligent, hard-working, caring, and incredibly smart. I hope that at some stage we can tempt him back into the world of politics.

As I said, this is a focus on the light. In what has been the worst possible year for many, we have seen the best of some of our people, and that is incredibly true of the people of Luton North. They are people who step up when the Government step back; people in organisations like Discover Islam, Luton Town football club and Sundon Park Baptist church, who provide breakfast boxes for our community—for our children. They went above and beyond to ensure that no one went without over the past year. But what country have we become when we have to rely on these fantastic charities to feed children to ensure that they do not go hungry to school? I praise incredibly loudly, and I am shamelessly proud of, the fantastic community spirit of the charities and organisations that we have in Luton North, and the hard work that they do, but it should not be up to charities and good will to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society do not go without.

I get to meet those children every day I go to a school, an early years centre or a nursery, where you not only get covered in glitter but get challenged and questioned about the decisions that we all take in this place by young people who are concerned about their future. I am so pleased to say that we have an award-winning team from Chantry Primary School—the green team, who are tidying up their community, not just for themselves but for future generations to come.

Many small businesses have joined in the charitable work that went on over the past year to help to feed children in Luton North when the Government said no to feeding children during school holidays. We have countless small businesses. We recently celebrated Small Business Saturday nationally. About a year ago, I started visiting small businesses across the town, and I decided that there are enough fantastic small businesses in Luton North to do that every single Saturday, so since then I have been doing that, promoting their fantastic work, diversity, ingenuity and innovation. We should be backing them. I am so proud that Labour has put forward measures to really back small businesses. People say that they are the backbone of our British economy, so we must show that they are. We must praise them and give them the credit and support that they deserve.

There are fantastic charities such as Age Concern. We all talk about the isolation that we felt. I am so pleased to be back in this place, and to be able to go and do visits and see people face to face. Zoom many have been very useful, but my goodness, it is very miserable being sat behind a screen. We all do this job because we love people. But imagine if that was your only lifeline or if you did not even have that. Organisations and charities like Age Concern in Luton have been going above and beyond in making sure not only that nobody went without but that nobody went without a conversation, because that is such an important lifeline to so many.

Active Luton was one of the most fun and energising events that I went to. It had activities for children throughout the school holidays. I did not really imagine when I took on this role that I would be playing dodgeball with a bunch of children and having numerous balls thrown at me, but I think that they were even more shocked that a Member of Parliament threw the balls back. The children definitely won.

I also never imagined that I would be joining the Luton Lions for a 10 km race, but they were very persistent and it was for a very good cause. I also did not think that we would be doing it in a torrential downpour. I want to put on record my thanks to every person who was involved in that race. There were marshals, organisers and runners, and there were also people clapping and cheering us on from their homes and their windows and even from underneath their car boots, taking shelter from the rain. That is the kind of community spirit we have in Luton to get people through and bring them together to raise money and support fantastic organisations such as the Curry Kitchen.

Covid affected everyone. It affected our lives in ways that we could never have imagined, but it is true to say that people who are poorer or from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background were more likely to be affected. Over the past two years, the inequality that has been allowed to run rife throughout our country has been exposed for everyone to see, and it is on us to ensure that that does not continue. Alongside that inequality, we have also seen an increase in hate crimes, especially during the pandemic. I have had constituents write to me about the increase in the Islamophobia and Sinophobia. I was interested to listen to the earlier debate about the Online Safety Bill, and I would like the Government to bring forward measures to ensure that online hate crimes and racism are tackled in legislation.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Member for making that important point. Does she agree that this is particularly applicable to many colleagues and friends in this place, the Scottish Parliament and other places who are BAME politicians, and particularly female BAME politicians?

**Sarah Owen:** The Member makes a very good point. We see this in relation not only to black, Asian and minority ethnic women politicians but to BAME women in any public-facing role. They are subjected to the absolute worst elements of the internet, and they must be protected. This applies especially to our young people looking to the future. Many of us have lived our lives without having to be online, but for many younger people that is a huge part of their life and we must ensure that they are protected.

A number of people are, sadly, no longer with us. One who was taken from us far too soon was Southfield Primary School headteacher Sarah Pollard. She was a fantastic advocate for young people in our town. Her influence, her lessons for life, her love of reading, her energy, her enthusiasm and her care for every single child she met will live on in future generations. I want to join her parents, Jean and Brian, in the calling on the Government to look at the lowering of the age for starting breast cancer screening to below 40. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South has already mentioned the passing of Lord Bill McKenzie and Councillor Paul Castleman, two men who served Luton for the best. One of the ways in which those we have lost to covid in

Luton will be remembered is through the peace garden initiative, which will have a tree for every life lost in Luton. I know that fundraising is now taking place for the initiative, so please, please donate to it so that we can ensure that every life is remembered.

How do we best remember and pay tribute to those we have lost? To me, it is by creating a future better than what we have seen in the past. People have often said in the past year, “I want things to go back to normal. I want to go back to how things were before.” I do not want to go back to how things were before. I do not want to go back to what was normal, because I want better for the people of Luton North. We should be striving for better, because if we have learned nothing else over the past year we should have learned what is truly important, what truly matters and which people hold this country together.

One thing that is key to a better future is providing better education. We have wonderful educators in Luton, and we need to see the Government’s aspirations meeting the aspirations of young people in Luton North. I am so proud that we have one of the top education providers and the oldest sixth form in the country, Luton Sixth Form College. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South went there and is a governor; I was able to visit a few weeks ago and hopefully I will be going there tonight to watch “Matilda”.

One thing the college has asked for time and again is a protection for BTECs and a guarantee that they will continue. They are hugely popular and hugely successful in Luton, not only at Luton Sixth Form College, but at Barnfield College. I am so excited every time I drive or walk past Barnfield College, because there are loads of cranes and it looks really busy, but I know next year we will be opening the doors on a fantastic new college that lives up to the aspirations, dreams and future hopes of young people in Luton. When I went to Icknield High School, I got to see first-hand how fundraising and creativity went hand in hand to raise funds for the fantastic Keech Hospice Care.

Last week I went to Beechwood primary school, which had a sense of community and education together. I saw that first hand when I walked in to Venus class. The class were designing posters encouraging people either to come to this country, or to come to live in Luton, and all the words on the posters summed up what I think are the best, the lightest and the brightest bits of Luton. They had “community” and “friendship”—one lad had “football”—and they all had “opportunity”. That is exactly what those young people deserve. I do not want to go back to normal. I want to go better than what we had before, because those young people in Luton North deserve so much better.

I put on record my thanks to all the staff who keep us going here—the staff who keep us safe, the staff who keep us fed and the staff who keep us on the right track when we are going the wrong way—and I wish everybody a merry Christmas and a safe and happy new year.

3.18 pm

**Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con):** It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate, but I share the views that have been expressed by many hon. Members and hon. Friends about Sir David Amess not being here with us. I have only been a Member of this place for a short while, but

[*Tom Hunt*]

even after that short while, I felt it was a bit weird being here today. This debate cropped up on me. I had not really thought about it—in fact I only put in to speak a little bit earlier, because I forgot it was going to happen—and for a moment one of the things I remembered most about him was his contributions towards these debates. He will be missed forever, and it is on days like today when we especially remember him.

I have a few local issues and a few national issues. I have been pretty active in the Chamber this year. In my first year I was in this place, I made 86 interventions in different debates. I was quite pleased with that, bearing in mind that my predecessor made 82 and his main re-election claim was that he was the hardest-working MP in Suffolk. I was quite glad to get 86 in my first year. I think this year I have made about 79, so it has dropped a little bit, but normal service will be resumed next year.

I continue to be involved in campaigns in Ipswich. The funding of core public services continues to be a huge priority for me and many of my Suffolk colleagues. Just this week, me and all six of my Suffolk colleagues sent a letter to the Department for Education on special educational needs and disability funding. For whatever reason, young people with learning disabilities in Suffolk are probably the most poorly funded in the country—not just compared with large metropolitan areas, but compared with counties that are very similar to us. It makes no sense. My view is that, whatever their postcode, a young person with learning disabilities deserves exactly the same level of support as anybody else. It is not about taking away from other areas; we are just saying that young people with learning disabilities in Ipswich and Suffolk deserve the same support as anybody else with learning disabilities.

I am continuing my campaign nationally on learning disabilities. As a dyslexic and dyspraxic, I am a broken record on the Education Committee on those two issues. I was pleased when my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) announced that he is also dyslexic and that he is moving forward with the ten-minute rule Bill on the requirement to screen all primary school children for dyslexia. I was proud to co-sponsor that Bill, and I will continue to work closely with him on that important mission.

We know that around half of prisoners have dyslexia, and around four in 10 entrepreneurs have got dyslexia, so the stakes are incredibly high. Given the right support and with an early diagnosis, there is no reason why dyslexics cannot be among the most productive and creative people in our country. If they do not get the right support, they can often go in the wrong direction.

Like many hon. Members and hon. Friends in this place, I continue to be very active on the issue of cladding. I also eagerly await the further support that has been promised. Though many of my constituents have been supported through the building safety fund, many have not. I have been clear that I will continue to campaign on this issue, because I believe that no leaseholder should be left behind, and some have been—through no fault of their own. That campaign must continue.

I want to raise a slightly different issue on cladding. We have had a few examples where buildings have been successful in getting funding through the building safety

fund, only for shrink wrap to emerge. One large tower block in Ipswich—St Francis Tower—was one of the first buildings in the country to get access to the building safety fund. That was good news, until shrink wrap covered the building and hundreds of residents were expected to live behind that for up to a year, with virtually no natural sunlight and very little air.

I have been clear in this place that I believe that Block Management UK and OANDA—the companies that have put shrink wrap on the building—have not behaved in an acceptable way. There are other buildings in Ipswich where this is happening. Those companies seem to have listened a little to the debates around what happened at St Francis Tower, and breathable material is shortly to be erected on another building in Ipswich. I went to see it, quite excited about this great development, but it was not that breathable. It is slightly better than the shrink wrap around St Francis Tower, but not by that much, to be honest.

My message to the Government is that Ipswich is ahead of the game when it comes to accessing the building safety fund. We have experienced some of these pains before other areas. I do not think it will be long until there are other hon. Members and hon. Friends raising exactly the same issues in this place. I have been looking to secure an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate to raise awareness of this issue. Yes, we have got to get money from the building safety fund, and dangerous materials do need to be removed, but we have got to carry out that work in a way that is sensitive to the mental health of the people who are expected to live in those buildings.

Freeports continue to progress; town deal projects continue to progress. Ipswich Town football club is mid-table in league one at the moment; it is not great. I was at a Charlton game recently at The Valley. We lost 2-0, but it was great to be with 3,000 Ipswich fans in strong voice. Not many of them actually recognised me; I seem to get recognised more at Portman Road than when I go to the away matches. I have been going despite the concerns about omicron. I will be at Portman Road this Saturday to see them—hopefully—defeat Sunderland. As a Newcastle United fan, I have two reasons to hope that Sunderland are unsuccessful on Saturday.

There are three more national issues that I want to touch on—things that I feel strongly about. One of them I have been banging on about quite a lot, but two of them, for whatever reason, I do not feel like I have had the opportunity recently to air my views in this place. I want to talk quickly about child cruelty. I know that many Members have mentioned this, but in the case of Arthur's tragic death, I want to put on record how disturbed I was by that. I know we all know about what happened, but if Members have not listened to and seen the clips and the videos of the abuse that he suffered, my advice would be to do so, as difficult as it is, because we have to confront and not hide away from the horror of what happened.

I noticed yesterday that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) raised the case of Star Hobson at Prime Minister's questions, which is also incredibly disturbing. It is enough to bring any of us to tears when we think about what must have been going through the minds of those young, defenceless people—how vulnerable they were, and how incapable they were of doing anything to protect themselves as horror was

placed on them and there was no escape. Their last moments would have been feeling alone, desperate and unloved. It is vitally important that any failings in children's services in those relevant local authorities are looked at urgently and lessons are learned so that this cannot happen again. We know that some of this was linked to the fact that lockdowns were taking place, so it is another very real reminder of the consequences of lockdowns and how some of the most vulnerable people in our society pay the greatest price and have done. We must do what we can to avoid them.

In terms of covid as an issue, it is in some senses good that this has been a positive debate. We all will do what we can to remain positive and, when we go back to our constituencies, to be positive and lift up people we meet with a bit of Christmas spirit and cheer, but it is quite sad, because for millions of people in this country, last Christmas was a very dark and depressing time. We were looking forward to having a Christmas that was much more normal, much more positive and much more festive. Like many Members, I have enjoyed over the past few weeks going to Christmas craft events, seeing Christmas decorations made and going to a number of different carol services. For one, I was asked to dress up as a wise man, which was an interesting costume, and give an incredibly long reading. It was an essay, which was quite difficult, but I got through it and I was pleased to have been able to do that.

My concern is that if we are not careful, this Christmas could be quite similar to last Christmas, and that is a sad thing. It is an incredibly challenging time for our hospitality sector at the moment and for many people who will test positive. Even if they do not get that ill from having it, they may have to spend Christmas alone, and there will be lots of people in that position.

It is important, though, that we accept the brutal realities of lockdown restrictions. For some people they may not be that bad, but for other people, the mental health consequences of lockdowns are debilitating. Even the fear of a lockdown and the uncertainty that surrounds whether one may or may not take place will be taking a great toll on the mental health of millions of people up and down the country. That is not to say that I think this is an easy situation or that we should not be concerned about the omicron variant; it is just to say that in any decision we make, we need to have a rounded debate and discussion in which all the factors are considered: the economic effects, the impact on livelihoods and the impact on mental health.

We need to begin to think about what the long game is here. When does it end? If it is the case that we can—I hope—get through the next few weeks without too much devastation in terms of economic effects and potential loss of life, there will be more variants. There will be another variant perhaps in two months' time, three months' or four months' time that could have 31 mutations or 32 mutations. If we act and continue to act in a just-in-case way, I do not really see where this ends.

At some point, as a country and as a world, I think we need to figure out in the long term how we live with this. We all know people—there are millions of people in this country—who are shadows of the people they were 20 months ago; who have lost confidence, whose development has been stifled, and that is across all age groups. I have incredible concern about our young people and how their chances have been blighted. This is

a difficult time for us, and I do not envy the Prime Minister being in the position that he is in. The ultimate responsibility lies at his door. As a Member of this place, I would just say, let us always think in the most rounded way possible. It has been a pleasure to contribute to the debate, local, national, light-hearted and much more serious and sombre.

With regard to child cruelty, I do think we need to look at children's services. We need to prevent what has happened from happening again. We also need to look at whole-life tariffs. I think we would struggle to find a person in this country who would not accept that retribution does have a legitimate role to play in the justice system, particularly when it comes to the most heinous crimes and the most evil individuals such as the individuals behind the barbaric crimes that I outlined earlier in my speech.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We now come to the Front-Bench responses to the Christmas Adjournment debate.

3.32 pm

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** It is a pleasure once again to be the SNP lead in the Adjournment debate. It was superbly led by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). He rightly started with a glowing tribute to Sir David Amess. I can only reflect that there will not be another summer or another Christmas in which I will be mentioned in the Southend newspapers because of my exchanges with Sir David. Indeed, last summer I made a wisecrack in here that somehow managed to find its way into every single newspaper in the UK, including in Southend when I compared the England football team's penalty shoot-out record with the Southend trains. I can only say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that when Sir David saw me in September he very much approved and thanked me for the opportunity once again to mention the train service in Southend. I support the Backbench Business Committee in its request to name the Summer Adjournment debate after Sir David. That is very much a tribute. I can only feel sorry for his successor, whoever that may be. They will really have something to live up to. It was nice to hear all hon. Members mention Sir David Amess.

As the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) said, we are dealing with covid once again, and this new omicron variant. We need to hear from the Government fairly soon that they will have to support business and, indeed, workers. I hope they will take the opportunity to revisit the issue of the excluded—those 3 million people who have not received financial support during the pandemic. In the past 20 months we have seen the best in people.

I can think of organisations that have assisted the vulnerable in Glasgow South West, such as Govan HELP, which organises The Govan Pantry; the Crookston Community Group; SWAMP and G53 Together; the Threehills community supermarket, which is a thriving project that I am very much involved in; and the Drumoyne Community Council. They have made sure that the vulnerable have been protected, particularly when it comes to food.

People have a right to food. I am delighted that, in 2022, I will be working with the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union on its campaign on the right to food to

[Chris Stephens]

ensure that those workers are aware of their rights. I support workers in the hospitality sector. The Government need to look at people not being given travel to get home at night from their place of work and the fact that people working in the hospitality sector on zero-hours contracts cannot afford food. It sickens me that they spend their shifts serving food that they cannot afford.

Perhaps in 2022, the Government will finally table their much-promised employment Bill to look at those indignities, because many indignities that we see in our society happen in the workplace. As the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) touched on, the covid pandemic has exposed inequalities, including in employment and employment practices. I hope that the Government will fix this country's broken social security system.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and ensuring that it is taken forward. It is harrowing for hon. Members to listen to constituents in our surgeries showing us the threats that their family members in Afghanistan have received about what will happen to them if the constituent does not go back to Afghanistan to face the Taliban. It is important that that work is done. I will certainly continue to raise issues with the Home Office and I will join him in ensuring that it puts the scheme in place. I am delighted that he and other hon. Members raised it.

That comes back to another of my wishes for 2022. The language of our politics is important, especially when we are discussing immigration and refugees. I place on record again that it is legal for people to seek sanction or asylum; it is not illegal and we should stop labelling people as illegal.

This year is the 25th anniversary of Show Racism the Red Card and I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group. I did a recent podcast with the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) where we mentioned that it is important to get the tone and language of our politics right when we are discussing those issues.

I have seen Show Racism the Red Card at a school in Glasgow South West telling schoolchildren in excellent terms the difference between an asylum seeker, a refugee and an economic migrant. The Deputy Chief Whip may want to invite it to this workplace to tell MPs that difference. Again, I hope that the Government will consider giving asylum seekers the right to work in this country after six months, because I think that they should have that right.

In general, the Government have had some recent difficulties. They seem to have engulfed themselves in sleaze and the perception of arrogance. There is a cost-of-living crisis. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) mentioned that we should do an assessment of Brexit and face the Brexit realities. The economy appears to be shrinking. The Government should consider their position in dealing with some of those issues and with the perception of the Government.

Of course, support for Scottish independence is rising to its highest levels, and whether or not there is a connection, I am very confident that, after the covid crisis is over, Scotland will become a modern, independent country.

The hon. Member for Harrow East, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) and others rightly mentioned something that I always mention: the role of constituency staff. The caseloads are increasing, and have increased in the past 20 months. Once again, my constituency office staff team have never been busier and they are the real heroes, as far as I am concerned. I thank Justina, Dominique, Keith, Tony, Greg and Scott for their work. They are led by our office manager, the great Roza Salih, who, unfortunately, was not elected to Scotland's Parliament this year, but I am sure that she will be elected to her place very soon, because she deserves it.

In 2022, I hope that we will continue to ensure that not just Members of Parliament, but constituency office staff have the security measures that they need to continue to do their work. When I was first elected, I never contemplated having to deal with some of the security questions and measures that we now have to deal with.

**Paul Holmes:** The hon. Gentleman rightly mentions constituency security. He will know—I will have to raise this later—that contracts have changed, but we are still seeing unacceptable delays and works not being completed to our constituency offices, despite our consistently trying to get the authorities to act on it. Has he experienced that, and have any colleagues spoken to him about that problem?

**Chris Stephens:** I have experienced delays; I had a visit this week that I hope deals with that. Social media was touched on as well, and the abuse, threats and hateful conduct that we receive as Members of Parliament on social media will have to be looked at. That is seen not just by us, but by family members and constituency office staff, and I hope that some work will be done around social media.

It falls on me again to remind everyone that we go into a recess, not a holiday, and I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker and the Speaker's team, the House staff, those who look after us and feed us, everyone's constituency office staff across the United Kingdom, and right hon. and hon. Members a merry Christmas. I look forward to seeing them again in 2022.

3.42 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): It falls to me to respond on behalf of my party as the shadow deputy Leader of the House. Although I cannot promise to match the pizzazz of the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who was here earlier, I look forward to supporting her excellent work in holding the Government to account every sitting Thursday in 2022, just as she has done on Thursdays at business questions this year—in fact, not just on Thursdays or at Christmas, but all year round. I feel, however, that my appearance at the Dispatch Box, rather than in the Whips Office, should give hope to late developers everywhere.

Although the tone of these end-of-term debates is often more convivial than other exchanges that we have in this place, there is an air of sadness today. As someone who often takes part in the pre-recess Adjournment debates, like the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston), the loss of the late Member for Southend West, Sir David Amess,—is really keenly felt among us, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) rightly said.

He was an ever-present master of these debates. His speeches were always fair, funny and passionate, and he unashamedly championed his beloved Southend and his constituents. His speeches were delivered with the customary grin and glint in his eye that we will all remember him for. We very much missed a speech from him today but his generosity and kindness to colleagues, and the contribution that he made in this House, is missed even more. I know that we will all send love to his family and friends.

As David Amess really showed us, these debates are a fantastic opportunity, as are business questions, for hon. Members to raise a whole range of issues. As the hon. Member for Wantage said, there are 40, 50 or 60 issues that a Member could raise, and let's face it: this year we have had plenty of material to work with. Today, we have had some brilliant contributions from around the House on issues that are really close to Members' hearts.

Turning to the Opposition Members who spoke, it was a real pleasure to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). He was a wonderful member of the shadow Leader of the House team, and my thanks to his staff for all the work that they have done. He talked with such pride about the contribution of community groups and schools in his constituency. I very much applaud his call to give the covid memorial wall a long-term future, and I wish him luck with that campaign.

It is always great to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) speak about the excellent work of community groups in her area. She is a fantastic local champion. I look forward to her securing a debate in this House on the contribution of charities and the support they need. It would allow me to speak, and to thank the unsung heroes in Newport East, including the food banks and charities doing so much great work, not least on an issue raised with me recently by the guides about access to banking services for small charities. I do hope she gets that debate.

Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who also spoke about local community groups, as well as a range of other issues. Well done to her also on her campaign to ban plastic in wet wipes. No one disagrees—she is quite right—and it would be worth spending a parliamentary life on that issue alone, so we look forward to her success. It was very interesting to hear of her experience of Bosnia. Her points on housing were well made, and I draw to her attention—and to the attention of the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), who spoke on the subject—the announcement made by the Welsh Government today on some of the housing and cladding issues we have heard about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) is a fellow Labour Whips Office colleague. We should thank our Whips across the House, and our advisers and civil servants who support our Whips Offices. My hon. Friend—I have to say that Luton was very well represented in this debate—is quite right about looking to see the light, and seeing the best in people who have really stepped up and stepped forward during the most difficult of times. I very much recognised her description of those weeks trying to help people home from Afghanistan. She was quite right to raise the issue of the disproportionate impact of covid on the disadvantaged, and the inequalities that that has exposed.

On the issue of Afghanistan, I very much agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East about the need for the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Having worked over the years with a number of Afghan interpreters who have settled in Newport East—we spent many years trying to reunite them with their families before this crisis—I think it is really important that we get this right. He also mentioned the biometric residency permits issue; many of the families, certainly in Newport, who did make it here to rejoin previously settled Afghan interpreters have been waiting in bridging hotels for many months for those permits. I do hope that the Deputy Chief Whip listens to that, because it is very important.

I commend, as I think all Members would, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for raising the really important issue of compulsory helmets for those involved in snow sports. He spoke about a really harrowing case—I know we would all send our love to the family—and he does the House great service by raising it.

It was extremely important to hear the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) speaking with such experience of the situation in Bosnia. He speaks with such expertise on defence issues generally, and his comments were echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney. He is quite right that Britain has a role to play, and we must save Bosnia from another disastrous war. I think many Members will reflect on his speech in the days to come, and it was a really important matter to raise.

I join in what the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) said about key workers and health workers. That gives me the opportunity to thank the staff at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, GPs who are part of the booster programme, and all those key workers out there working with us at this time. I hope that the Deputy Chief Whip will note—this is for his black book—that the hon. Member for Eastleigh is a most assiduous attendee of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. The hon. Member also talked about rail, which gives me the opportunity to ask the Government to look kindly on the campaign for a walkway station in Magor. I have raised that issue many times in the House; perhaps the Deputy Chief Whip can put in a word for me.

Last but not least, the hon. Member for Ipswich mentioned dyslexia, which is a really important issue to raise in the House. Many of my constituents will welcome that. I echo the points rightly made about security and abuse by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I hope that the Deputy Chief Whip heard that, and that we continue to apply the pressure to get those things right.

As we close the curtain on 2021, colleagues around the House will be challenging the Government to do better in 2022 across a range of policy areas. One of the most basic things that the Government could do to help is improve engagement with Members on departmental answers and response times. I speak for many Members when I say that departmental response times for constituency queries have been a real concern this year—they are often raised in points of order in the House. The Home Office has been shocking—at some stages there have been about 8,500 unanswered queries from hon. Members in the system. We also have constituents waiting more than a year for cases with the Child

[Jessica Morden]

Maintenance Service to be resolved, and there are unacceptable wait times from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, too. Let us hope for much better in 2022.

As I said, there is always plenty to raise with Ministers on these occasions, not least today, as in the last few days we have seen the Prime Minister suffer the biggest rebellion of the Parliament. As others have said, it has been up to the Opposition to show the leadership that the Prime Minister cannot. This week, as many have said, we have seen some of the worst leadership at the worst possible time. We need a serious Prime Minister for very serious times.

We cannot let an absent Chancellor off the hook, either, at a time when urgent clarification is needed on support for workers and businesses, when the threat that inflation poses for household bills looms large, and with a cost of living crisis as we head into the new year. With inflation at nearly decade-high levels, it will be a really difficult Christmas for many families. When businesses cannot trade properly, we cannot pretend that nothing has changed, and we cannot abandon them and workers at this time. It feels like the Government are in chaos with a Prime Minister who has lost his grip, and that working people are paying the price.

On a more cheery note, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) put it so well, the glue that keeps the House together is all the people who work in it for us. May I therefore end by thanking staff across both Houses—the wonderful Doorkeepers, the security staff, the police, the catering staff, the cleaning staff, the Clerks, the Library, *Hansard*, broadcasting and those in many other roles—for all their tireless work to keep us safe and help us keep our jobs? My personal thanks to my team—Kath, Dan, Elaine, Sarah and Emma—and to hon. Members' staff working in constituencies who are, as many said, on the very frontline for us in difficult times. Next year will be difficult, too.

If I may, I will thank one other team whose work in this place is often unseen but none the less vital. As the Chair of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, may I take the liberty of saying a very big thanks to counsel, the Clerks and the Committee, of which the hon. Member for Eastleigh is a member, for all the work that they do to scrutinise secondary legislation, especially at this time of emergency regulations? I recommend the Committee's special report, "Rule of Law Themes from COVID-19 Regulations", to the Deputy Chief Whip as interesting recess reading. It gives some pointers as to where the Government could improve, while appreciating the hard job that civil servants have in drafting legislation in the current difficult circumstances.

I wish everyone a merry Christmas and a safe recess. To you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the whole Speaker's team, I say Nadolig llawen pawb.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Nadolig llawen i chi hefyd. I think it is about time that we heard from the man standing behind that tie: the Deputy Chief Whip.

3.55 pm

**The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to answer this debate.

I do enjoy these debates—not only do we get a great tour of the country, various issues, and the community work that goes on, but it is great to hear people talk so passionately about their constituencies. However, as others have said, something just is not the same this year: we have all rightly remembered our late friend Sir David Amess. I was always struck, as were others, by the speed at which he would give his speech, and not only because when I tried to list some of the things on which he needed responses, it was impossible for me to look through the file quick enough to find any meaningful answers. I often felt for the *Hansard* reporters who tried to record it word for word. He really used these debates superbly.

David was one of the many right hon. and hon. Members I see in this House working incredibly hard daily for their constituencies, often with very little praise—if anything, with lots of criticism. One thing that really struck me in the days that followed his death was that the tone changed very quickly, and people were appreciative of MPs and the work they were doing. Sadly, sometimes it does not last very long, and colleagues have yet again been subject to threats and abuse on social media. We have to do all we can to stop that happening, because I do not want people to be dissuaded from standing for election to this House. Our democracy is incredibly important and, as I say, I see on a daily basis people working incredibly hard for their constituencies.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for raising that issue; it is very important. Will he join me in saying that not only Members of Parliament but constituency office staff should not suffer abuse? They are recognised in the community as members of an MP's team.

**Stuart Andrew:** Funnily enough, I was literally about to come to that. It is often our staff who see the abuse first. If the people who write the abuse think that our staff are not affected, they need only speak to my staff or, I am sure, anybody's staff. They are affected. I thank all our staff for the work that they do.

David epitomised what I was saying about being a hard-working Member of Parliament. In these debates, he would always finish his speech on the subject of making Southend a city, and that is now happening—there is no greater honour to him. I hear loud and clear the calls for the summer Adjournment debate to be named after him in tribute, and I am sure that if it is the will of the House, there will be ways in which we can make progress on that.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving the Government's view that we should rename the summer recess Adjournment debate after Sir David. One reason why we have made that suggestion is that there is not always a Christmas or Easter Adjournment debate, but there is always a summer one. Will my right hon. Friend find a way? Does there have to be a resolution of the House? Is this done by Government diktat? What do we have to do to make this happen—everyone agrees on it—for next summer?

**Stuart Andrew:** My understanding is that it is a matter for the House. However, I will raise it with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

That was a timely intervention, because I was just about to refer to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I feel like I know Stanmore station extremely well, and he raises an important point about building on car parks. Many train stations across the country did just that, and they now regret it because we want people to use alternative modes of public transport to get to work.

I am glad my hon. Friend raised the important and concerning issue of the theft of catalytic converters by gangs.

My hon. Friend was not the only hon. Member to mention the Afghanistan resettlement scheme. The Home Office is working quickly to establish the details of the scheme. As we know, we are looking at 5,000 coming in during the first year, with 20,000 coming in over five years. We are working with partners such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to design and open the scheme, and further details will be announced by the Home Office. I will reflect to the Department the fact this was raised in a number of contributions to this debate.

My hon. Friend also raised the important issue of homelessness, and I congratulate him on his work and campaigning. Like me, he will be pleased that rough sleeping has fallen by 43% since 2017. Investment is going in, but I am under no illusion that there is still work to be done.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) talked about Christmas lights, and I think we all like that we have had some events to go to this Christmas. It was good to see a couple of thousand people, including families, coming out to enjoy the festivities in Guiseley.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) rightly talked about how schools and community organisations adopted COP this year. Pupils at so many of our schools took a great interest in COP, which shows the huge responsibility on our shoulders to ensure we tackle this important issue for their generation.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton also mentioned Sir Richard Leese, to whom I offer my congratulations on his lengthy service as leader of Manchester City Council. The Conservative group leader of Leeds City Council is celebrating 50 years of service, including more than 40 years as leader of the Conservative group, which is quite a phenomenal achievement. Councillor Andrew Carter has done a phenomenal amount of work, so I nick this opportunity to give him some credit.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) made a very important contribution on Louis Watkiss. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been for his parents, Natalie and Chris, to lose their child in such an awful accident. When I worked in the children's hospice movement, one of the things that hit me the most was when bereaved parents would tell me it was not just the loss of a child but the loss of their hopes and dreams for a life they thought would go further. I hope that out of this tragedy we can see some good. Clearly their campaigning with my right hon. Friend is important, and I will talk to the relevant

Department to see whether an amendment to the law is practicable or whether the code of practice can be changed.

My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made a powerful contribution. I suppose no one can talk about Bosnia with such experience, although I have learned that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) also has experience of Bosnia.

I have been to Bosnia a couple of times, and visiting Srebrenica is probably one of the hardest visits I have ever made. We went up to the village and met some of the mamas of Srebrenica. One of them told me that in one day she lost her father, her brother, her husband and her two sons. You just cannot imagine the atrocities. My right hon. Friend is right to raise this serious situation. The de facto secession attempt by Republika Srpska is something that the Government take very seriously. We are not complacent about it, and we condemn those threats. We fully support Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and sovereignty. He rightly pointed out that we are working with our international allies and other partners, and mentioned the appointment of Sir Stuart Peach. Clearly, this is an important area of work. My right hon. Friend will know that the Foreign Secretary hosted Foreign Ministers from the western Balkans just this week to address these issues, but again, I will ensure that the serious points that he made are heard in Government.

The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) talked, like many did, about the contribution of community groups. I think we have all been impressed at how much they have done to help so many people in our communities. I will certainly speak to the Leader of the House about her request for a debate on the contribution that such organisations have made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) complained that he has not yet received a Christmas card from me. All I can say is that all good things come to those who wait. In fact, I think everybody I know is still waiting for one; that is how far behind I am on my Christmas preparations. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituency. He talked about the housing issue, which I know he raises at every opportunity. He is also a doughty advocate for Southampton airport. The fact that he went to speak in support of it at 1 o'clock in the morning shows how much he clearly cares about that issue. His bid for the headquarters of Great British Railways to be in Eastleigh is noted. Just like the Christmas card, an early present cannot be forthcoming, but the bid is noted.

The hon. Member for Putney—from Pudsey to Putney—and others talked about the amazing contribution of staff and volunteers in getting the vaccine and the vaccine boosters out. We are so grateful for the amazing work that they are doing, and we are grateful to those who have been doing the community boxes. The wet wipes issue is one that I have personal interest in, in that—I had better clarify that—we had our niece living with us for about a year and, unbeknown to me, she was using them to remove make-up, flushing them down the toilet and clogging up the pipe. I just do not think people realise how destructive they are. Indeed, Yorkshire Water ran a very important campaign trying to highlight the issue. I will personally advocate for that campaign with the relevant Department.

[Stuart Andrew]

My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) talked about three serious issues in his constituency, including the relief roads and the pensions issue. He talked about those who are involved in those campaigns feeling that they are not being listened to, but let me reassure those constituents of his that I have seen him at work in this House and I know that they have an MP who is diligent and relentless, who will ensure that their voice is continually heard.

The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) talked about the Afghanistan resettlement scheme and all those organisations; I particularly enjoyed listening to her experiences at the various groups she has been to. I was touched by the case of the headteacher she talked about, and I will raise with the Department of Health and Social Care the suggestion about lowering the age of screening.

I listened to one of the first speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), when he talked about learning disabilities. As a personal champion of that issue, he offers a great contribution to the House, and I know how passionately he cares about it. He also raised the awful cases of Arthur and Star. I have one regret in life, and that is that I am not a dad, because I think that is probably one of the best and most precious gifts you can have. I cannot therefore understand how anybody could do anything to hurt young children. I hope that we will all, in the memory of those children, do everything we can to ensure that such cases are never raised in this House again. Finally, I turn to the Front-Bench contributions from the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden). I think we will always disagree on the independence of Scotland. We had the referendum. I understood it was a once-in-a-generation referendum, and the answer was very clear. Both raised the important issue of security for MPs and MPs' staff. I sit on one of the Committees concerned. We have to get reassurance to Members and their staff that when work that is needed is highlighted, it is enacted quickly. There have been too many delays, and I will continue to raise that. I will raise the issue about Departments' responses with the Leader of the House.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker for all your support and hard work over the past year. I thank the Clerks, who always offer us support and try to help us understand some of

the mad rules that sometimes I cannot get my head around. I thank the Doorkeepers, who are always so polite and always help us when we need it, all the catering staff, and all the other staff in the House. I want to add my thanks to my staff—Steph, Penny, Kyle, Dawn and Simon, who work incredibly hard.

I hope everybody has a safe break. Our message should be to get boosted. The hon. Member for Luton North said that she wanted to talk about giving a bit of light, and you have also referenced this, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I thought I would activate my tie as I wish every right hon. and hon. Member a very merry Christmas and a superb new year. I look forward to seeing everybody again after the end of recess.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** How do I follow that?

Everybody has mentioned Sir David, or thought of David, during this debate. I have chaired many Adjournment debates where David took part. It does not matter if you put a three-minute limit on David, he sees that as a challenge. He certainly does not reduce the number of issues, as you intimated, Stuart; he just rattles through them. Of course, today he would have carried on with his campaign to make Southend a city, and, more recently, to get a statue of Dame Vera Lynn on the white cliffs of Dover, which I heartily support. I also support the idea that has come forward that we change the name of the summer recess debate to one that contains Sir David's name. Irrespective of whether that happens or not—and I think there would be a will of the House for it to happen—the spirit of David will always be in this Chamber during Adjournment debates.

I cannot compete with the tie, but I do have a hat. [Laughter.] There are 650 MPs, but thousands of people who work here to make sure that we can do our job. I want to wish everybody who works here, from the cooks to the cleaners to the Clerks—there are simply too many to mention—a very merry Christmas. It has to be better than last year. At least I am not going to have to kick my sister and brother-in-law out of the house after one day—that felt really awful. At least we are going to have a decent Christmas. I wish everybody a very, very happy and healthy 2022.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

## Animal Testing

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

4.14 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak today on this issue and for granting this important debate.

I have said many times, and in many debates in this House, how passionately I feel about animal welfare. I know I am not alone among my colleagues in that respect, and I know I am not alone in my constituency. We are a nation of animal lovers, and that is why animal rights consistently sits in the top ranking of issues I am contacted about. It was only two months ago that my constituency broke into the top 10 for the number of signatories to an e-petition that prompted a Westminster Hall debate on this very issue. We, as a nation, care.

Looking to the future of testing on animals, there are several angles of the argument we need to consider. First, does the scientific evidence support continued animal experimentation? Next, on the morality of testing, can we justify knowingly submitting animals to suffering in the name of science? There is also the international context to consider. Are we willing to go from a world leader on animal rights to merely following the law? I will do my best to cover those questions today.

It will come, I hope, as no surprise that public opinion overwhelmingly supports the replacement of animal experiments with human-relevant techniques. Now would be a good time to reflect on that fact as it is, after all, the public who elect us to this place, and it is both our responsibility and greatest privilege to represent their views here. In February, YouGov polled the UK in partnership with Cruelty Free International. That polling found that 68% of people support phasing out animal testing in favour of alternatives. In Scotland, 79% of adults found it unacceptable that animal testing continued while other methods were available. In September, further polling found 65% of respondents wanted to see a binding plan in place to phase out experiments. Two thirds wanted a target date for the end of testing. And if that does not convince you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will appeal to the politically minded among us. Almost 70% have a favourable view of MPs who support the phasing out of animal testing. Now is the time to step up.

Let me turn to the first of the questions I posed earlier, on the scientific argument for testing. In October's debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), set out the justification for testing. I have great respect for the Minister and do not doubt his passion for these matters, but in my opinion the argument was hinged on a flawed principle. First, that animal testing is

“vital for identifying benefits for humans, animals, and the environment.”—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 41WH.]

I will make no comment about the contradiction there of animals suffering for the benefit of other animals. That it is the legal framework in which we currently work.

Let us look at the first point: that animal testing is a necessary evil. Some 92% of drugs that show promise in animal trials fail to reach the market, most commonly because of poor efficacy or safety that was not picked

up in animal trials. For treatments for complex and poorly understood conditions, failure following success with animal trials is almost a certainty. For example, on Alzheimer's, the chief science officer of the Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation has said:

“We've cured mice engineered with this disease over 500 times. The mouse models don't translate into humans.”

We would be forgiven for assuming that animal testing is only used as a last resort. We hear all the time that animal experiments are used only where there is no alternative, and it is true that that is the intent of the law. The duty is currently on the researcher applying for a license to prove there is no alternative to animal testing. Not only are applications not approved by experts in the subject matter, but analysis of Home Office documents show that this is treated as a tick-box exercise by some researchers. There are no rigorous checks and balances in place. There is the continued approval of mice testing for Botox products, despite the availability of approved non-animal methods, and the fact that most products are used for cosmetic purposes.

Dogs have a special protection in legislation and are allowed to be tested on only if there are no alternative suitable species. Last year, however, 4,340 licensed procedures were carried out on dogs in Great Britain. Dogs are mostly used for repeat dose toxicity testing, where they are given daily doses of test substances for about four weeks, sometimes longer. Once the experiment is over, the dogs are put to sleep so that researchers can examine the effects of the substance on their internal organs. Although continued research and development into viable and reliable human-relevant methods remains essential, and progress must be made at pace, there are existing methods available. I question, then, why 3 million animal experiments were carried out in 2020. In fact, no application for animal experiment was refused by the Home Office last year. In one specific case, a simple one-word answer was provided to justify why there was no alternative to animal testing. Perhaps that is why, in my recent pursuit of information on Scotland-specific animal research data and unnecessary animal deaths at testing facilities, the Home Office has been so reluctant to provide any meaningful responses at all.

How can we recognise the sentience of animals and not recognise the hypocrisy of allowing them to suffer in the name of medicine, when those medicines are not even reaching the market? How can that be justified? Not by the existing legislative framework, to start with. Although it may be legally permissible, it is not morally permissible. It is time for the Government to commit to a reform of the animal testing law. Although they acknowledge that, actions speak louder than words, as the old adage goes. If they do not do this, the UK risks falling behind our international partners.

We have heard this Government's exclamations about how Brexit presents opportunities untold. Whether that is true remains to be seen, but I ask them to seize this moment: let us make this issue one of those opportunities to cement ourselves once more as a world leader. The European Parliament recently voted in favour of an action plan to accelerate the move away from animal testing across the bloc. It backed the establishment of a high-level group to work with member states to draw up an ambitious plan, with concrete actions. Germany has committed to a plan to support innovation through animal-free research. The Netherlands has initiated its

[Margaret Ferrier]

transition programme for innovation without the use of animals, in order to become a front runner in this area. The US Environmental Protection Agency has released its first update to its plan for reducing animal testing, with concrete steps towards its goals and metrics to monitor progress. We must be proactive here.

So where do we start? Funding is crucial. Current funding through NC3Rs is not enough if we are to replace animal testing. Its annual budget is about £10 million. By comparison, it is estimated that in 2019 the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health Research together provided £1.8 billion in funding for UK medical research, and medical research charities provided £1.9 billion. NC3Rs does not even focus solely on animal experiment replacement. The Chancellor's autumn Budget committed £5 billion to health research. I encourage the Minister today to commit some of this funding to the development of human-relevant science.

In tandem with funding, a clear and ambitious strategy is essential. That means a joined-up approach across Government and stakeholders. We can see the approach the international community is starting to take. Some good suggestions from animal charities that I have heard include the use of target setting, as we have seen with our climate change commitments, and the immediate discontinuation of funding for projects using animal experiments in areas that have proven poor translation rates to human trials. Research techniques need the space to continue modernising. Continuing to rely on outdated principles, legislated for half a century ago, is stifling development. If we look back into history at all the advances made in medicine and technology, we see that they are filled with methods and practices that were seen as innovative and state-of-the-art at the time, but that we would not dream of using now. That is precisely where animal testing should lie: necessary in the past maybe, but necessary no more—it is not ethical.

I also agree with calls for a dedicated Minister with the sole portfolio of accelerating animal-free science. At the moment, lines of responsibility for these issues are too muddy. They are divided up between the Home Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and, even then, there is overlap with a number of other Departments. The Home Secretary has statutory duties to support the development of non-animal testing, but it is often overlooked, which, when we think about the knock-on effect on drugs, economic policy and public health, is difficult to accept. Stakeholders say it is difficult for them to know which Minister they should be engaging with—a clear sign of how low this is sitting on the list of priorities. It must be addressed urgently.

I mentioned earlier my own difficulties in obtaining specific animal testing data from the Home Office, where the responsibility for this policy is supposed to lie. When I tabled a written parliamentary question asking for the number of unnecessary animal deaths at licensed testing facilities, the answer was:

“No such estimate can be made”.

When I followed up to ask what plans there were to record this information in future, the answer was that “the Home Office does not hold information on, nor has plans to record future deaths of animals that occur at licensed scientific testing facilities.”

That demonstrates the urgent need for better oversight. How can we accurately assess the legitimacy of animal testing and the associated suffering and death if the Ministers responsible do not even register the full necessary data?

In conclusion, I thank the charities that work so hard for change in this area, and I thank them for the information that they have made available to aid this discussion. They are Cruelty Free International, Animal Free Research UK, OneKind and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

I reckon the Minister and I are the last two in the Commons today, or among the last three. I thank him for taking the time to respond to my Adjournment debate, and wish him a very happy Christmas break.

4.26 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove):** I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing this important debate and for her kind festive wishes, which are very much reciprocated to her and her family. I am grateful to her and to all colleagues who have raised concerns about this issue in previous debates and in correspondence with Ministers and in various questions for those contributions.

I have the privilege of closing today's debate on behalf of the Minister responsible for animals in science. In so doing, I would like to thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for closing a Westminster Hall debate on this subject on 25 October. He provided a thorough account of the Government's position on that occasion, and I hope that I can build on his commentary in my remarks today.

This is an evocative topic. The strength of feeling it generates is entirely understandable and I do not seek to minimise that in any way; I am exceptionally mindful of it. What we absolutely must do when discussing this issue is ensure that our discussions are rooted firmly in the evidence. The use of animals in science lies at the intersection of two important public goods: the benefits to humans, animals and the environment from the use of animals in science; and the UK's proud history of support for the highest possible standards of animal welfare. I note the hon. Lady's point that the UK ought to be a world leader. I argue that one of the important contributions that have we made, including when we were a member of the European Union, was that the European directive for the protection of animals used in science was built upon and developed directly on the back of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, so UK legislation was very much at the forefront when it came to shaping safeguards and regulation in this policy space.

The balance between those two public goods is reflected in the UK's robust regulation of the use of animals in science through a dedicated Act and our strength in science and innovation. The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, which I have mentioned, specifies that animals can be used in science only for specific limited purposes where there are no alternatives, and provides protection for these animals through the legal requirement to apply the principles known as the 3Rs—replacement,

reduction and refinement. The Government are committed to maintaining robust regulatory standards, and to investing in alternatives to animals. I agree with the hon. Lady that that is very much something that the British people want to see happen, which is why we, as a Government, are committed to the three Rs. When we are considering the ongoing need for the use of animals in science, it is essential to look at the impact that would result if it were not possible. Animal testing and research play a vital role in the understanding of how biological systems work in health and disease. They support the development of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies, for humans and animals, and they support the safety and sustainability of our environment. From new vaccines and medicines to transplant procedures, anaesthetics and blood transfusions, animal research has helped us to make life-changing discoveries and advances with enormous benefits for society. Indeed, the development of the covid-19 vaccine, like that of all vaccines, was made possible at least in part because of the use of animals in research.

Animal testing is required by all global medicines regulators, including the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. That testing is essential to protect human health and safety. Without the testing of potential medicines on animals, the development, registration and marketing of new, safe, and effective medicines would not be possible.

Although much research can be done with non-animal models, there are still purposes for which it is essential to use live animals, as the complexity of whole biological systems cannot always be replicated with the use of validated non-animal methodologies. That is especially the case when the safety of humans and animals needs to be ensured. Ours is a nation that rightly gives strong support to animal welfare, and I think it fair to say that it is a country of animal lovers, but let us not confuse the issues. I will be clear: animals are only ever used in science when there is a legally permissible purpose that is for the benefit of humans, animals themselves, or the environment. We authorise the use of animals only when the harms caused to the animals are justified by the likely expected benefits, and when there are no non-animal alternatives. We issue licences only when pain, suffering, distress and lasting harm have been minimised to the degree needed to meet the scientific research objectives. There are, of course, various levels and layers of safeguards in respect of this work.

There are three commonly cited but incorrect statements about the use of animals in science. The first is that the use of animals in science is not necessary because all the benefits can be achieved through the use of non-animal methodologies. The second is that the use of animals in science is not valid or useful primarily because data acquired from animal testing cannot predict the experience of humans or other animals. The third is that many potential medicines fail during development, and that this demonstrates that animal testing is not useful or necessary in drug development.

Let me deal first with the claim that there are alternatives to using animals for all purposes. Although scientific progress has meant that many scientific objectives can be achieved without the use of animals, there are still areas in which that is not possible. One example is the assessment of what is described as the "reproductive toxicity" of a chemical or potential new medicine.

That means understanding whether a chemical causes abnormalities in fertility, abnormal development of offspring, or even problems with the fertility of the offspring of those exposed to such a chemical. Although some initial screening tests for that purpose can be performed without the use of animals, animal tests are still necessary for the assessments. Such tests have prevented the further development or marketing of substances that would have had significant negative impacts on fertility or developing embryos.

Let me now deal with the second point. Animal models are constantly improving to become more accurate and predictive, and scientists understand progressively more about which biological systems in which animals offer the most scientifically valid results. Improvements in the understanding of the genomes of animals and humans have been critical to ensuring that scientific research in animals is understood and applied appropriately. Data from animal experiments are constantly fed into computer models that analyse their predictivity and enable scientists to use animal models in increasingly smarter and more predictable ways.

As for the third claim—that many drugs fail during development, and that this shows that animal testing is not useful or necessary—although it is correct to assert that there is a high attrition rate in drug development, there are many reasons why drugs that are assessed as potentially effective and safe in animals do not progress to the market, including commercial reasons. Although there are always some effects in humans that cannot be accurately predicted in animals, animal studies are successfully used to characterise toxic effects of potential medicines with respect to the target organs that may be affected, and to understand how such effects vary with the dose of the substance administered. Additional information can be obtained about whether toxic effects seen can be reversed. This information allows for the identification of factors that can be monitored to assess adverse effects from potential new medicines in their first clinical trials and to establish the first dose that can safely be given in these studies. This is a critical part of protecting the safety of the participants in these studies.

Results from animal studies are therefore used as the basis for extrapolation to indicate and manage possible risks to humans. Thus, animal testing is considered not in a stand-alone context but as part of an integrated set of evidence from a variety of sources, including non-animal testing. Should animal testing not occur, more potential medicines would not progress to market, resources would be spent on potential medicines that would have been excluded through animal testing and the risk to humans in clinical trials would be considerably higher.

I commend the hon. Lady for the passion with which she speaks on these matters and the constructive approach and tone that she has taken in this debate, and which I know she will continue to take in raising these matters. I can assure her that the UK aims to be a world leader in the development of, and access to, new and innovative treatments and technologies. We must continue to protect the health of humans, animals and the environment. To achieve these important outcomes, we will continue—until such time as alternatives are achieved for all purposes—to need to use animals in science, but it is right that robust checks and balances should be in place. Importantly, while achieving these outcomes is critical, this Government also remain committed to robust regulation of the use

[Tom Pursglove]

of animals in science through enforcement of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, and to the funding, development and promotion of non-animal alternatives. That is something I know all of us in this House and in our country want to see delivered.

In closing, Mr Deputy Speaker, I should like to thank you, Mr Speaker and the terrific team of Deputy Speakers for everything that you do. I should also like to thank the Clerks, the staff of the House and of course the Doorkeepers. As the final Minister to speak at the Dispatch Box this year, I also want to say an enormous thank you to the officials who have been working tirelessly across Government, particularly during the challenges of the pandemic, which is of course ongoing. I also want to thank those in my private office and my parliamentary staff, without whom I could not do the work that I do.

As a Home Office Minister, I would also like to thank and send my best wishes to our emergency services workers and all those working on the frontline this Christmas and new year. And perhaps most importantly for me, I want to thank the good people of Corby and east Northamptonshire, without whom I would not be here.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** On behalf of the Speaker and the three Deputies, I wish everybody listening a very merry Christmas and a happy 2022. It is now my duty for the final time this year—hopefully, I pray—to put the Question.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.37 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 16 December 2021*

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Surgical Fires in the NHS

1.30 pm

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate. That is in line with Government and House of Commons Commission guidance. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House of Commons 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 on the estate or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

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

That this House has considered the matter of preventing surgical fires in the NHS.

It is a joy to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees, for the third time this week, and to be here myself to make a contribution to the debate. I am pleased that other hon. Members are present: the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar); the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting); and the Minister. It is no secret that I am very fond of the Minister. She and I have worked together in the House on many health issues, and I very much look forward to her response. This topic is of significant importance, so I am glad to see other Members in the Chamber to make what I am convinced will be significant contributions.

As Members are aware, health has been my portfolio in this House for quite some time—almost 10 years—which means I have been exposed to some of the more challenging issues to face the healthcare system across the United Kingdom. Today's discussion is about one of those: surgical fires in operating theatres. It is certainly one of the most concerning issues that I have come across in my time in this House. Did I know much about it? I probably did not, but once it was brought to my attention in this place and back home in Northern Ireland, where it is a devolved matter and the responsibility of a Minister in the Assembly, I became aware of it.

I spoke to the Minister present before the debate, and she has some of the questions in my speech from my staff and others. I very much look forward to her response to the questions that I will pose today. First, however, I pay tribute to the work of the expert working group on the prevention of surgical fires, who brought the matter to my attention and whose report on the prevention and management of surgical fires I recommend to the Minister and all Members of the House. It is a thorough and detailed report, which encapsulates the issues that we will discuss in the debate and gives the Minister and her Department the opportunity to respond, I hope in a positive way.

I had the pleasure of chairing the parliamentary launch of the working group's report in November last year. I am sure that their report and campaign will feed into much of the debate—it certainly will through my comments, and I am pretty sure it will through those of other hon. Members as well.

I want to underline what we mean by surgical fires and the serious dangers they pose to patients and clinicians alike. A surgical fire is a self-descriptive name: it is a fire that occurs during surgery in an operating theatre. In order for a surgical fire to occur, three elements must be present: the ignition source, the fuel and the oxidiser. Ignition sources include electrosurgical units, fibre-optic light sources and lasers. The fuels regularly include alcohol-based skin prepping agents that have been used in excess or applied inappropriately. The oxidiser is simply an oxygen-rich environment in which nitrous oxide is present, alongside the oxygen. Those are the three ingredients, or the three elements that are the reason for surgical fires. I do not believe that it is impossible to address the issue, through the Department and the Minister's response, so that we can ensure that such fires do not happen.

The statistics, which the people working in the background have gained from across the whole United Kingdom, highlight just how worrying this matter is. The report states:

“Injuries caused by a surgical fire most commonly occur on the head, face, neck and upper chest.”

By and large, that is where operations focus on, and a fire can leave victims with debilitating pain and lifelong physical and psychological scarring—I will later give the example of someone whom I met in this House at a presentation that we did some time ago. A surgical fire can also cause harm to operating theatre staff, who are exposed to similar risks. It can affect not just the patient on the table who is having the operation, but the staff, so there is a dual responsibility for safety—obviously for the patient, but also for the staff.

Like so many members of the public and those of us present for the debate, I had absolutely no idea that surgical fires posed a threat to patients across the United Kingdom, and I was unaware of the extent of the injuries that they can cause, so I am extremely pleased that this subject is being debated, even though we are in the graveyard slot. We are going into recess after today, so most Members have probably left. That is unfortunate, because others had wished to participate but could not stay. The omicron variant has also been part of the problem, and that is perhaps the case for the shadow Minister who was originally going to participate in the debate but could not do so. We are ever mindful that although we may be small in number, the debate is none the less important, and we want to put that on the record.

Today's debate is about raising awareness about the seriousness of surgical fires and pushing for the next steps to ensure that they no longer happen. Ultimately, that is the goal of the debate—to ensure that precautions are taken so that surgical fires do not happen. What I will outline in my contribution will helpfully enable the Minister and her Department to take the necessary action.

I am sure that many Members will be asking the same question that I did when this issue was first brought to my attention: how common are surgical fires? That is a

[*Jim Shannon*]

question that many of us ask. The reality is that nobody knows entirely, but the expert working group sent out a freedom of information request to trusts, health boards and relevant bodies across the United Kingdom. Although there were significant discrepancies across all organisations, the NHS England acute trusts and Welsh health boards stated that they recorded some 96 surgical fires between 2010 and 2018. The report states:

“A search of the National Reporting and Learning System (NRLS) data from between 2004 and 2011 identified just 13 reported surgical fires.”

The important point is that, by comparison,

“NHS Resolution claim to have been notified of 631 clinical negligence claims relating to surgical burns to patients”

between 2009 and 2019. NHS Resolution also claims to have paid out £13.9 million

“in damages and legal costs on behalf of NHS organisations.”

The data that some of the trusts and health boards hold as their evidential base indicate to me that the issue is bigger than many people thought. The fact that some £13.9 million has been paid out in damages and legal costs emphasises that point with a strong evidential base. I am sure that the figure is still a stark underestimate of the scale of the problem, and not all incidents will have been recorded. I suspect the number of claims could be bigger than 631, and that does not even account for all the near-misses that may have occurred in operating theatres across the United Kingdom.

According to a survey by the Association for Perioperative Practice, which is one of the largest membership organisations for operating theatre staff, almost half of its members have personally witnessed a surgical fire—again, an evidential base to prove that this issue is like picking at a scab, because the evidential base and examples are far-reaching and quantitative. There is no question but that there is a clear and obvious discrepancy in how surgical fires are reported, which raises questions about the true number of such incidents.

One of the key questions is what reason is behind the large discrepancy in reporting and why the number of surgical fire incidents that occur each year cannot be accurately quantified. The answer is quite simple: it is not mandatory for trusts to report these events when they take place. I am astounded that that is the case. There is evidence to show that £13.9 million was spent in pay outs for damages and legal costs, and that there were 631 fires. How can it be possible that it is not mandatory to report when someone is set alight during surgery? It is bound to be a fairly dramatic situation. These figures do not even cover the near-misses that must occur on a regular basis.

As the Minister may know, over the past year I have tabled a few parliamentary questions, asking the Government to provide an answer about the number of surgical fires that occur every year, but each time they have been unable to do that. I find it concerning that the Government accept that surgical fires are an issue within the NHS but they still do not know the true scale of the problem. Such is the magnitude and severity of this issue that I would have thought the Government might respond. I say that very respectfully, which is my way of doing things, Ms Rees; when I ask questions, I ask them

both to get the answer and to improve the situation. That is probably why I always see the glass as half full, rather half empty. I look to the Minister for a response on that.

The Government are still not monitoring or reporting issues that threaten the safety of patients in the UK. This is also a structural problem that requires proper education and training, and puts in place the necessary protocols to mitigate and reduce the risk as much as possible. One would assume that trusts across the country all have protocols in place to prevent such fires from occurring, but I am sad to report that that is not the case.

According to research by the expert working group, which examined specific protocols and training programmes addressing surgical fires in local NHS trusts, only a limited number of trusts across the UK actually have surgical fire protocols. I think it is vital that they should have them, but many rely on general fire safety guidelines, where there is often no mention of surgical fire risk and prevention processes. Again, I look forward to the Minister's response about what protocols and safety measures can be put in place.

According to a survey by the Association for Perioperative Practice, over half the respondents reported not having surgical fire protocols to date, while almost two thirds reported that their organisation did not provide training courses or education for operating theatre healthcare professionals on preventing surgical fires. Again, there has to be a clear change of focus among healthcare professionals to ensure that this issue is addressed.

A third of respondents reported receiving training and education, and that training included both high-risk management courses and more generic fire safety training, which was more reactive than preventative. I am a great believer in early diagnosis and preventative measures, rather than reactive measures, so I hope that as a result of this debate we will have measures put in place to address those issues. The training is clearly not adequate for the seriousness of the danger at the moment. The lack of prevention and management protocol is completely unacceptable and represents a clear and present danger to all patients who undergo surgery in the NHS.

It is truly astonishing that surgical fires are already recognised as a safety concern in other countries. I will give examples of those, because if other countries can see the risk, difficulty, impact and severity of this, then I know that our NHS, which we all treasure and love, can deal with the issue equally well, if not better. Yet there is insufficient guidance about how to prevent and manage surgical fires in the UK.

In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration already provides a list of specific recommendations on reducing the incidence of surgical fires. These include conducting a fire risk assessment at the beginning of each surgical procedure, which seems to be logical. Again, maybe the Minister can give us some indication of whether that is a procedure that the NHS will adopt. Those recommendations also include additional safety procedures such as planning and practice on how to manage a surgical fire, including how to use carbon dioxide fire extinguishers. Are those things available in the NHS? They should be, so if not, is there an intention to put them in place? As a result of introducing the necessary protocols, educational tools and reporting

systems, the number of surgical fires in the United States has dropped by 71% since 2004. By putting the right strategy and safety measures in place, we reduce the threat. That is my goal today, and that is the approach we should be trying to emulate within the NHS.

The expert working group's report made a number of recommendations on the prevention and management of surgical fires. I do not intend to read out the entire report—even though I have three hours, I do not want to put people to sleep when they want to go home—but I want to highlight four of its key recommendations. First, professional associations should explore the value of a national awareness campaign for healthcare professionals. Secondly, education on surgical fire prevention should be mandated in the surgical and perioperative education and training syllabus. Thirdly, NHS England should explore how to evolve the procurement process for sanitation products, in order to reduce surgical fire risk and encourage procurement of proven surgical fire-safe technologies. Fourthly, NHS England should explore the development of a standardised patient safety alert system that aligns the processes and outputs of all bodies and teams, and ensure that they set out clear and effective actions for providers to take on safety-critical issues. If I were to ask for nothing else today, I would ask for those four recommendations to be acted on, because that would be a massive step forward.

It is clear to me, as I hope it is clear to other Members, that effective education and training are the primary means of preventing the incidence of surgical fires. Despite some form of fire safety training being mandatory for all NHS staff during their induction and ongoing employment, that training does not address the unique features involved in preventing or extinguishing a surgical fire. The response to different kinds of surgical fires can differ, as can an individual's role, depending on who is present at the time. I know that the past year and a half—almost two years—have been extremely difficult due to covid, and that the NHS, the Minister and the Government have other priorities, but this is about prevention. It is about making sure that surgical fires do not happen again, and it is logical to try to do so: it would have stopped that £13.9 million from being paid out in damages and legal fees. Meanwhile, preventative measures and effective management strategies require additional education and training, and the absence of such training currently acts as a barrier to eliminating incidents of surgical fire and ensuring an appropriate response.

As I have highlighted, providing detailed guidance and encouraging the individuals who constitute the perioperative team to consider their role in surgical fire prevention has led to a statistically significant decline in the incidence of such fires in the United States. Their incidence has fallen by 71%—wow! I did not do the mathematics, but if we brought that 631 down by 71%, it would be approximately three quarters of that number. It is clear to me that surgical fire training should be made mandatory across the NHS and the private sector, and should be updated at least every two years. Again, I refer to those four asks: we need to make sure that those matters are taken on board, so that we have a proper system in place for the future as well.

Despite education being an essential method of preventing surgical fires, it is no use if it is not mandated, and if we still fail to tackle the institutional failure to

truly record the scale of the problem. Following discussions with the expert working group and others, I call on the Minister to instruct the Centre for Perioperative Care to investigate the possibility of making surgical fires a never event, meaning that they never happen again. We would like to see surgical fires made a never event as part of the CPC's work on redeveloping the national safety standards for invasive procedures to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

Classifying surgical fires as a never event would require mandatory reporting of incidents or near misses, while also mandating essential education for surgeons and other perioperative staff across all NHS trusts. Even without knowing the details of surgical fires, the name itself suggests they should be a never event. The concept of a surgical fire is terrifying enough that if we asked a lay person whether it should be classified as a never event, they would likely agree that it should never happen—indeed, they would probably be astounded that it even did. Only by classifying surgical fires as a never event can the national safety standards continue to be fit for purpose.

I have been paying keen attention to some of the Government's responses to my questions about surgical fires over the past year. I realise that the Government have previously stated that they have no plans to classify surgical fires as a never event. Again, I urge the Minister, in the light of the evidential base we now have, to do just that. I note in the latest response to me that the Minister says that it is not possible to make surgical fires a never event because

“there is currently no national guidance or safety recommendations to prevent surgical fires in operating theatres”.

I say respectfully that we need to do that. If we can do that, we can move forward.

I have good news for the Minister—I always try to bring good news, and not just because it is Christmas. The expert working group has already developed national guidelines. Its report made safety recommendations for perioperative staff, and the group is waiting for them to be adopted. What the expert working group has done could be a template for exactly what the NHS needs to do. It has informed me that it is more than willing to pass on its hard work directly to Government. If the Minister is agreeable, I would be happy to have a meeting to exchange those views, and those papers as well, with the Centre for Perioperative Care expediting the process. I believe there is now no reason not to classify surgical fires as a never event.

We should not forget the most important impact of surgical fires: the human impact. As I mentioned earlier, I had the pleasure of chairing the launch of the report last year. During the event, I also had the pleasure and the privilege of listening to a patient who had experienced a surgical fire. He explained to us the impact that the incident had on his life. What happened to this gentleman is quite tragic. I will quote his story, but I will not name him, and I will be careful what I say in relation to him.

He told the group that he had visited the hospital for a routine procedure, but that when he woke up the staff informed him that his body had been set alight during surgery. He told us how he had been burnt on the left side of his chest and upper arm, and of the impact that this trauma had on him. He was not aware of the fire because he was under anaesthetic having an operation.

[*Jim Shannon*]

He went on to explain how it had prevented him from continuing his career in social care, which he had been in since the age of 16, because he was disabled as a result of the incident. He explained how it had left him physically and psychologically drained, and how it had left him in pain, unable to carry out simple household tasks such as making a cup of tea—he did not have the stretch or lift in his arm any more. He told us of the impact that the fire had on his family. His partner became his carer and he could no longer spend time with his granddaughter. Having five grandchildren—three girls and two boys—I know how much I enjoy spending time with my grandchildren.

That is a jarring story—one that is all the more shocking and disturbing the more details that are revealed. I am not going to name him because there are legal discussions going on with the trusts involved and because he has nothing but praise for the nurses who have cared for him since the incident. He understands that nobody set out for it to happen, but it happened, and it happened because the precautions were not in place, because there was no safety measures and no training. The so-called never event happened.

He is a very kind man—a gentleman. However, no matter how good the nurses have been to him, it would be remiss of me not to mention how inadequately his situation was addressed. To cause severe harm to a patient is beyond the pale; it is against every medical principle that exists. The NHS and all its staff are tasked with saving life, and that is what they do to the best of their ability. We must not forget the impact on the operating theatre staff, who may also experience a psychological cost from these experiences. It is equally essential that surgeons learn how to give both physical and emotional support to the victims of surgical fires. They are the ones who have suffered most, and surgeons must be empathetic to them and their needs.

What is also concerning is that, despite this serious incident taking place, the hospital appears not to have made the appropriate changes to its systems and protocols. We all learn lessons—every day of my life, I learn lessons; I am not so proud that I do not learn from all those around me and those who I speak to. The patient required follow-up treatment in the same hospital and, on inquiring what had been done to prevent the incident from happening again, was told that nothing had changed; there had been no updates. How disappointing.

As I mentioned, I cannot name the patient, but I pay tribute to his bravery and his determination to prevent this from happening to another person. That is one of the reasons why he told us his story. He wanted to provide us with the evidential basis for what had taken place and to ensure that it did not happen to somebody else. He is truly an admirable person. I thank both him and his partner for sharing their story with me and, ultimately, with everyone in the House and Westminster Hall and with the Minister and her Department.

I am coming to the end of my speech, Ms Rees. I will begin summing up, so that we can also hear from others. I look forward to hearing some thoughtful and insightful contributions from the shadow Ministers and, specifically, the Minister. As I have stated, I hope this debate will bring greater attention to the issue of surgical fires and shine a spotlight on this danger. It is clear to me, from

reading the expert working group's report and patients' testimonies and from listening to expert guidance, that more needs to be done to prevent surgical fires. That is why I am so pleased to play my part in today's debate in support of the aims of the expert working group.

I hope that in the short time—it feels like a long time perhaps, Ms Rees—that we have been making the case today that it is clear that we are supporting the aims of the expert working group. There needs to be mandatory reporting of both surgical fires and near misses, because until we can effectively quantify the scale of the problem, we cannot effectively address it. Similarly, we need to introduce effective and mandatory education for all surgeons and perioperative practitioners in order to prevent surgical fires from occurring and to ensure that they are effectively managed when they do occur. This can also be done by classifying surgical fires as a never event. NHS operating staff are already aware of the threat of surgical fires, but they have not received the proper support and guidance to ensure that these incidents are prevented.

I therefore hope that our actions today will start the necessary change. Whether we are talking about simple steps such as introducing a checklist to ensure the taking of appropriate preventive measures, such as using the correct antiseptic skin solution, or ensuring the presence of the appropriate tools and equipment for the management of fires, which we should have as a precautionary measure in all operating theatres, these are all necessary steps to ensure the safety of patients and operating theatre staff alike. This is about the patient; it is about the staff; it is about getting it right. If we do not, we will have to confront the reality that many more people will be harmed by our failure to act. Classifying surgical fires as a never event is, I believe, the only way to effectively prevent patients and NHS staff from coming to harm.

I thank hon. Members for attending the debate and ask them to consider the reaction of their constituents if they were asked about surgical fires. If a Member here were asked about this matter, what would he or she want done in relation to it? They would surely all agree that such fires should never be allowed to happen. Making them a never event is the common-sense option, and I hope that others will join me in urging that that rational action be taken on this issue.

The people to whom I have referred, including the gentleman who made his own personal submission, are real human beings. They are people who have gone through operations and been confronted with the reality of this issue. We know about 631 of them in the United Kingdom, and we believe there are more. Addressing this issue would put an end to the need for the £13.9 million of damages and legal charges. We live in an age in which we must also be careful with the money we spend. If we are not, things may happen that cost the NHS money. People have been affected by this issue, and people will continue to be at risk until we act. I therefore invite the Minister and other hon. Members to join me in what I believe is a very worthwhile campaign to make surgical fires a thing of the past—as I said before, a never event.

1.59 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on such an

important matter. Surgical fires are rarely ever spoken about across the UK, but they are a more common occurrence than is perhaps first considered. When these tragic events do occur, they are very serious and can cause injury to both the patient and our healthcare professionals. Most surgical fires occur in, on or around a patient undergoing a medical or surgical procedure, with the most common injuries being on the head, face, neck and upper chest. The majority of the fires are caused either by a skin preparation solution not being given enough time to dry or because swabs soaked with the fluid were left in the operating field within an unsafe distance of an ignition source.

The sources can include drapes, towels, endotracheal tubes and swabs, and alcohol preparation solutions that have not been allowed to dry fully and as a consequence have pooled on or under a patient. Electrosurgical units, lasers and fibre-optic light sources are all well-described ignition sources for surgical fires, which have a devastating effect on patients physically and mentally. There are numerous personal accounts of patients who have been harmed due to those types of fires, and in nearly all cases they were wholly avoidable.

More recently, in one case a patient undergoing surgery for pancreatic cancer caught fire and suffered 40% burns and died a week later in hospital as a result of those injuries. It is even more vital that we have the protective measures in place to prevent these avoidable incidents from ever happening again.

Between 2010 and 2018 there were a total of 96 recorded surgical fires, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out. Those were declared by NHS England acute trusts and Wales health boards. The figures are similar in Scotland, from what I have been able to ascertain.

When doing my research for this debate, I spoke to a few of my constituents who work in the surgical field, based at the fantastic University Hospital Monklands, which cares for so many of my constituents. I am going to take this opportunity—I am sure Members would like to join me—to place on record my eternal gratitude to all those based at Monklands and across NHS Lanarkshire, as well as across all the nations of the UK, for the incredible work that they do all year round. We wish them all a safe and peaceful Christmastime. I spoke to my surgical constituents to get a real feeling of the impacts of such events, but also of any prolonged or psychological effects of such incidents on staff and patients. The information I received from my surgical constituents was illuminating and very concerning.

Recent research conducted by the National Reporting and Learning System found that from January 2012 to December 2018, 37 reported surgical fires were identified, in which 52% of patients suffered some degree of harm and 8% were recorded as receiving severe harm. Those statistics are of course alarming for us all. However, the data does not show the full scale of incidents that occurred from surgical fires because of the discrepancies between data held at national and local levels. That raises a question about the true number of incidents across the health boards. Is it greater than what has already been suggested? Is there even more cause for concern than we already believe? We need to explore that to get the answers to those questions.

We need a standardised approach to conduct a clear and effective reporting of incidents and decide on the correct steps to mitigate the risk of further surgical fires.

It might surprise right hon. and hon. Members that the last time the term “surgical fires” was even uttered was almost seven years ago in 2015 by NHS England’s surgical services patient safety expert group—that is a mouthful—and yet nothing ever came of its work.

Three years later in May 2019, a short life working group for the prevention of surgical fires was established by a group of experts from healthcare organisations and bodies across the UK. The group aims to compile a series of recommendations and guidance that would make the case for surgical fires being ruled out and made the never event that the hon. Member for Strangford wishes to see. I join him in recommending to the Minister that it is crucial for theatre staff to have the training and for professional associations to explore the value of a national awareness campaign for healthcare professionals. We should mandate the inclusion of surgical fire prevention in the surgical and perioperative education and training syllabus.

NHS bodies should explore how to evolve the procurement process of sanitising products, to reduce surgical fire risk and encourage the procurement of proven surgical fire-safe technologies. I call upon all boards across the UK to explore the development of the standardised patient safety alerts system that aligns the processes and outputs of all bodies and teams. It is vital that such recommendations are implemented, especially given the expertise of those who have provided such information.

The prevention of surgical fires is an urgent and serious patient safety issue in all UK hospitals. It is also very costly, as research has found that nearly £14 million has been paid out in damages and legal costs on behalf of NHS organisations across the UK for such fires. It is essential that we understand when these incidents happen and fully examine whether we should successfully implement changes that prevent their future occurrence. It would be helpful if the NHS published an update on its progress on this matter, so that we can better understand the urgency of the action that is being taken.

Surgical fires are recognised as an international patient safety concern, so for all patients across the UK it is vital that we seek to mitigate their potential impacts as soon as possible. Sadly, it is not always possible to prevent patient safety incidents from happening, but preventive actions can and should be taken to prevent further harm to our patients in the near future.

2.5 pm

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I apologise on behalf of the shadow Minister for patient safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who is isolating, so I am afraid that you are stuck with me, the shadow Secretary of State for Health, which at least gives me the opportunity early on to place on the record my commitment to patient safety.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and on underlining—in terms of the policy detail and what the data tells us or does not tell us, as well as in very stark human terms—why this issue is so significant. As he said, I have no doubt that there would have been more hon. Members present for this debate if it were not for the omicron risk and the fact that this is the final afternoon before the House adjourns for Christmas.

[*Wes Streeting*]

Surgical fires are a serious patient safety issue. In the contributions we have heard today—from the hon. Member for Strangford and the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar)—the case for further action to prevent these incidents is clear.

Although rare, surgical fires can cause serious harm to both patients and healthcare professionals, and, as we have heard, in some cases they tragically result in life-changing injuries. The Department for Health and Social Care has declared that it does not know how many surgical fires happen across the NHS, because it does not collect such data centrally, but we know that they happen. In the period between 2010 and 2018, there were a total of 96 recorded surgical fire incidents declared by NHS England acute trusts and Welsh health boards. A search of the NHS's National Reporting and Learning System for the period between January 2012 and December 2018 identified 37 reports of surgical fires. There is a discrepancy between those two figures. In my opinion, even one preventable incident of surgical fire in the NHS is one too many.

Although surgical fires are preventable, the absence of national guidelines has resulted in an inconsistent approach within UK hospitals to their prevention, with fewer than 40% of healthcare organisations in England having specific protocols and training programmes in place to address the prevention and management of surgical fires. Among healthcare organisations across the UK, 50% of healthcare organisations in Northern Ireland have specific surgical fire prevention guidelines, compared with 38% in England, 20% in Wales and 10% in Scotland, and only a limited number of trusts across the UK—23—have protocols and training programmes that specifically address surgical fires.

We know that these incidents occur as a result of particular circumstances, yet the majority of local trusts rely on general fire safety guidelines, in which there is often no mention of surgical fire risks and prevention processes for them.

The hon. Members who have spoken in this debate have discussed the findings of the expert working group's report, which was published last year, so there is no need for me to go over the report's recommendations; we have already heard them. However, it would be good to hear from the Minister this afternoon as to whether she has had the chance to consider those recommendations and understands where the Department intends to go in taking action to respond to them.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said in his opening speech, the report also supported surgical fires becoming classified as a never event. The NHS in England defines never events as

“serious incidents that are entirely preventable because guidance or safety recommendations providing strong systemic protective barriers are available at a national level and should have been implemented by all healthcare providers.”

Patient groups have argued that surgical fires should be classified as never events. They argue that if they were classified in this way, they could be monitored and investigated as such. Staff would also be empowered to manage incidents in the appropriate way.

However, the Government have recently said that they have no plans to revise the NHS never events policy and framework to classify surgical fires in operating

theatres as never events. As the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, the reason for that is that we currently have no national guidance or safety recommendations to prevent surgical fires in operating theatres. I endorse what he said. I think that the way to address that is to ensure that we have national guidance and safety recommendations and then to update the NHS never events policy. It would be good to hear from the Minister what progress, if any, has been made in developing that guidance and, if the Government intend to act in that way, when it might be published.

I would also like briefly to address some wider issues related to patient safety that are relevant to the debate. Unfortunately, in the last financial year prior to the pandemic 472 serious patient safety issues were classified as never events across the NHS in England. Clearly, that figure demonstrates that there is work to be done across the NHS to ensure everyone gets the best care and that improvements still need to be made. In striving for that, we of course need to listen carefully to the experiences of the patients affected and to ensure that staff feel safe to come forward during patient safety investigations and that processes are transparent, so that lessons can be learned.

We also need to do more to ensure that the environments in which care is delivered are safe. Currently, there is a £9.2 billion repair backlog across the NHS estate. That means that broken pipes and crumbling buildings are putting patients at risk. In the past financial year there were more than 1,600 serious patient safety incidents with an estates and facilities cause.

Although I am responding on behalf of the Opposition, I am sure the House and the Minister will indulge in me making a parochial constituency point. Whipps Cross hospital is in urgent need of redevelopment and refurbishment, and I think that is very much on the Government's radar—I am led to believe that Whipps Cross is near the top of the list. The Minister may not be able to reply on Whipps Cross this afternoon—I appreciate that it is probably without the scope of what she was expecting to talk about—but the issue is none the less on the record for the Department to consider, and we will be very persistent about it on a cross-party basis locally.

Chronic workforce shortages across our health and care services are also putting patients at risk. We went into the pandemic with 100,000 vacancies across the NHS, including a shortage of 40,000 nurses. I am struck whenever I speak to staff working in the NHS, including the shadow Minister for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who has enormous experience in this respect, that too often staff are coming home from work worried about staffing shortages, patient safety and whether they have been able to deliver the best care. That is really important for patient safety and the confidence of staff working in challenging environments. In June, a report by the Health and Social Care Committee warned that staff burnout caused by workforce shortages was at an emergency level and posed

“an extraordinarily dangerous risk to the future functioning of” healthcare services.

Last month, NHS leaders warned that pressures on the system were likely to have an impact on patient safety, and a survey revealed that nine out of 10 felt that staffing pressures were putting patients' health at risk.

It is clear that the NHS is now in desperate need of a serious plan to provide the modern, safe facilities and equipment that patients deserve, alongside a long-term strategy to recruit and retain the staff to deliver safe, quality care. The safety of patients must be the golden thread running through every aspect of healthcare delivery, and I want our healthcare system to be the safest in the world. I hope that the Minister will consider the points raised in the debate carefully and assure the Members present that the prevention of patient safety incidents, including surgical fires, is of paramount importance to her Department.

Since this is the last day before we rise for the recess, and in the light of the wider challenges facing the country, I wish you, Ms Rees, and all hon. Members and staff throughout both Houses of Parliament a very merry Christmas. I say a special thank you to Ministers and staff at the Department of Health and Social Care, the agencies for which they are responsible, the entire workforce across health and social care, the armed forces and the emergency services for all that they are doing to get our country through the pandemic, to respond to the challenges of the omicron variant and to get Britain boosted. I ought to wrap up, because I am due to get my booster later this afternoon, and I do not wish to miss my appointment. I look forward to hearing what the Minister says, and I wish her and all her civil servants and colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** I echo everything the hon. Gentleman said in wishing everyone a merry Christmas and thanking them for everything they do.

2.14 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this hugely important debate. While he is right that we may be small in number this afternoon, it is the quality not the quantity of the Members that counts.

Health is a devolved matter, so I can really only respond on behalf of the NHS in England to the issues the hon. Gentleman raised, but, as the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), said, surgical fires are a priority area of concern in all the devolved nations. Patient safety is our absolute focus. We want to provide the public with the safest care possible. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, a fire affects not only patients but the NHS staff working in those units. We traditionally think of surgical fires as taking place in hospital-based settings such as theatres, but more and more minor surgery is taking place in community facilities such as primary care facilities. This issue is expanding to other areas of the NHS, so it is important that lessons learned in hospital trusts are learned in the community as well.

Supporting a culture of safety in the NHS is critical, and we have put in place a number of measures aimed at supporting the NHS. The key is learning from incidents. Where there have been surgical fires in the past, it is important to identify their causes and how they could be prevented in the future. It is also important to hear from staff, who will sometimes not be surprised when an incident occurs or who may have flagged issues a number of times before attention is taken.

We are taking a number of initiatives to improve patient safety across the board. The first is establishing the health safety investigation branch, which conducts independent reviews and investigations into any patient safety concerns, including surgical fires. We are also introducing a statutory duty of candour to ensure that NHS organisations are open and honest towards patients. If a surgical fire happens, as in the hon. Gentleman's tragic example, a patient who may have been asleep at the time should be made aware of that and receive an apology and support afterwards. Sometimes the fires are quite minor and the patient is not affected, but it is important that they know that an incident happened. We are also setting out in legislation the first ever patient safety commissioner, which will be for England only. They will be a champion for patients in relation to medicines and medical devices and will certainly look at the issue of surgical fires.

Regrettably, despite some of the progress and some of the measures we are putting in place, and despite the high quality of care provided by NHS staff, incidents happen that cause harm to patients and put staff at risk. If a surgical fire is extensive enough to take a theatre out of service for a time, that has a knock-on effect for other patients on surgical waiting lists, who may be delayed as a result. Minimising the risk of surgical fires is an area we take very seriously, and although rare, when they do occur in or around the operating table, they can cause extensive damage and put patients and staff at risk.

The issue is how to best minimise the risk of fires in the first place. As has been pointed out, work is going on into this area. NHS England's national patient safety team has been involved with the expert working group on the prevention of surgical fires, which the hon. Gentleman referred to and which is chaired by the chief executive of the Association for Perioperative Practice. We will continue to support the development of its guidance. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to follow this up, because as highlighted by the shadow Minister the working group published a report in September last year on the prevention and management of fires and made a number of recommendations. It is the view of the national patient safety team that further work on surgical fire prevention following the report is best developed alongside the wider national safety standards for invasive procedures. Those standards were created to support all aspects of patient safety in the surgical environment and are currently being led by the Centre for Perioperative Care, which is responsible for ensuring that national safety standards for invasive procedures continue to be fit for purpose.

**Jim Shannon:** I am very encouraged by the Minister's response. I referred to four key recommendations, which she referred to. She also referred to the fact that there are ongoing negotiations and discussions with the expert group. Has there been an opportunity to push for those four key recommendations as part of the change that is needed?

**Maria Caulfield:** That is certainly an area that we can discuss further when we meet. I am very happy to do that. The hon. Gentleman is right that experts in this field are best placed to consider whether we have the right standards in place. Work is ongoing to ensure that the standards in place are the correct approach to minimise the risk of surgical fires happening in the first place and to advise the NHS on the issue.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the fire triangle of ignition, heat and oxygen. There are potential risk factors in all three of those areas that can make a fire more likely. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, we are working on learning lessons about where fires have happened, to make sure that we learn from those experiences.

In terms of the data, I am obviously concerned that there is no central record of how many surgical fires are taking place, but a new learn from patient safety events service is coming in next year and will better record patient safety events, improve data collection and help NHS trusts to collect the data, use it and learn from it. Although that is not specific to surgical fires, I am keen that fires in general, including surgical fires, are reduced as much as possible and that we learn from these events when they happen.

I am also keen that staff training is a priority. There is a legal duty on NHS trusts to ensure that their staff are trained in fire safety when first employed but also on an ongoing basis. Very often, particularly in theatre, new equipment comes in. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) talked about lasers and diathermy equipment. As those machines and that equipment are introduced and upgraded, it is important that staff are trained properly and are able to flag faults with the equipment and ensure that action is taken quickly, for a whole host of reasons. A theatre is a very risky place not just in terms of fire but for a number of reasons.

All colleagues touched on never events. By its very nature, a never event is something that should never happen, but there are not many classified never events if we look on the list. In theatre, there is a never event on swabs used in theatre procedures. We have very clear guidance and procedures in place when swabs are used—they are counted in and counted out to absolutely make sure that nothing is left behind after an operation. That is key.

Surgical fires are not a never event at the moment because there are no clear guidelines that staff can follow that can absolutely rule out any particular fire from happening. That is the crux of the matter. Fires should absolutely be preventable and we should learn the lessons when a surgical fire takes place, but we do not have the guidelines to be able to say to staff what has to be followed to absolutely prevent a fire from happening in the first place. When I meet the hon. Member for Strangford, we need to look at the guidelines and make sure they are coming forward. I have been informed by NHS England that it cannot classify surgical fires as a never event at the moment, until the national guidance or safety recommendations are in place. It has also confirmed that it always reviews any new guidance when it is published. That is the nub of the issue.

The shadow Minister touched on the Whipps Cross hospital renovation. Sadly, that is not in my portfolio, but it does come in the portfolio of the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), so I will speak to him to try to get an update on progress.

In conclusion, I want to reassure the House that patient safety remains a top priority for the Government. The risk of surgical fire is a real issue, and surgical fires

do put patients and staff at risk. The issue is taken very seriously by the Department, and work continues in this field to ensure that the correct guidance is there to minimise the risk of surgical fires occurring in the first place. I look forward to, hopefully, sharing some progress with Members in the new year.

I thank all Members and staff for their hard work this year. It has been a very tough year for everyone, so hopefully everyone will get to enjoy their Christmas. Like the shadow Minister, I also thank all the staff at the Department of Health and Social Care and across the NHS, who may be having a very tough Christmas this year, and I place on record our thanks and gratitude to them—their hard work has not gone unnoticed. With that, I thank everyone, and especially the hon. Member for Strangford for securing the debate.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** Thank you for your remarks, Minister—they are much appreciated.

2.26 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) for his contribution. He developed the debate in the way we hoped he would, referring to the strong evidential base, the urgent need and the update on progress, as well as patient safety and preventive action.

I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), in his place. I wish him well in his new role—I should have done that at the beginning, and I apologise for not doing it. Being the true MP that he is, he took the opportunity to make a mark for his constituency, as we all would, by the way—none of us misses that opportunity. I thank him for a very constructive contribution, in which he referred to the training that is needed now, the national guidelines and the never event. Incidents can be prevented—I think that is the thrust of the debate. I thank him for that and wish him well for the future in his new role.

I want to say a big thank you to the Minister, who clearly responded on the key issues. The first one, which is important in relation to the example I gave, was that if we get it wrong, we apologise and we change the system. That is a key issue. It is never hard to do, but sometimes difficulties seem to arise. I thank her for her comments on that. She also referred to the four key recommendations and the data to be collated. I thank her for agreeing to a meeting—we will do that.

On staff training, this is not just about patient safety; it is about the staff as well. On the never event, I think that that will be really important when the expert working group meets the Minister and her officials. For patients and staff, work continues to progress, and I very much thank the Minister for her constructive response to all three of us here today.

I take this opportunity to wish a merry Christmas and a happy new year to you, Ms Rees, to my colleagues the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and for Ilford North, and especially to the Minister and her Department. The Minister and I have worked together on many things, and we will work on many more if God spares us to the new year. Her Department, her Parliamentary Private Secretary—the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies)—and all the officials certainly make our jobs easier. We could not do this job without them.

I am a very simple person when it comes to these things. I wish to make progress and to do that alongside people. I never want to score a point—that is not my form. I think that we have made progress today and that we will make progress on other things in the new year, which I am looking forward to. Once again, I wish a merry Christmas and a happy new year to all of you and your families. I hope that we will see each other here on 5 January 2022.

**Christina Rees (in the Chair):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. I wish you all a merry Christmas too.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of preventing surgical fires in the NHS.

2.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 16 December 2021

## CABINET OFFICE

### Independent Review of Construction Frameworks

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay):** My noble Friend the Minister for Efficiency and Transformation, Lord Agnew Kt, has today made the following written statement:

The Government have today published the “Independent Review of Construction Frameworks Report”. The review is a key part of implementing the Construction Playbook which was published in December 2020 to deliver the Government’s ambition of transforming how we assess, procure and deliver public works projects and programmes. This work has been led by Professor David Mosey of King’s College London and supported by the invaluable input of over 120 participants from across the construction industry and public sector. The recommendations in the review will help to ensure the principles of the Construction Playbook apply to the many projects that utilise commercial frameworks and not only those that run standalone procurement exercises. This will help change the face of the construction industry and enable better, faster and greener project outcomes.

The review reflects the Government’s focus on delivering for the taxpayer by getting projects right from the start, driving better outcomes and achieving a more productive and sustainable construction sector. It sets out the components of a gold standard framework that will help the Government to make informed procurement and contracting decisions. The report makes specific recommendations and highlights examples of good practice that provide value for money through reducing waste and supporting innovation.

Applying the gold standard will enable us to easily identify those frameworks which embody the policies and principles of best practice while providing a number of options to ensure competition and flexibility. This will be achieved through:

An outcome-based strategic approach that drives economic, social and environmental value;

Collaborative, multi-party relationships that align objectives, success measures, targets and incentives with commitments to jointly work on improving value and reducing risk;

Improved framework call-off systems, cost models and incentives that provide a fair return for suppliers and that drive value rather than a race to the bottom.

Construction is a key UK industry and we are committed to underpinning the economy through investing in infrastructure. By improving our approach to construction frameworks, we will progress towards a sustainable and more productive construction sector which benefits all of our citizens. A full list of the recommendations is available as part of the report published today on gov.uk.

A copy of the “Independent Review of Construction Frameworks Report” has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS502]

## LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

### Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2022-23

**The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove):**

#### Introduction

Today, I have set out the provisional local government finance settlement for 2022-23. This is a settlement that, at a national level, makes available an additional £3.5 billion

to councils, an increase in local authority funding for 2022-23 of over 4% in real terms. This will ensure councils across the country have the resources they need to deliver key services.

The proposals I am announcing today focus on providing stability by:

Making available up to £3.5 billion more funding for councils across England compared to 2021-22. Overall, this means up to £53.9 billion of funding available for core services.

Providing a new, one-off 2022-23 services grant worth £822 million.

Striking a balance on council tax that helps councils invest in the services they provide to residents while protecting hard-working taxpayers from unfair hikes in rates, with a 2% core referendum threshold and 1% of additional flexibility for councils with adult social care responsibilities.

Making available over £1 billion of additional funding for social care.

Alongside this settlement, the Government will be providing further support to local communities through: £2.6 billion of UK shared prosperity funding, which helps people access opportunities in places in need; a £4.8 billion levelling up fund, which seeks to level up the country by investing in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK; and a further £2 billion of investment across the next three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

#### 2022-23 services grant

Local government delivers a range of services that are at the core of every community.

I therefore propose to create a one-off 2022-23 services grant worth £822 million that will be distributed through our existing settlement funding assessment. We will then take the time to fully consider its future distribution in consultation with councils.

This funding would be excluded from any proposed baseline for transitional support as a result of any proposed system changes.

#### Adults’ and children’s social care

The Government are committed to ensuring local government has the resources it needs to support the most vulnerable through adult and children’s social care.

I propose, therefore, allocating £700 million of new grant funding going to social care. This means:

£636 million more into the social care grant, including funding for equalisation against the 1% adult social care precept.

providing an inflationary uplift to support integrated working with the NHS.

Local authorities can make use of over £1 billion of additional resource specifically for social care in 2022-23. This includes the increase in social care grant and the improved better care fund, a 1% adult social care precept and deferred flexibilities from last year’s settlement.

For many councils, adults’ and children’s social care are key priorities and the largest areas of spending. Councils are not expected to rely solely on this earmarked funding to meet the inflationary and demographic pressures facing these services; they also have access to funding from un-ringfenced grant, including the 2022-23 services grant, and from council tax.

On top of this funding to address core pressures, £162 million in adult social care reform funding will be allocated in 2022-23 to support local authorities as they

prepare their markets for adult social care reform and to help move towards paying a fair cost of care. The funding made available to councils means overall local government core spending power can increase by over 4% in real terms in 2022-23, including the investment in adult social care reform.

#### *Council tax*

This Government recognise the importance of high-quality local services and believes in empowering local decision makers to shape thriving communities. This includes ensuring they have the flexibility to generate their own income through council tax, while protecting residents from excessive increases.

I have proposed the following package of referendum principles for 2022-23:

A core council tax referendum principle of up to 2% for shire counties, unitary authorities, London boroughs, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and fire and rescue authorities.

A principle of up to 2% or £5, whichever is higher, for shire district councils

An adult social care (ASC) precept of 1% for all authorities responsible for ASC.

The ability to add up to an additional 3% of unused ASC precept from 2021-22.

A £5 referendum principle for the eight lowest-charging fire and rescue authorities.

A referendum principle of £10 for police and crime commissioners (PCCs), including the GLA charge for the Metropolitan Police and the PCC component of the Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire Mayoral precepts.

No other council tax referendum principles for Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and no council tax referendum principles for town and parish councils.

The Government's manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases, and it is for the House of Commons to set an annual threshold at which a council tax referendum is triggered. This is an additional local democratic check and balance to avoid the repeat seen under the last Labour Government when council tax more than doubled.

This package of referendum principles strikes a fair balance. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level.

Councillors, Mayors and police and crime commissioners and local councils will rightly want to consider the financial needs of local residents at this challenging point in time, alongside the public's support for action on keeping our streets safe and providing key services.

#### *Stability of funding*

Through this package we are providing local authorities with a firm foundation for funding throughout 2022-23. This means we are proposing to roll over much of the 2021-22 local government finance settlement, including:

Rolling over the current approach to the new homes bonus worth £554 million.

Keeping the rural services delivery grant at £85 million.

Maintaining the lower tier services grant at £111 million with an updated cash terms funding floor.

Increasing the revenue support grant in line with inflation; an increase of £70 million.

Continuing with the 100% retention authorities in the five devolution deal areas and 67% for Greater London overall.

#### *Updating the system*

The Government are committed to ensuring that funding allocations for councils are based on an up-to-date assessment of their needs and resources. The data used to assess this has not been updated in a number of years, dating from 2013-14 to a large degree, and even as far back as 2000. Over the coming months, we will work closely with the sector and other stakeholders to update this and to look at the challenges and opportunities facing the sector before consulting on any potential changes.

As part of this we will look at options to support local authorities through transitional protection. Councils should note the one-off 2022-23 services grant provided in the local government finance settlement in 2022-23 will be excluded from potential transitional protections.

#### *Conclusion*

In outlining these proposals, my priority is to provide stability in the immediate term so I can work closely with local government and other partners on options to update our assessment of local authority needs and resources. I welcome representations from all interested parties on the four-week consultation we have launched today.

The consultation can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/provisional-local-government-finance-settlement-2022-to-2023-consultation> (www.gov.uk).

[HCWS510]

## **BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

### **Nuclear Third Party Liability Framework**

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** Today I am notifying Parliament of the ratification of the 2004 protocols to amend the convention on third party liability in the field of nuclear energy (the "Paris convention") and the convention supplementary to the Paris convention (the "Brussels convention") (together the "2004 protocols") that will come into force on 1 January 2022. The 2004 protocols were laid before Parliament in September 2015 under cover of miscellaneous series 6 (2015), Command Paper 9135 and miscellaneous series 7 (2015), Command Paper 9136 respectively.

The Paris and Brussels conventions are implemented domestically through the Nuclear Installations Act 1965. This has been amended prospectively by the Nuclear Installations (Liability for Damage) Order 2016 to implement the 2004 protocols. Ratification of the 2004 protocols will trigger the remainder of the 2016 Order coming into force in the UK on 1 January 2022.

Nuclear has a key role to play in our transition to net zero by 2050. Nuclear safety and regulation are of paramount importance and the risk of any accidents in the UK remain very low. Nevertheless, ratification of the 2004 protocols mean that in the highly unlikely event of an incident, an increased level of compensation would be available to victims and the period during which claims can be brought would be extended. The 2004 protocols, once in force, increase operator liability in the event of a nuclear incident from the current

€140 million to a maximum of €1.2 billion over a period of five years and extend the period for which claims can be made from 10 to 30 years.

The Government recognise that in the short term, there is a gap in the insurance market. Therefore, the Government have agreed initially to provide an indemnity, for a charge, to cover increased personal injury liabilities for the 10 to 30 year period. For each individual site, the maximum HMG liability is between €70 million and €160 million depending on the site's classification, operator's uptake of the indemnity, and whether transit of nuclear material takes place. The indemnity will be reviewed annually to ensure that it remains the best value for money option. In relation to this, I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute giving notice of the Department incurring this contingent liability.

Additionally, the Government are also providing an indemnity to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA). The NDA are a non-departmental public body who are responsible for the decommissioning of several civil nuclear facilities, and who will be required to have appropriate cover in place. This creates a maximum contingent liability of €700 million in the first year, rising to €1.2 billion for the Government per site over a five year period.

We also intend to build on our well established nuclear third party liability regime by seeking accession to the convention on supplementary compensation for nuclear damage (the "CSC"), by working with the International Atomic Energy Agency ("IAEA") as depository for the CSC, and legislating when parliamentary time allows. Accession to the CSC would expand the number of countries to which the principles of channelling liability to the operator, and capping that liability, apply. This further improves the investment climate for new nuclear in the UK, without placing any additional burden of liability for developers or operators. In the event of a nuclear incident in a country that is party to the CSC, the UK would contribute an amount to the shared international fund, based on its installed capacity and UN contributions at the time. Similarly, in the events of an incident in the UK, we would be able to draw on these pooled CSC funds.

[HCWS504]

## DEFENCE

### Future Nuclear Deterrent Annual Update 2021

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):** On 18 May 2011, the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), made an oral statement to the House (*Official Report*, column 351) announcing the approval of the initial gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor to the Vanguard class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report".

As confirmed in the 2021 integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, this Government have committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the ninth report, "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2021 Update to Parliament".

A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-12-16/HCWS506/>.

[HCWS506]

## EDUCATION

### School and Early Years Funding

#### **The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):**

Today I am confirming schools, high needs and early years revenue funding allocations for 2022-23. This announcement covers the dedicated schools grant (DSG), the pupil premium, and supplementary funding to allocate an additional £1.6 billion announced at the spending review.

Overall, taking the DSG allocations and the supplementary funding together, core schools funding is increasing by £4 billion in 2022-23—a 5% increase in real terms per pupil from 2021-22. This includes an increase in mainstream school funding, for the five to 16 age group, of £2.5 billion. This is equivalent to a 5.8%, or £300, cash increase in funding per pupil on average. Every local authority area is forecast to see an above-inflation increase in mainstream school funding, with each local authority seeing at least a 4.7% increase per pupil.

Nationally, high needs funding, including the supplementary funding, is increasing by over £1 billion (13%).

In July 2021, the then Minister of State for Schools informed Parliament of the publication of primary and secondary units of funding for the schools block of the DSG, and the provisional allocations for the high needs block and central school services block. These have now been updated with the latest pupil numbers to show how much each local authority will receive in 2022-23.

For early years, we are announcing initial allocations for local authorities of £3.6 billion for 2022-23 based on the early years hourly funding rates that were published on 25 November 2021. These initial allocations will be updated later using census data from January 2022 and January 2023.

The DSG also includes funding for the Department's safety valve intervention programme, which targets the local authorities with the highest DSG deficits, accumulated where LAs have struggled to manage their high needs systems within their allocated funding. With £150 million of additional funding secured through the spending review, we are expanding this programme in 2022-23 to target more local authorities with the highest deficits, to rapidly secure the sustainable management of their high-needs systems and reduce their deficits. This expansion will sit as part of a new, wider programme of intervention and support for local authorities, including the Delivering Better Value in SEND programme, which will provide some support with attached funding to help more local authorities with less substantial deficits to establish sustainable and effective practice in managing their high needs systems. I will announce further detail about the Delivering Better Value in SEND programme in due course.

In addition to the DSG, mainstream schools will receive a supplementary grant in 2022-23 worth £1.2 billion. For early years and post-16 provision, the grant is being provided in respect of the health and social care levy. For primary and secondary provision, the grant is being provided in respect of both the health and social care levy and other cost pressures, giving schools the resources they need to raise attainment, increase teacher pay and continue to rise to the challenges of covid response and recovery.

Today I am announcing how that supplementary grant will be allocated. Mainstream schools will get:

A lump sum of £3,680 for schools that have primary and/ or secondary provision. (Schools with only early years or post-16 provision will not receive this lump sum.)

£24 per pupil for their early years provision

£35 per pupil for their post-16 provision

£97 per pupil in primary

£137 per pupil in key stage 3

£155 per pupil in key stage 4

Additional funding of £85 per primary pupil and £124 per secondary pupil who are recorded as having been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years (FSM6).

The grant rates will be uplifted with area cost adjustments for schools in areas with higher wage costs.

Special schools and other providers funded from the high needs block of the DSG will benefit from an additional £325 million in 2022-23, through a top up to the DSG allocations referred to above. This is an increase of 4% to the allocations announced in July 2021.

This core schools funding comes alongside the Government's investment totalling nearly £5 billion, up to 2024-25, to help children and young people recover from the impact of the pandemic, which includes spending £1.5 billion on a national tutoring revolution in schools and colleges.

#### *Funding for disadvantaged pupils: the pupil premium*

The pupil premium provides additional funding to schools to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Today, I am announcing that pupil premium rates in 2022-23 will increase by 2.7%, in line with forecast inflation as published by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) at the 2021 spending review. This will ensure that this targeted investment continues to support the most disadvantaged children in our schools.

With the increased funding rates, total pupil premium funding is forecast to be its highest ever, in cash terms, in 2022-23. Total pupil premium funding is forecast to increase to over £2.6 billion in 2022-23 (up from £2.5 billion in 2021-22, and from £600 million when the pupil premium was introduced in 2011-12). Funding rates in 2022-23 will be the highest ever in cash terms, with primary pupils who have been eligible for FSM at a point over the past six years attracting £1,385, and secondary FSM6 pupils attracting £985. This means that, compared to when the pupil premium was introduced in 2011, funding rates are now almost £900 higher in cash terms for primary FSM6 pupils, and almost £500 higher for secondary pupils. The Department for Education continues to ensure that all schools must have regard to high-quality evidence-based interventions when deciding how best to support eligible pupils.

[HCWS508]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Adult Social Care Funding and Reform

**The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan):** As set out in our adult social care reform White Paper, "People at the Heart of Care", on 1 December 2021, the Government are committed to a wide-ranging and ambitious reform of the adult social care system.

To make social care fairer, we are protecting people from unpredictable care costs, are supporting local authorities to move towards paying a fair cost of care to providers and ensuring that more self-funders will be able to ask their local authority to arrange their care for them to give them a choice of better-value care.

To move us towards the 10-year vision for reform set out in "People at the Heart of Care", the Government are today publishing the "Fair Cost of Care and Market Sustainability Fund: Purpose and Conditions for 2022-23". This sets out how the Government will provide £1.4 billion over the next three years to support local authorities to prepare markets for reform and move towards paying providers a fair cost of care. This breaks down into £162 million in 2022-23 and £600 million in both 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Some local authorities are promoting efficient and effective operation of care markets, with sustainable rates of care. However, a significant number of local authorities are paying residential and home care providers less than it costs to deliver the care received. In many areas, this has resulted in higher self-funder fees which we are addressing by further bringing into effect section 18(3) of the Care Act 2014. The market effect of this change will be that some providers will over time need to reduce reliance on subsidising state-funded care from self-funders. This £1.4 billion will enable local authorities to ensure local care markets can respond to the changes reform will bring and will also help to address under-investment and poor workforce practices.

It is important this additional funding reaches the places and parts of the social care system that need it most. The Government propose to distribute 2022-23 funding on the basis of the adult social care relative needs formula, as is used for the social care grant. Local authority level allocations for 2022-23 have been published alongside the provisional local government finance settlement.

Today my Department is publishing a policy statement that sets out:

#### *Funding conditions for 2022-23*

As a condition of receiving further grant funding in the two following years, we will expect local authorities to conduct cost of care exercises, set out their plans for driving market sustainability, including progress towards a fair cost of care, and to report to DHSC on how funding is being used. The Department will use this information to monitor progress and provide public assurance that local markets are being managed successfully.

#### *Practical guidance and support tools*

From January 2022, we will work closely with the sector to develop a practical support offer for those local authorities who may require it to meet the funding conditions. This includes guidance and templates on cost of care exercises; workshops, webinars and market shaping tools.

The funding and conditions set out in this statement today are part of the new health and care levy announced in September this year, of which £5.4 billion is being invested into adult social care over the next three years.

We will work closely with local government to determine appropriate grant conditions, national guidance and distribution mechanisms for funding allocations in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Beyond this additional £1.4 billion, we are proposing today in the provisional local government finance settlement to make available over £1 billion of additional funding for social care in 2022-23.

Councils are not expected to rely solely on this earmarked funding to meet the inflationary and demographic pressures facing these services; they also have access to funding from unringfenced grant, including the 2022-23 services grant, and from council tax. The funding available to councils means overall local government core spending power will increase by over 4% in real terms in 2022-23, including the investment in adult social care reform.

Today's publication is a further milestone on the Government's journey to reform adult social care, creating a system that is fit for the future and of which we can all be proud.

[HCWS509]

### David Fuller Case: Update on Actions

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** Yesterday, David Fuller was sentenced at Maidstone Crown court for the murders of Wendy Knell and Caroline Pierce, as well as over 100 sexual offences in a mortuary, and several other sexual offences.

This is a profoundly distressing case and I would like to reiterate my apologies to the friends and families of all of David Fuller's victims. While nothing can undo the damage that has been done, he has been brought to justice for his crimes.

I would like to provide an update on the steps we are taking to ensure something like this never happens again.

First, all NHS trusts have undertaken risk assessments on their mortuary and body store facilities and assured their practices against existing Human Tissue Authority guidance. NHS England and Improvement is working with all trusts to ensure that the additional steps already requested are in place early in the new year, if they have not already been delivered.

Secondly, we have made good progress in establishing the independent inquiry chaired by Sir Jonathan Michael to look into the circumstances surrounding the offences committed at the hospital. It will help us understand how these offences took place without detection, identify any areas where swift action is necessary and consider wider national issues, including for the NHS. Sir Jonathan has developed draft terms of reference and will seek views on these from families who have been affected in the new year before they are published.

Next, Ministers have received initial advice from the Human Tissue Authority and they will be reviewing this carefully.

Finally, families have quite understandably approached the trust seeking compensation. I have asked NHS Resolution to work with the trust and engage on plans for providing settlements. More details will be set out on this soon.

[HCWS505]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Independent Inquiry Report into Issues Raised by Former Surgeon Ian Paterson

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** On 4 February 2020, the independent inquiry into the issues raised by the disgraced surgeon Ian Paterson published its report, which was welcomed by the Government. On 28 April 2020, we reluctantly announced a delay in the Government response due to the unprecedented pressures of the covid-19 pandemic. On 23 March 2021, we provided an update on the progress made and committed to publishing a full response during 2021. Today, the Government have published that response.

We want to thank the Right Reverend Bishop Graham James and the inquiry team for their thorough report which provides a detailed analysis of the issues which allowed this malpractice to take place and recommends steps to better protect patients moving forward.

Our thanks also go to the patients who shared their experiences with the inquiry and to their representatives who subsequently continued to engage with the Government through the process of preparing this response. Patient voices have rightly been central to this entire process.

#### *The Government's response*

The inquiry's findings point to several important themes where action is needed to improve protections for patients being given hospital-based care—whether in the NHS or independent sector. These actions must improve the way our health system works for patients at every stage of their treatment journey.

The health system has to provide patient-centred information to enable patients, their families and carers to make informed decisions about their treatment and care. Medical practitioners should face regular challenge to improve the standard of care they provide as part of their overall learning and development, with concerns about their practice from any source heard and acted upon. There must be accountability across the healthcare system, ensuring quality of service from the frontline to the boardroom. Finally, when things do go wrong, patients must have the confidence that the entire system will work to put things right—meeting the needs of the patient and learning the lessons to prevent the same mistakes being repeated.

Working with patients and stakeholders, we have carefully considered all 15 recommendations the inquiry made for improving the health system. We are accepting 12 of these recommendations either in full or in principle with a further one recommendation still pending. There is one recommendation we are not accepting but keeping under review and one recommendation that we do not accept. Whether we are accepting the recommendation or not, we are taking action to improve healthcare against every recommendation.

The response outlines actions which have been taken since Ian Paterson's malpractice came to light, in addition to detailing 40 actions for our further implementation plan. The Government will review the progress made in this implementation in a further publication after 12 months to ensure adequate action has been taken and update where additional action is planned.

*Recommendation 1*

Recommendation 1 calls for a single repository of the whole practice of consultants in England containing critical consultant performance data. This would be made accessible for use by both managers and healthcare professionals, and by members of the public. We accept this recommendation in principle. A significant amount of progress has been made on the collection of consultant performance data in both the NHS and independent sector. We commit to making more progress on the collection of data, use of the information it allows us to develop, and the publication of useful metrics. In 2018, the acute data alignment programme was launched to move towards a common set of standards for data collection and reporting across the NHS and independent sector. This brings together data collection through NHS Digital, with the use and processing of this data in parallel in the NHS and independent sector through the national consultant information programme (NCIP) and the private healthcare information network (PHIN). This is currently in pilot, with the potential to be fully implemented, dependent on the results of that pilot, in 2022-23. This data will be made available for managers and healthcare professionals across the system to support learning and identify outliers. PHIN is already mandated to publish information on consultant practice in the independent sector and will be continuing to roll out the publication of further metrics in the coming years. Over the next 12 months, we commit to reaching a decision with key stakeholders on what further information should be made publicly available and whether further Government action will be needed to achieve this.

*Recommendation 2*

Recommendation 2 asks that it become standard practice for consultants to write directly to patients about their treatment and care in language they can understand. We are pleased to accept this recommendation. Guidance across the system makes clear that this is best practice and a range of key stakeholders have agreed to write to their members to encourage the uptake of this advice. We will continue to explore with providers how their systems can change to embed this process and to monitor that best practice is being followed.

*Recommendation 3*

Recommendation 3 requires the publication of information explaining the differences in how care is organised in the NHS and the independent sector, so that patients can make informed decisions. We have accepted this recommendation. We will be commissioning the production of this independent information, to be created in partnership with patients, families and carers. This will be published in 2022 and made widely accessible.

*Recommendation 4*

Recommendation 4 calls for the introduction of a short waiting period in the decision-making process for surgical procedures, to enable reflection on the diagnosis and treatment options. We are accepting this recommendation in principle. While a specific period for general surgery is not being introduced, as the time required will depend on the patient and the procedure in question, the General Medical Council has updated its guidance to confirm that patients should be given sufficient time to consider their options before making decisions about treatments. During appraisals, doctors must demonstrate they are meeting the principles set

out in GMC's "Good Medical Practice", and CQC takes all GMC guidance into account during its assessments across the NHS and independent sector.

*Recommendation 5*

Recommendation 5 relates to multi-disciplinary teams, asking CQC to assure that all hospital providers are complying effectively with national MDT guidance. We have accepted this recommendation. CQC has added more detailed prompts to its inspection framework on multidisciplinary team working. When assessing providers across the NHS and independent sector, CQC will continue to seek assurance that patients are not at risk of harm due to non-compliance in this area.

*Recommendation 6*

We have considered recommendation 6, which relates to complaints processes, in two parts. The first part calls for more effective communication to patients of the means to escalate a complaint to an independent body. We have accepted this part of the recommendation. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is piloting the NHS complaints standards which set out in one place the ways in which the NHS should handle complaints. This includes the need for organisations to ensure people know how to escalate a complaint to the ombudsman. These have been developed with the Independent Sector Complaints Adjudication Service, ISCAS, who have included it in their code of practice.

The second part of recommendation 6 proposes that all private patients are given the right to mandatory independent resolution of their complaints. We have accepted this part in principle. CQC will strengthen its guidance to make clearer that it expects to see arrangements in place for patients to access independent complaints resolution. We will review the impact of this guidance in the coming year and will explore whether legislative action is needed, if insufficient action is taken.

*Recommendations 7 and 8*

Recommendations 7 and 8 both relate to the recall of patients of Ian Paterson by providers—University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust and Spire Healthcare. These recommendations have already been accepted in full. UHB has contacted all known living patients of Ian Paterson and ensured that all cases had been reviewed by June 2021. Spire had proactively contacted all known living patients by December 2020 and have now reviewed the care of over two-thirds of the patients concerned. We have asked Spire to provide an update on progress in 12 months on reviewing the remaining patients.

*Recommendation 9*

Recommendation 9 calls for a national framework to be developed for the recall of patients. We have accepted this recommendation. This framework has been developed and outlines actions to be taken by organisations in the NHS and independent sector in the event that a patient recall is necessary. This framework will be published in 2022 and will be owned by the National Quality Board, who will ensure it is periodically updated.

*Recommendation 10*

Recommendation 10 relates to indemnity products for healthcare professionals and asks for the shortcomings in clinical negligence cover identified by the inquiry to be resolved. The outcome of this recommendation is pending. We recognise that a system needs to be in place to ensure that patients have confidence that they can

access compensation if harmed while receiving care, and we will bring forward proposals in 2022. These proposals will build on the consultation at the end of 2018 on “Appropriate clinical negligence cover” for regulated healthcare professionals. The summary of responses to this consultation will be published in early 2022. We have put forward an extended programme of actions in our response to work towards change in this area, and we will ensure any reforms are robust, meeting the needs of both patients and professionals, before implementing them.

#### *Recommendation 11*

Recommendation 11 calls for the Government to ensure that the system of regulation in healthcare serves patient safety, that regulators collaborate effectively and that weaknesses identified by the inquiry are resolved. We are accepting this recommendation. The healthcare regulators referenced in the Paterson inquiry (the GMC, Nursing and Midwifery Council, and CQC) exist to protect patient safety and this is reflected in their new corporate strategies. They have also taken a number of actions to encourage collaboration and information sharing between organisations. The Government’s consultation on “Regulating Healthcare Professionals, Protecting the Public” sets out proposals which address issues raised by the inquiry, including a proposed duty to co-operate for all regulators. We plan to bring forward legislation in relation to the GMC in 2022.

#### *Recommendation 12*

We have considered recommendation 12 in two parts. The first part required that any investigation of a healthcare professional’s behaviour should result in a suspension, if there is any perceived risk to patient safety. We have not accepted this recommendation. Exclusion and restriction of practice can be a necessary and appropriate response during an investigation in some instances. However, we do not believe it would be fair or appropriate to impose this step as a blanket rule in all cases. It is vital that investigations are robust and conducted in a timely manner. Guidance has been implemented in recent years to ensure concerns are taken seriously and appropriate action taken, including clear advice on when exclusion is the right step to take.

The second part of recommendation 12 proposes that any concerns about a healthcare professional at one provider should be shared with other providers they work with. We accept this recommendation in principle. Where patient safety is at risk, information should be shared. Providers must use their judgement, though, as they are taking on responsibility to ensure the information is appropriate and accurate when shared. Regulators have taken key steps to make it easier for people and organisations to share information regarding patient safety risks.

#### *Recommendation 13*

Recommendation 13 identifies a specific issue relating to the engagement of consultants through practising privileges in the independent sector. This is where the consultant is self-employed and allowed to work in the hospital’s facilities, rather than employed by the hospital. In the case of Ian Paterson, this led to a gap in responsibility and liability for the consultant’s actions. The inquiry reported the impression that private providers were just renting consultants a room, and claims for compensation took significant time and effort from patients to resolve.

We accept this recommendation in principle. Independent sector providers must take responsibility for the quality of care provided in their facilities, regardless of how the consultants are engaged. The Independent Healthcare Providers Network published the medical practitioners assurance framework in 2019 to improve consistency around effective clinical governance in the independent sector. We encourage all private providers to take up this framework, and CQC will continue to assess the strength of clinical governance in all providers as part of its inspection activity. We will be using the response to recommendation 10 on indemnity products and the programme of action laid out there as the initial response to the challenges faced by patients of Ian Paterson in accessing compensation. We will additionally keep the potential liability held by providers in the independent sector under review.

#### *Recommendation 14*

Recommendation 14 says that apologies should be given at the earliest stage of investigation when something goes wrong, and that potential liability should not hold anyone back from apologising. We accept this recommendation. Healthcare organisations have a statutory duty of candour—which sets out specific requirements providers must follow when things go wrong with care and treatment, including providing truthful information and an apology. This duty is regulated by CQC. NHS Resolution consistently advises members to apologise when things go wrong and that this has no impact on potential legal liability. We continue to ensure this guidance is promoted.

#### *Recommendation 15*

Finally, recommendation 15 says that private providers should not be eligible for NHS contracted work unless they have implemented all the other accepted recommendations from this response across the entirety of their workload. We are not accepting this recommendation, but will keep it under review. Across all the issues raised in this inquiry report, independent sector providers are fully committed to implementing changes alongside NHS providers. These providers must meet the same regulatory standards as NHS providers, as required by CQC. Independent providers must meet the conditions of the NHS provider license and the NHS standard contract to be able to deliver NHS-funded treatment. Accepting this recommendation would create a duty on the NHS which would need to be carefully implemented to ensure it could be monitored effectively and would not reduce the capacity available to the NHS for providing care—particularly given the numbers of patients waiting for treatment as a result of the pandemic. We do, however, recognise the importance of ensuring change takes place. We will continue to work with the independent sector to implement the changes related to the inquiry’s recommendations and will review progress in 12-months’ time. We commit to taking robust action should progress not meet our expectations.

This response forms part of the Government’s broader commitment to patient safety, including our response to the independent medicines and medical devices safety review as previously published and the measures included in the Health and Care Bill.

Copies of the Government’s full response will be laid before the House and will be available from the Vote Office and at: <https://www.gov.uk>.

### Medicine Supplies to Northern Ireland

**The Minister for Health (Edward Argar):** Under the Northern Ireland protocol (NIP), medicines moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland are required to comply with the EU pharmaceutical acquis. This creates a number of additional and duplicative regulatory barriers which risk the continuity of supply for medicines moving into NI.

Negotiations are under way to seek a bilateral agreement with the EU to tackle these problems. In order to support this, it is essential that we do everything we can to ensure that our regulations are fit for purpose, regardless of the outcome of these negotiations, and that the supply of medicines to patients in Northern Ireland is not put at risk.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), and officials from my own Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), have been working closely with officials from the Northern Ireland Department of Health (DHNI) in recent months to design a robust contingency measure which can be operational, if necessary, to support the flow of medicines into Northern Ireland from 1 January 2022.

Today the UK Government will be introducing a statutory instrument titled the Human Medicines (Amendment) (Supply to Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021 to establish the Northern Ireland MHRA Authorised Route (NIMAR).

NIMAR provides a route for the lawful supply of prescription only medicines that are unlicensed in NI, where no licensed alternative is available. This route will be tightly governed, with all medicines supplied via NIMAR already complying with the strong regulatory safeguards required for a product to enter the GB market. All medicines supplied this way into Northern Ireland will meet the MHRA's robust standards that are in place for the rest of the UK.

Supply using the NIMAR route will be closely monitored by DHSC, in partnership with officials at DHNI. It will only be used where clinical need cannot be met by a licensed alternative, in the interests of public health.

It will allow citizens in NI to continue to access the prescription only medications that they require for their individual treatment.

The required statutory instrument will be laid before the house today, along with the accompanying explanatory memorandum, and I invite members to refer to this for more detail on the functionality and detail of NIMAR.

[HCWS507]

### HOME DEPARTMENT

#### Interpol General Assembly

**The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):** Interpol's 89th General Assembly took place in Istanbul, Turkey between 23-25 November, during which elections took place for the role of Interpol president and membership of the executive committee.

The General Assembly voted to elect the UAE candidate, Major General Al-Raisi, as Interpol president for a period of four years, on a majority of 104 to 47. Voting was conducted in secret.

The UK candidate for election to the executive committee, Deputy Chief Constable Will Kerr of Police Scotland, was also elected, and will take a seat alongside Turkey and Spain to represent the European region in Interpol for a period of three years. In addition, a UK lawyer, Ms Susie Alegre, was elected to the Requests Chamber of the Commission for the Control of Files (CCF).

Interpol remains a vital tool for UK law enforcement in tackling international crime worldwide and we will work with the newly elected executive committee to ensure that it continues to operate in accordance with its constitution and with full respect for human rights obligations.

[HCWS501]

### Provisional Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2022-23

**The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):** My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today published the provisional police grant report (England and Wales) 2022-23. The report sets out the Home Secretary's determination for 2022-23 of the aggregate amount of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Today the Government are setting out the provisional police funding settlement in Parliament for the 2022-23 financial year. Overall funding for policing will rise by up to £1.1 billion compared with the 2021-22 funding settlement, bringing the total up to £16.9 billion. Within this, funding to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) will increase by up to an additional £796 million, assuming full take-up of precept flexibility. This would represent an increase to PCC funding in cash terms of 5.8% on top of the 2021-22 police funding settlement.<sup>1</sup>

This Government are absolutely committed to keeping the public safe; the police have a critical role to play in this, and in reducing crime. We are determined to strengthen our police service and, by providing a three-year spending review settlement, we are giving the police the financial certainty and stability needed for longer-term, strategic reforms. We have confirmed total grant funding for police forces for the next three years, with increases of £550 million in 2022-23, at least £650 million in 2023-24 and no less than £800 million in 2024-25. In addition, PCCs will have up to £10 of precept flexibility in each of the next three years to use according to their local needs.

With this substantial investment, this settlement supports the police to:

1. Successfully complete the 20,000 officer police uplift programme by March 2023, building on the outstanding progress to date.
2. Accelerate progress on the Government's key policing priorities: reducing crime, ensuring the criminal justice system works for all, driving forward improvements in the service the public receive, and transforming critical capabilities and infrastructure.
3. Ensure an increase in productivity using enhanced technology and investigative tools. In return for this significant investment, we expect police leaders to become more efficient and effective with officers' time, and in the fight against national threats.

### *Recruitment*

This Government are delivering on their commitment to recruit 20,000 additional police officers, and the three-year spending review settlement gives the police the investment and financial certainty they need for this. We have already invested significantly in increasing the number of police officers, providing £700 million in 2020-21 and a further £425 million in 2021-22. Forces have leaned in to this commitment, and as at the end of September, over 11,000 officers have been recruited, 55% of our 20,000 target. As a result of this policing is more diverse than ever. Since April 2020, more than four in 10 new recruits were female and 11.4% identified as belonging to a black, Asian, mixed or other minority ethnic groups. Good progress is also being made on deployments into regional organised crime units. Forces are recruiting officers to support deployments across the policing system, and we expect this growth to be seen over the spending review period. Forces must not be complacent in their efforts to ensure policing is open to all in modern Britain and to bring in the best talent from across their local communities.

For 2022-23, PCCs will receive an additional £550 million of Government grants which include funding for the recruitment of the final 8,000 additional officers, and continued growth in police staff to support officers, by the end of March 2023. To ensure recruitment is maintained, £135 million of the grant increase will be ringfenced and allocated in line with funding formula shares. As in previous years, PCCs will be able to access this as they progress towards their recruitment target.

Building on the commitments in the beating crime plan, we are continuing to strengthen capability to confront serious and organised crime. Therefore, 425 officers will be deployed into regional organised crime units and equivalent capability in London. Recruitment allocations for year three of the programme are set out in the tables attached to this statement.

### *Precept*

Spending review 2021 confirmed that PCCs will be empowered to raise additional funding through precept flexibility. We propose to enable PCCs to increase their band D precept by up to £10 in each of the next three years without the need to call for a local referendum, the equivalent of less than £1 per month. If all PCCs decide to maximise their flexibility, this would result in up to £246 million additional funding for local policing next year. It is for locally accountable PCCs to take decisions on local precept.

### *Counter-terrorism policing*

The Government will continue to provide vital support for counter-terrorism (CT) policing, ensuring they have the resources they need to meet and deal with the threats we face. For the first time, CT police funding will total over £1 billion in 2022-23. This significant investment will aid in supporting the ongoing CT policing investigations to keep the country safe, and includes continued funding for both armed policing and the CT operations centre. The funding includes the transfer of £44 million for special branch from core PCC budgets to the CT policing grant, protecting local CT assets while providing forces with greater access to specialist expertise and resources to keep our citizens safe from harm.

PCCs will be notified separately of force-level funding allocations for CT policing, which will not be made public for security reasons.

### *National priorities*

This Government will continue to support PCCs and forces through increased investment in national policing priorities. This settlement provides £1.4 billion for the following national priorities in 2022-23 (as set out at tables 1 and 5):

Maintaining our focus on cutting crime to make communities safer, we are continuing to invest in critical priority areas. This includes drugs and county lines activity, violent crime reduction, child sexual abuse and exploitation, fraud, and modern slavery. Next year we will see:

Further investment in law enforcement intelligence and investigation capacity, taking these capabilities one step closer to intercepting the rise of economic crime.

Regional organised crime units equipped with the capabilities they need to tackle serious and organised crime and protect the most vulnerable citizens from abuse, building on the provision of more officers through the uplift programme.

A national crime laboratory to drive the use of innovative data science techniques to prevent and reduce crime.

This Government recognise that transparency, governance and accountability have a key role to play in building public confidence in the criminal justice system. This settlement will enable us to:

Fulfil key commitments from the rape review, including the expansion of Operation Soteria to additional pilot areas to test innovative ways for the police and CPS to investigate rape cases.

Deliver on our commitment to ensure that no victim of rape and serious sexual assault is left without a mobile phone for more than 24 hours and explore how we can further exploit technological advancements and new ways of working to improve investigation outcomes.

Drive improvements in local police performance, including measuring responsiveness to 101 and 999 calls and providing a peer support function through the College of Policing for poor performing forces.

We must ensure that there is no place left for criminals to hide that carry out serious and organised crime and rely on sophisticated digital communications to evade detection. That is why this Government will be:

Investing in a set of critical investigative tools to help deliver the drugs supply attack plan and support a range of other national priority threats. These tools will provide better-quality intelligence, expand law enforcement's ability to tackle international crime networks, homicide and neighbourhood crime, and boost prosecution rates against high-harm offenders.

Providing greater investment in tackling fraud and improving the way in which intelligence on firearms is collected and managed.

This settlement also includes continued investment in major law enforcement programmes, and other critical national police and law enforcement IT capabilities. This Government will invest in:

Strengthening the ability to share, analyse and act on all available intelligence data to counter drugs, county lines and other high harm offences.

Collaborating with industry to leverage technology in support of safeguarding the vulnerable.

Simplifying the technological capabilities that are delivered so that they can be easily adopted and exploited by operational users.

The Government expect PCCs to continue to take responsibility for crime outcomes both locally and nationally, and we will support PCCs and forces to deliver

well-evidenced crime interventions as part of their core business. The spending review has provided £150 million of Government funding for crime reduction in each of the next three years, which will allow the continuation of existing programmes as well as some new investments to prevent crime and keep our communities safe.

We will confirm funding arrangements for specific crime reduction programmes in due course. These will follow a match-funding principle where funding for local intervention is supported via funding allocated to or raised by local leaders. This approach will maximise PCC investment in crime reduction and increase the total funding spent on crime priorities, making our communities safer.

#### *Outcomes and efficiency*

While we continue to invest in policing, it is only right that the Government hold the policing sector, as with other public services, to account on delivering for the public. The police must demonstrate to taxpayers that they are using this funding effectively, meeting the needs of their community and ensuring the public receive the highest possible quality of service.

As part of the spending review settlement, the Government will expect to see over £100 million of cashable efficiency savings delivered from force budgets by 2024-25. For 2022-23, we expect to see £80 million of efficiency savings—which have been reflected in the funding set out as part of the settlement.

Ensuring the value of the Government's investment in policing goes beyond efficiencies. Following greater investment in modern technology infrastructure and interoperable systems, we expect to see an increase in productivity. This will enable more efficient data sharing and analysis, reduce the risk of service disruptions, and provide a foundation for future enhancements and innovations. We will continue to work with and support the policing sector through the Efficiency in Policing Board with a renewed focus on improving the measurement and delivery of productivity gains.

This Government have once again set out their commitment to giving the police the resources they need to cut crime and keep the public safe—setting out today how up to an additional £1.1 billion will be invested in the policing system in 2022-23. We will continue to work with policing to achieve the outcomes set out here. I would like to pay tribute and express my sincere gratitude to our police officers and police staff for the extraordinary bravery and dedication they display each day, to keep us all safe from harm.

I have set out in a separate document, attached, the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between police and crime commissioners for 2022-23. These documents are intended to be read together.

<sup>1</sup> Funding for special branch has been transferred from existing PCC baselines and now will go to PCCs through the CT policing grant.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-12-16/HCWS503/>.

[HCWS503]

## **UK Anti-Corruption Strategy: Year 3 Update**

### **The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds):**

Today I am pleased to be publishing the third annual update to the UK anti-corruption strategy 2017 to 2022 which covers the year 2020. As part of the strategy, the Government are committed to providing an annual written update to parliament on progress.

It is particularly pertinent that we are publishing this update as countries are gathering to assess progress with implementation of the UN convention Against corruption. This serves as a reminder to us all of the need for domestic and international action to address the evolving threat from corruption. This month we also saw the UK join our US partners in their summit for democracy, which similarly focuses on actively tackling the corruption challenges at home and abroad.

This update highlights the progress made against the anti-corruption commitments in 2020 and focuses on a number of key areas:

- securing the public commitment with all Crown dependencies and inhabited overseas territories to implement publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership information. This will help strengthen the international effort to counter illicit finance;

- extending the remit of the national fraud initiative and helping local authorities to undertake bank account and active company checks;

- reforming the police complaints and disciplinary systems to make them more transparent, independent and proportionate; securing endorsement from G20 Ministers of a G20 call to action for countries to combat corruption in the covid-19 response and recovery;

- publishing a review of procurement risks in local government that improves understanding and strengthens our response; and

- publishing the Green Paper on procurement reform with specific proposals to further strengthen transparency and integrity across Government.

This update covers activity made against the Government's commitments in the Strategy during 2020. Activity in 2021 will be reported on in the Year 4 Update due to be presented next year.

The year 2020 has been dominated in so many ways by the covid-19 pandemic.

The challenging global environment has required the whole of Government to respond to the pandemic focused on public health. Whilst recognising 2020 was a challenging year, this update provides more details and highlights achievements which have gone beyond the original strategy commitments as well as an explanation for those off-track commitments.

The Government will continue to implement their strategy commitments to combat corruption and to promote integrity and transparency at home and overseas. There is still much work to do and it is important to recognise that a number of broader issues are considered as we look ahead. The Government will update Parliament on progress made in 2021 in the fourth annual update due next year and I am pleased also to announce that Government have started to develop the successor to the strategy which expires at the end of 2022. In addition, a policy statement in response to the "Upholding Standards in Public Life" report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the review into the development and

use of supply chain finance in Government by Nigel Boardman will be published in due course, in the new year. Alongside this the Government will be providing an update to its work to reform the business appointment rules.

I have written to the devolved Administrations as the update is of direct interest to them.

Finally, I would also like to thank the ongoing work of the Prime Minister's anti-corruption champion, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), throughout this period.

A copy of the update will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and also published on gov.uk.

[HCWS500]

### Home Office Delivery 2021

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel):** Today I am updating Parliament on Home Office delivery over the last 12 months.

Dealing with the effects of covid-19 has been a challenge for the entire country, but it has also brought out the best of us as communities stepped up to deal with those challenges. Few have played a more important role than our emergency service workers and I put on record my particular thanks to the police officers and firefighters who have continued selflessly to serve the public in sometimes trying circumstances, as well as all Home Office staff and Border Force officers who have played their part in the fight against covid-19.

Despite covid-19, the Home Office has continued to deliver on the people's priorities and as we recover from the pandemic, we will continue to build back safer in 2022.

#### *Cutting crime and law enforcement*

We are delivering our manifesto commitment for new police officer recruitment, having recruited more than 11,000 of the 20,000 new police officers we have pledged for England and Wales to help cut crime and protect our communities. Every region in the country has more police officers keeping our streets and communities safer day and night—both beating crime and preventing crime.

The College of Policing has continued to connect all those working in the police and law enforcement, with the chair of its board, Lord Herbert of South Downs, launching a fundamental review of the College's work. This is important if we are to ensure that it continues to meet its potential and that its work and role within policing is valued across the service.

We have published several landmark strategies on the safety and security of our nation.

Our beating crime plan establishes how the Government will ensure the public is better protected across all parts of the country, with each neighbourhood having contactable, named police officers who know their area and are best placed to ensure that persistent crime and antisocial behaviour is tackled.

Our tackling violence against women and girls strategy set out plans to increase support for victims and survivors, increase the number of perpetrators brought to justice and reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls in the long term. The need for the strategy became all the more stark following the tragic murder

of Sarah Everard and immediate measures taken included the creation of the new online tool "StreetSafe". This provides women and girls with a way to anonymously and quickly pinpoint areas where they have felt unsafe and say why—an innovative crime prevention tool. The appointment in September of Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth as the national police lead for violence against women and girls means that police action in this vital area is now being co-ordinated across England and Wales.

In June we published the end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions, in which we committed to deliver lasting improvements to the way we investigate and prosecute rape so that victims are properly supported and they—and the public—can have confidence that perpetrators of this sickening crime will feel the full force of the law.

The Domestic Abuse Act, which gained Royal Assent this year, provides for the first time in history a wide-ranging legal definition of domestic abuse and delivers important new protections and support for victims, such as ensuring that abusers can no longer directly cross-examine their victims in the family and civil courts. It also gives police new powers, including domestic abuse protection notices which provide victims with immediate protection from abusers.

We also published our tackling child sexual abuse strategy—a first-of-its-kind national strategy to protect children from all forms of child sexual abuse in which we set out how the Government will use new legislation and enhanced technology to stop offenders in their tracks and bring the perpetrators of these heinous crimes to justice.

We have also enhanced our work tackling the scourge of drugs with a new cross-Government 10-year strategy which includes pursuing and closing down the ruthless gangs who exploit and threaten the most vulnerable in society for financial gain through the illegal drugs trade. We have already closed down 1,500 county lines and this new crackdown aims to dismantle a further 2,000, as we seek to continue driving down crime and delivering safer streets for all.

During the course of this year, we have also expanded Project ADDER, the programme which seeks to ensure that more drug users get effective treatment, with enhanced treatment and recovery provision. Its overarching aim is to reduce drug-related deaths, reduce drug-related offending and reduce the prevalence of drug use while disrupting high-harm criminals and networks involved in the supply and importation of drugs. Having launched the programme in January 2021 in Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich and Swansea Bay, in July 2021 it expanded to take in Bristol, Newcastle, Wakefield, the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, and three local authorities in Liverpool city region.

Meanwhile, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill—legislation to restore confidence in the criminal justice system—is approaching its concluding stages in the House of Lords. Once enacted, this will give our police officers more of the powers and tools they need to keep themselves and all of us safe, while introducing tougher sentencing for the worst offenders and ending automatic halfway release from prison for serious crimes. Following recent antisocial protests which have caused misery and disruption for countless road users and citizens going about their lawful business, the legislation

will give the police the power to stop and search people in order to seize items such as glue and chains intended to cause serious disruption by “locking-on”. It will also introduce mandatory life sentences for those who kill an emergency worker in the course of their duty.

Following the mass shooting in Plymouth in August, a review of police firearms licensing procedures was completed, including a review of licences which had been surrendered, seized, revoked or refused, only then to be returned following further checks or appeals. Following this review, eight of these returned licences were either re-surrendered or revoked, providing further reassurance to the public that their safety remains our priority.

We have also continued to establish what needs to be done to protect people from being exposed to harmful content online, whether that be publishing incitement to terrorism or images of the sexual abuse of children. I will continue to hold technology companies to account for the harmful content they host on their platforms and if they neglect public safety when designing products; and in due course our Online Safety Bill will place on those technology companies a binding duty of care to their users—and end-to-end encryption will not release them from that duty. This is fundamental to ensuring public safety and keeping people safe from evil.

Figures published last month show a 14% decrease in total crime (excluding fraud and computer misuse) across England and Wales for the year ending June 2021, compared with the year ending June 2019. This includes an 11% decrease in the number of homicides, a 6% decrease in the number of police recorded offences involving firearms and an 8% decrease in offences involving knives or sharp instruments.

#### *Controlling our borders*

Following the UK’s exit from the European Union we have been able to take back control of our borders by ending free movement and introducing our new points-based immigration system, which has now been in operation for over a year. We have also created new routes to attract the most talented and highly-skilled workers and global leaders in their fields to the UK.

These include the graduate route, which will allow talented international graduates who have been awarded their degree from a UK university to stay in the UK and work, or look for work, at any skill level for at least two years, and the new fast-track international sportsperson route, which will make it easier for professional athletes across sports to work in the country.

Additionally, we have improved the employer sponsorship system to enable UK businesses and educational institutions to become sponsors and attract global talent faster, while adding more illustrious prizes to the global talent visa, making it simpler for more of the world’s most gifted minds to come to the country.

We have also created an immigration route for British nationals overseas status holders in Hong Kong, reflecting our historic and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong who have had their rights and freedoms restricted. As of 30 September, since the route launched on 31 January 2021 there had been 67,300 applications with 57,300 successful grants.

Recognising the considerable public concerns about illegal migration, the Nationality and Borders Bill is a critical piece of legislation whose aim is to deter illegal

entry into the UK and reduce the pull factors. It was given its Third Reading in the House of Commons by a majority of 67 earlier this month.

This legislation will deliver long-overdue reform to our broken asylum and immigration system and will be critical in making unviable the business model of the people smugglers who threaten the lives of every person from whom they take money to then place in unseaworthy vessels to cross the English channel.

Once enacted, this legislation will: make the system fairer and more effective so that we can better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum; deter illegal entry into the UK and save lives by breaking the business model of those criminal trafficking networks; and remove from the UK those with no right to be here.

We have also continued to work closely with our international partners on tackling this shared problem emanating from the global migration crisis and specifically signed a new agreement with the French Government to strengthen UK-France co-operation on tackling illegal immigration across the channel.

The tireless work of the National Crime Agency tackling organised immigration crime has also played an important role in helping bring to justice people smugglers, having been involved in more than 140 arrests in the first 11 months of this year and with around 50 ongoing investigations linked to organised immigration crime. (The NCA has also played a critical role in other areas, such as keeping children safe online throughout the pandemic and disrupting high-risk offenders.)

We have also signed a new agreement with the Albanian Government to remove Albanian nationals who have no right to be in the UK, and established a new migration and mobility partnership with the Indian Government, supporting people coming to the UK through legal routes, while stopping the abuse of the system and speeding up the removal of those who have no right to be in the UK.

#### *Protecting the homeland*

Most of the work of our counter-terrorism police and security agencies is done out of public sight for good reasons, but they play an essential role in keeping the public safe.

They constantly review where threats exist and take the necessary action to clamp down on those with malign intent. To that end, this year Parliament has proscribed the entirety of Hamas, the militant Islamist terrorist movement, as a terrorist organisation, as well as Atomwaffen Division and The Base, predominantly US-based white supremacist groups.

During the year, the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act received Royal Assent, further protecting the public by completely ending the prospect of early release for anyone convicted of a serious terror offence and forcing them to spend their whole term in jail. It also enhances the tools available to counter-terrorism police and the security services to manage the risk posed by terrorist offenders and individuals of concern outside of custody.

The Covert Human Intelligence Sources Act was also given Royal Assent, providing a clear and consistent statutory basis so that our intelligence and enforcement agencies and public bodies have the right tools to keep us safe. This longstanding critical capability supports the

work of undercover agents in preventing and safeguarding victims from serious crimes, including terrorism, by ensuring they can gain the trust of those under investigation.

This year also saw the unveiling of the first elements of the new counter-terrorism operations centre in London, including a cutting-edge counter-terrorism operations suite which is now fully operational and helping to keep the public safe.

During the summer, the Home Office stepped up to help in the evacuation of people from Kabul airport—the largest evacuation mission undertaken since the second world war, which involved getting more than 16,000 people out of the Afghan capital. The Home Office's dual priorities during this evacuation were to save as many lives as possible while keeping the British public safe and I am very proud of all who worked on that immense response.

Likewise, I was proud of all the Home Office teams, police and our partner agencies who were involved in safely delivering the COP26 conference in Glasgow in November—the largest international event the UK has hosted since the 2012 Olympics—as well as the G7 summit earlier this year. UKVI staff and Border Force officers efficiently processed and welcomed tens of thousands of visiting delegates from around the world; meanwhile, police officers from across the UK and our security agencies kept attendees and the public safe throughout—as they do without fanfare across the UK every day of the year. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

#### *International engagement*

In September I chaired the G7 Interior Ministers in London, showing how the UK is taking a lead on the international stage in the spheres of counter-terrorism and illegal migration, as well as tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation online. We agreed to work together to take action to prevent and combat violent extremism and terrorism; to protect people against harms enabled or exacerbated by the internet; to ensure security is not undermined by the threat of serious and organised crime; to support global action to confront emerging issues for national and border security; and to strengthen international action against corruption and kleptocracies.

Throughout the year I and ministerial colleagues have engaged with numerous counterparts from around the world. In November I visited Washington, where I met with senior members of the US administration, and it was agreed that the UK and US security services will undertake joint work to further strengthen the vital counter-terrorism relationship between our two nations.

#### *EU settlement scheme*

Following the UK's departure from the European Union, a considerable number of our EU friends and neighbours decided to make the UK their home and secure the status to which they are entitled through the hugely successful EU settlement scheme. By the end of November 2021, more than 6.3 million applications had been received, with over 5.9 million (94%) applications concluded. We have continued to work as quickly as possible to conclude applications, as well as supporting people with late applications, and the scheme remains open indefinitely for late applications.

#### *Windrush*

Finally, this year, we have continued to put right the wrongs suffered by the Windrush generation under successive Governments. Following the overhaul of the compensation scheme I announced in December 2020, it is now easier for people to get higher payments more quickly, and as a result of my changes, more than £38 million has been paid or offered in compensation.

We simplified the application process, including changes to the primary claim form, designed in consultation with stakeholders, to make it easier to complete and easier for caseworkers to process; and for those who need support, we have funded an organisation to provide free, independent claimant assistance to individuals for the duration of the scheme.

We have also worked at pace to implement the recommendations of the Windrush lessons learned review, with Wendy Williams having recently returned to the Home Office to undertake a progress review on delivery of her recommendations.

[HCWS511]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Disability Workforce Reporting Consultation

**The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith):** Today the Government are publishing their consultation on disability workforce reporting, as announced in the national disability strategy.

Our strategy, published in July 2021, set out over 100 wide-ranging practical actions to improve the everyday lives of disabled people. The strategy focuses on the issues that disabled people have told us matter most to them.

Supportive workplaces, where disabled people feel valued and able to be open about any additional needs, are vital to driving progress. It is also important that employers have the information required to create inclusive workplaces.

Through this consultation we will build an evidence base to better understand:

- current reporting practices, and what works well
- the case for and against implementing a mandatory approach to reporting
- how a mandated approach to reporting, if adopted, might be implemented in practice
- if there are alternative approaches that could also be taken to enhance transparency and increase inclusive practices.

I would encourage Members to make constituents and networks aware of the consultation, and to respond before the closing date on 25 March 2022.

I will deposit a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses and publishing it online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/disability-workforce-reporting>.

[HCWS498]



# Petitions

*Thursday 16 December 2021*

## OBSERVATIONS

### TRANSPORT

#### Electrification of the Hull to Selby railway line

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that rail links to Hull are among the poorest in the north of England; further that the current train service reliability of 60 per cent or lower means it is quicker to travel to Leeds by road; further the Humberside economy is increasingly supplying renewable energy but poor rail connections to Hull and the port do not encourage sustainable transport choices; further electrifying the Leeds to Hull route via Selby, and significantly upgrading the railway line between Sheffield and Hull via Goole, will permit cleaner, faster and more reliable trains to run in and out of Hull; further this will provide an electrified railway from east to west and allow freight to cross coast to coast more efficiently; further the Government has committed to a carbon neutral economy by 2050.

The petitioners therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to: prioritise the rail electrification of the Hull-Selby line and the upgrading of the railway line between Sheffield and Hull via Goole by inclusion in the forthcoming Integrated Rail Plan.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Emma Hardy*, *Official Report*, 20 October 2021; Vol. 701, c. 890.]

[P002691]

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that rail links to Hull are among the poorest in the north of England; further that the current train service reliability of 60 per cent or lower means it is quicker to travel to Leeds by road; further that the Humberside economy is increasingly supplying renewable energy but poor rail connections to Hull and the port do not encourage sustainable transport choices; further that electrifying the Leeds to Hull route via Selby, and significantly upgrading the railway line between Sheffield and Hull via Goole, will permit cleaner, faster and more reliable trains to run in and out of Hull; further that this will provide an electrified railway from east to west and allow freight to cross coast to coast more efficiently; and notes that the Government has committed to a carbon neutral economy by 2050.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to prioritise the rail electrification of the Hull-Selby line and the upgrading of the railway line between Sheffield and Hull via Goole by inclusion in the forthcoming Integrated Rail Plan.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Dame Diana Johnson*, *Official Report*, 26 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 241.]

[P002694]

*Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):*

Thank you for your petition regarding rail electrification to Hull.

We expect electrification to play an important part in the Government's commitment to decarbonise rail as part of our target of reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050 as set out in the Transport Decarbonisation Plan. We also recognise that investment in Hull and providing opportunities for the people and businesses of Hull remains an important consideration to the success of the Northern economy and supporting the levelling up agenda.

The electrification of rail routes to Hull were considered as part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) programme. The Government's Integrated Rail Plan identified a core pipeline of schemes, and any further schemes, including Hull upgrades and electrification, will be subject to affordability, delivering commitments on time and to budget, and complementary investments being made.

The Government agree that any future development of rail routes to Hull should focus on electrification and line speed improvements. Further work could also look at the case for electrifying beyond Hull Station as far as the docks via a 15 km single track spur off the main line. This would provide an industry benefit as faster freight trains would improve passenger timetabling on the Leeds-Hull route.

More broadly, Network Rail's "Hull Area Strategic Study" (<https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/long-term-planning>), published in February 2020, examined what might be required to accommodate future train services in the Hull Area to support economic growth up to 2043. This study examined potential future passenger and freight growth across Hull, East Yorkshire and North Yorkshire as part of their Continuous Modular Strategic Planning approach to long-term planning.

The Department for Transport will continue to work with industry and local leaders to determine the most effective way to address rail capacity and performance issues in and around Hull.



# Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 16 December 2021

## EDUCATION

Arthur Labinjo-Hughes

*The following are extracts from the oral statement on 6 December 2021.*

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Not that long ago, only about 37% of local authorities had a good Ofsted inspection. The one thing I would correct her on is that it is not so binary as pass and fail, because, actually, it is very much about areas of improvement in children's social care. That 37% has now risen to 57% of local authorities that have a good inspection.

*[Official Report, 6 December 2021, Vol. 705, c. 41.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson).

The correct information should have been:

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Not that long ago, only about 37% of local authorities had a good Ofsted inspection. The one thing I would correct her on is that it is not so binary as pass and fail, because, actually, it is very much about areas of improvement in children's social care. That 36% has now risen to 50% of local authorities that **are good or outstanding**.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Since 2017 we have seen an uplift of 10% in the social care workforce, which I hope she will agree is to be commended.

*[Official Report, 6 December 2021, Vol. 705, c. 44.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck)

The correct information should have been:

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Since 2017 we have seen a **rise** of 10% in the **child and family social worker** workforce, which I hope she will agree is to be commended.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I thank the hon. Lady for her 15 years of service as a social worker. She is absolutely right. In the first quarter of next year, there will be a reduction in that bureaucracy; that is coming down the line even before the review.

*[Official Report, 6 December 2021, Vol. 705, c. 53.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby).

The correct information should have been:

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I thank the hon. Lady for her 15 years of service as a social worker. She is absolutely right. In the first quarter of next year, **the review will cover reduction in bureaucracy**.



# ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 16 December 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	1121	<b>TRANSPORT—continued</b>	
A1: Peterborough to Blyth .....	1135	Restoring Your Railway Programme .....	1125
A14 at Kettering: Junction 10A Funding .....	1133	Road Condition .....	1132
Affordable Bus Travel: North-east England .....	1128	TfL Funding: Discussions with Mayor of London .....	1122
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: Delays .....	1121	Topical Questions .....	1136
East-west Rail Connections: North England .....	1134	Tram Service Suspensions: West Midlands .....	1135
Major Road Blockages: Climate Activists .....	1129	Transport and Logistics: Labour Shortages .....	1131
Mass Transit System: Leeds .....	1133	Transport Decarbonisation .....	1134
Northern Powerhouse Rail: Stakeholders .....	1124	Zero-emission Buses .....	1126
Park-and-ride Schemes .....	1130		

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 16 December 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY</b> .....	70WS	<b>HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE</b> .....	76WS
Nuclear Third Party Liability Framework .....	70WS	Independent Inquiry Report into Issues Raised by Former Surgeon Ian Paterson .....	76WS
<b>CABINET OFFICE</b> .....	67WS	Medicine Supplies to Northern Ireland .....	81WS
Independent Review of Construction Frameworks .....	67WS	<b>HOME DEPARTMENT</b> .....	81WS
<b>DEFENCE</b> .....	71WS	Home Office Delivery 2021 .....	87WS
Future Nuclear Deterrent Annual Update 2021 .....	71WS	Interpol General Assembly .....	81WS
<b>EDUCATION</b> .....	72WS	Provisional Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2022-23 .....	82WS
School and Early Years Funding .....	72WS	UK Anti-Corruption Strategy: Year 3 Update .....	86WS
<b>HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE</b> .....	74WS	<b>LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES</b> .....	67WS
Adult Social Care Funding and Reform .....	74WS	Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2022-23 .....	67WS
David Fuller Case: Update on Actions .....	75WS	<b>WORK AND PENSIONS</b> .....	92WS
		Disability Workforce Reporting Consultation .....	92WS

# PETITIONS

Thursday 16 December 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	9P	
Electrification of the Hull to Selby railway line .....	9P	

# MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Thursday 16 December 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>EDUCATION</b> .....	5MC
Arthur Labinjo-Hughes .....	5MC

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**not later than  
Thursday 23 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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## CONTENTS

Thursday 16 December 2021

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1121] [see index inside back page]**  
*Secretary of State for Transport*

**Covid-19: Government Support for Business [Col. 1143]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(John Glen)*

**FCDO Staffing [Col. 1155]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(James Cleverly)*

**Business of the House [Col. 1164]**  
*Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)*

**Online Safety Bill [Col. 1185]**  
*Select Committee Statement—(Damian Collins)*

**Backbench Business [Col. 1193]**  
**Christmas Adjournment [Col. 1193]**  
*Motion—(Bob Blackman)—agreed to*

**Animal Testing [Col. 1237]**  
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**  
**Surgical Fires in the NHS [Col. 397WH]**  
*General Debate*

**Written Statements [Col. 67WS]**

**Petitions [Col. 9P]**  
*Observations*

**Ministerial Corrections [Col. 5MC]**

**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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