Wednesday
12 January 2022

Volume 706
No. 98

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 12 January 2022

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2022
This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 January 2022

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

1. **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase the number of women and girls (a) studying and (b) employed in STEM subjects and jobs. [905015]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): Between 2010 and 2020, under this Conservative Government, the number of women accepted on to full-time STEM undergraduate courses in the UK has increased by 49%.[1] We are utterly committed to ensuring that more women and girls study STEM through funding programmes that boost uptake, such as the Inclusion in Schools physics programme.

Suzanne Webb: Would my hon. Friend be able to let me know exactly how many women are taking up STEM apprenticeships? I ask this question specifically because the electric vehicle revolution in the west midlands is leading the way, and I am keen to see women taking up such opportunities so that they can have a long-term career in high-quality, high-paid jobs.

Alex Burghart: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and I look forward to visiting the west midlands to see that with my own eyes, because apprenticeships are exactly the sort of first step on the career path we are looking to provide for our young people. Women now account for more than half of all apprenticeship starts across the country and our apprenticeships diversity champions network is working with employers across the country to make sure we see the improvement we need.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The under-representation of women in STEM is informed by a variety of factors. What assessment have the Government made of how careers in niche areas of STEM such as photonics can be better advertised and incentivised for women?

Alex Burghart: We are always doing whatever we can to encourage more women and girls to study STEM. I am delighted to say that the number of women on full-time STEM undergraduate courses has gone up by 49% since 2010. The percentage of women on full-time STEM undergraduate courses has gone up from 34% to 42% since 2010, and A-level science entries are up 36% among girls. Girls now account for more than 50% of all science A-level entries, and women now account for over half of all STEM undergraduates. Those are significant increases since the Conservatives came to power in 2020, and I look forward to taking that from strength to strength.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Wockhardt in Wrexham made the AstraZeneca vaccine ready, setting the scene for Wrexham to be at the forefront of opportunities. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to encourage young people, including women, into STEM opportunities, and that Wrexham, with Glyndŵr University and Coleg Cambria, is just the place to do that?

Alex Burghart: It looks like I shall be going to Wrexham as well. I am delighted to say that, under this Government, women and girls are driving the STEM revolution that is powering the new economy.

Hate Crimes

2. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the Law Commission's recommendations on hate crimes. [905016]

13. **Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the Law Commission's recommendations on hate crimes. [905028]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): The Law Commission published its comprehensive review of hate crime laws on 7 December. Recognising the complex issues that the Law Commission has identified, the Government will carefully consider those recommendations and provide a further response as quickly as possible.

Helen Hayes: Women and girls in Dulwich and West Norwood and across the country are desperate to see action on the sexual harassment they experience daily on our streets and in public spaces. The suggestion from the Prime Minister that these offences should simply be prosecuted under existing laws demonstrates that he is as out of touch with the public mood on this issue as he is on everything else. The Law Commission recommended that the Government undertake a review of the need for a specific offence of public sexual harassment. Will the Minister confirm that the review will be undertaken swiftly, so that new legislation can be brought forward without further delay?

Rachel Maclean: I can reassure the hon. Lady and the whole House that the Prime Minister takes all forms of sexual harassment against women and girls extremely seriously. That is why we are focusing on the Law Commission's recommendations, which involve a number of complex issues, as she will understand. If there are gaps in the specific laws that tackle this appalling crime, the Government will act.

Jess Phillips: To follow up on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), a kite was flown in *The Telegraph* saying that the Government were absolutely going to put in place a public sexual harassment law, as has been called for, as has been suggested by the Law Commission and as was talked about in the violence against women and girls strategy that was published six months ago. Now

1. *[Official Report, 25 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 9MC.]*

the Minister is standing in front of us and saying, "We are still looking at it." Was what the Home Office official told *The Telegraph* right, or is what the Minister is saying right? The Government committed to this law six months ago, so when can we expect it?

Rachel Maclean: I am happy to put on record the official position, regardless of what has or has not been reported in *The Telegraph*, which unfortunately I have not read. We are responding to the Law Commission's review as quickly as possible, as I already said to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Our Streets Now, Plan UK and a variety of organisations from Girlguiding to the Soroptimists all agree with the Law Commission that hate crimes would best be prosecuted as a specific law. Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that she will look for a legislative vehicle to make that possible quickly?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue again and for representing the views of many across the country. She should be in no doubt that we take these horrific crimes seriously, and that is why we published the violence against women and girls strategy, which sets out a number of measures to keep women and girls safe. We are working at pace to work through the complex issues identified by our legal friends so that we are in a position to bring forward a response swiftly.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): With regard to the wider strategy on tackling hate crime, Home Office statistics show that there are about 124,000 hate crime incidents. Under the category religion, there was a real rise in Islamophobia and antisemitism. What will the Government do in their strategy to address those two real issues concerning our society?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend very much for making representations on the important issue of the persecution of religious faiths in this country. The Government take these issues extremely seriously, and that is why we will publish a refreshed hate crime strategy. We are also investing in a number of measures to keep communities safe, wherever they may worship. Freedom of worship in this country is a vital principle that we all believe in.

Transgender Prisoners

3. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What the Government's policy is on placing transgender women with sexual abuse convictions in female prisons. [905017]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): Transgender women can be allocated to women's prisons only following a rigorous risk assessment, with particular consideration given to the type of offence they have committed and the risk that they pose to others. The result is that well over 90% of transgender women in prison are held in the men's estate, and there have been no assaults or sexual assaults carried out by transgender women in the women's estate since we strengthened our approach in 2019. Just to emphasise, there is an exemption to the Equality Act 2010 requirement not to discriminate against transgender people in relation to single-sex spaces where doing so is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. Prisons can and do rely on that exemption.

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Does he agree that the protection of women is of paramount consideration when dealing with the placement of transgender offenders in the prison system? On what basis would a male-born prisoner with a record of sex offences against women who now identifies as a transgender woman be placed in a women-only prison?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Just to be clear, the safety of all prisoners is of fundamental importance to the Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, and we are particularly aware of the vulnerabilities of many female prisoners. Transgender women who want to move to a women's prison will be risk-assessed by an expert multidisciplinary panel chaired by a senior prison manager. The panel will consider an individual's offending history, their anatomy, their behaviour in custody and their use of medication related to gender reassignment, as well as the risk posed to individuals.

Support for Disabled People

4. **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the impact of the autumn Budget and spending review 2021 on support for disabled people. [905018] [R]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Under the 2021 spending review there will be delivery of targeted support for disabled people, including £1.1 billion of investment in helping them to get into work, £2.6 billion of funding for new school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and much more on health and other matters.

Karl Turner: In the autumn statement the Government snuck out a £70 million stealth cut to benefits. I was grateful for the opportunity to speak to the Minister before questions, and I know he is not the Minister responsible, but can he confirm that disabled people will be involved in the process and say how it will affect them? If he cannot, will the Minister responsible write to me?

Guy Opperman: Yes, the Minister for Disabled People will write to the hon. Gentleman, but I can confirm that we will spend the record sum of £58 billion this year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the health and disability Green Paper and the strategy published in the summer of last year, which will be responded to in this House in the summer of this year.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservatives are simply unable to get a grip on the cost of living crisis, and disabled people are paying the price. After failing to act in the Budget, yesterday the Conservatives voted against measures to slash the cost of fuel, which would have disproportionately benefited

disabled people, who are more likely to be in fuel poverty. Indeed, the Conservatives seem to have little understanding of the reality of disabled people's lives. Can anyone on the much enlarged Treasury Bench inform the House what percentage of disabled people currently live in relative poverty?

Guy Opperman: I will get the Minister for Disabled People to provide the precise stats for the hon. Lady, but I repeat the point that funding for disabled people and people with health conditions is at the record level of £58 billion.

Anneliese Dodds: I find it astonishing that no one on the Government Front Bench appears to be aware that 27% of disabled people in our country live in relative poverty—that is up by 1 million more disabled people since 2010. The situation looks set to be exacerbated by the Chancellor's £70 million stealth cut to disability benefits in the Budget, of which the Minister seemed to be unaware when it was raised a moment ago. Were the rest of the Women and Equalities team consulted about that stealth cut?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will understand that only the Minister who is asked the particular question can answer. The practical reality is that the spending review has shown that £58 billion is a record sum. It is an increase of nearly £5 billion in real terms since 2010.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy assured me that he has had extensive conversations with the Chancellor about the cost of living crisis that we have just heard about, but what we need is action. Not only have disabled people on benefits lost the £20 a week universal credit uplift, but their benefits are lower in real terms than they were before the pandemic and many face the future with real dread. Disabled people should not bear the brunt of the cost of living crisis, so what discussions has the Minister had with his Treasury colleagues about tackling the toxic blend of Tory cuts, tax hikes, soaring inflation and surging energy bills that is affecting disabled people across the UK?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will know that there is the household support fund, the winter fuel payments, the cold weather payments and the increase in the state pension by 2.5% for this year and by 3.1% next year, and that there is everything from the energy price cap to the freeze in fuel duty, which all go to assist anybody affected.

Covid-19 Vaccinations

5. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of steps taken by the Government to increase the uptake of covid-19 vaccinations where uptake is lower among certain ethnic groups. [905019]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The covid disparities report that I published last year summarised the unprecedented measures we have taken to promote vaccine uptake and includes recommendations to improve vaccination rates further for harder-to-reach groups that the Prime Minister has accepted in full. We have worked with faith leaders and other trusted local voices to overcome vaccine hesitancy and provided more than £23 million in funding to support the community champion scheme, which we have just extended to support the booster campaign.

Dr Huq: Behind the boasts of jabs in arms that for a while were distracting from the death figures, until we hit 150,000, are the Government not as worried as I am that the Office for National Statistics is finding vaccine hesitancy among the black British population more than five times higher than among the white population? Among the over-50s, just 44% of Caribbeans and 42% of Pakistanis have been boosted, as opposed to 77% of white British. When are the Government going to admit that their "Take me to your leader" model of community relations just is not working?

Kemi Badenoch: I have to say—and I really do not say this lightly—that the hon. Lady has form in pretending that the Government are doing absolutely nothing, when we are doing so much to encourage vaccine take-up in ethnic minority communities. She will know that in her own constituency of Ealing Central and Acton we have spent £485,000 on the community champions scheme. The hon. Lady will not stand up and let her constituents know what we are doing to encourage vaccine uptake. Perhaps she should focus on the positive things that the Government have done, including in her own constituency. There would be less vaccine hesitancy if Opposition Members stopped scaremongering.

Women in Enterprise

6. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps she is taking to support women in enterprise. [905020]

9. **Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): What steps she is taking to support women in enterprise. [905023]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government continue to support women in enterprise by implementing the recommendations of the Rose review. Our start-up loans company has advanced more than 35,000 loans to women since 2012, worth nearly £300 million, and that represents 40% of all loans.

Simon Baynes: My constituent Kerry Mackay from the Ceiriog valley has overcome hardship and just been named one of the top 100 most inspirational and dynamic female entrepreneurs in the UK for her business ScrubbiesUK, which makes environmentally friendly cleaning pads. Will the Minister congratulate Kerry and look at ways to raise awareness of the business mentoring and training schemes that were pivotal to her success and that of her business?

Kemi Badenoch: Kerry Mackay is inspirational and I congratulate her and all her colleagues at ScrubbiesUK. She is an exemplar for small businesses, leading the way to help the UK tackle plastic pollution and reach our climate goals. I am glad to hear that she benefited from Government mentoring support, and I will ask the relevant Business Minister to write to my hon. Friend with more details. In the meantime, I hope that people like Kerry Mackay will raise awareness of this opportunity through their own networks, which is often the most effective way to spread the word.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Covid particularly impacts women in business, and the sectors in which they are predominant need to be protected by the Government. What more can we do?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Some of the sectors most impacted by covid, such as the arts and hospitality, include a high proportion of women-led businesses. She will be aware of the targeted measures to help these sectors that were announced just last month by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, including one-off grants of up to £6,000 per premises for the hospitality sector and £30 million through the culture recovery fund. That support will help female entrepreneurs to keep trading through the current difficulties and make the most of future opportunities as they look forward to the end of the pandemic.

Spiking in Nightclubs

7. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on their response to young women being spiked by injection in nightclubs. [905021]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): The abhorrent crimes of spiking also speak to broader issues of violence against women and girls, which is taken extremely seriously by this Government. The Home Secretary has already asked the National Police Chiefs' Council to urgently review the extent and scale of the issue, and she is receiving regular updates from the police. The hon. Lady will know that we are delivering a pilot £5 million safety of women at night fund, which focuses on preventing violence against women and girls in the night-time economy, keeping them safe in public spaces at night.

Judith Cummins: Many girls and women are afraid of enjoying a night out or going to a music festival for fear of being spiked, raped and assaulted. What work is the Minister doing with venues such as bars, nightclubs and music festivals to prevent that from happening and to ensure that appropriate safeguarding measures are in place, and what is the assessment of the scale of the problem at those venues?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady raises a really good point. Those in the night-time economy play a key role and are taking their responsibilities seriously. The Government work very closely with them, and we are providing funding and helping them provide training to their staff so that women can feel safe at night. It is vital that the funding we are providing is being used by local authorities to provide, for example, testing kits and taxi marshals to get women home safely at night. Police are also ramping up their forensic capabilities. There is a lot of work going on.

Conversion Therapy

8. **Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): If the Government will ensure that proposed legislation to ban conversion therapy will not criminalise therapists and parents for telling children that it is not possible to be born in the wrong body. [905022]

The Minister for Equalities (Mike Freer): The Government's proposals will protect freedom of speech. The proposals will not affect a parent's right to express their views and raise their children with their values. Parents, clinicians and teachers will, of course, continue to be able to have open and challenging conversations with young people or others about their sexual orientation or whether they are transgender or not.

Mark Jenkinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. There have been instances of parents being reported to social services for not simply affirming their child's new trans identity. Will my hon. Friend assure parents that their right to not simply affirm their child's new identity will be protected in the face of the ideological capture of some of our public services?

Mike Freer: Parents and carers will, of course, have the right to express their views on how a child identifies.

Topical Questions

T1. [905007] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): We are five months away from Safe To Be Me, the UK's first ever global LGBT rights conference. Everybody should be free to be themselves, but that is not true in too many parts of the world. We will work with friends and allies across the globe to turn the tide on authoritarianism, spread freedom and end the criminalisation, persecution and violence experienced by far too many LGBT people.

Rob Butler: Aylesbury has a sizeable Pakistani diaspora. We have seen excellent campaigns locally and nationally to encourage uptake of vaccines among this community, but in the town's central wards fewer than half of the people have had the booster so far. What steps is my hon. Friend taking across Government to encourage vaccine take-up among ethnic minority groups, especially those who do not have English as their first language?

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): My Department has been working across Government to promote vaccine uptake among ethnic minorities. We have worked with trusted local voices such as faith leaders to spread messaging, and we publish key information and advice via community TV and radio stations, translated into a range of languages including Urdu and Punjabi. In May, I met the high commissioner for Pakistan to consider other ways we can reach out to diaspora groups to promote vaccine confidence and uptake. I should say that between April and October 2021, the largest increase in vaccine uptake among the over-50s was in the Pakistani and black ethnic groups.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Department for Work and Pensions data show that four in five black people have less than £1,500 in the bank. More worrying is that approximately one in four black British, British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani people have no savings at all. Energy bills are going up, food prices are up and taxes are up. The increased cost of living will hit minority communities hardest. What action will the Minister take to ensure that minority communities are not pushed into greater hardship this winter?

Kemi Badenoch: We have put, on average, £1,000 a year more into the pockets of the lowest earners through changes to universal credit, increasing the minimum wage next April to £9.50 an hour, and helping with the cost of fuel bills. Our multibillion plan for jobs, which was recently expanded by £500 million, will help people across the UK to find work and to boost their wages and prospects, and this will disproportionately benefit people in minority ethnic groups.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In May 2020, Professor Sarah Gilbert, with help from the Downing Street team, was working on the AstraZeneca vaccine. What more can my right hon. Friend do to encourage more women in biomedicine?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about Sarah Gilbert's achievements. She was part of our Gender Equality Advisory Council, working across the G7 to give women more opportunities and to enable more entrepreneurship, ideas and innovation around the world.

T2. [905008] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concern that many older workers who lose their job find it difficult to get back into work, either because of employer prejudice or because of an artificial requirement for paper qualifications, with no allowance made for capability or experience; and what is she going to do about it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The DWP has launched 50Plus Choices, which specifically addresses the issues the right hon. Gentleman raises. I will get the Minister responsible for that matter to write to him.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Outcomes for people in Blackpool in education, health and employment are among the worst in the whole country. I welcome the equality data programme, which is examining how factors such as social background and geography contribute to inequality. How does the Minister expect the programme to reduce the inherent inequalities that have disadvantaged people in Blackpool for decades?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Where one lives often has a bigger impact on outcomes than anything else. For example, the wage gap between London and the north-west is, on average, £5.22 an hour. We are examining the drivers of those disparities, and we have appointed Katharine Birbalsingh to lead the Social Mobility Commission and help to propose the policies that will sort this out.

T3. [905009] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for black, Asian and minority ethnic business owners, I have been working closely with special adviser Diana Chrouch to identify and address the barriers to accessing finance that BAME entrepreneurs experience. A significant issue is the lack of data collected by banks and other financial institutions on the ethnicity of business owners. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the APPG to discuss how better collection of business owners' ethnicity data can be driven forward across Government?

Kemi Badenoch: I am keen to hear what the APPG thinks the solutions are to this issue. The hon. Lady will know that collecting ethnicity data is a sensitive issue and it is not something that all people want to do, but I am happy to work with her and the APPG to learn about how we can come to some resolution.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that increasing diversity in the STEM sector is not only good for the individuals who will benefit from well paid, creative and rewarding jobs, but brings a wealth of talent and creativity to an ever more important sector?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need all the talent in Britain on the pitch, which is why it is so important we get more people into STEM, particularly girls and women.

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904958] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 January.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I know that the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to Jack Dromey. His working life was devoted to his trade union members and, in recent years, to his constituents in Birmingham, Erdington. I was deeply saddened to hear of his death, and my thoughts are with Harriet, the family and all those who knew him as a friend.

Mr Speaker, I want to apologise. I know that millions of people across this country have made extraordinary sacrifices over the last 18 months. I know the anguish that they have been through, unable to mourn their relatives and unable to live their lives as they want or to do the things they love. I know the rage they feel with me and with the Government I lead when they think that in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed by the people who make the rules.

Though I cannot anticipate the conclusions of the current inquiry, I have learned enough to know that there were things that we simply did not get right, and I must take responsibility. No. 10 is a big department, with the garden as an extension of the office, which has been in constant use because of the role of fresh air in stopping the virus. When I went into that garden just after 6 o'clock on 20 May 2020, to thank groups of staff before going back into my office 25 minutes later to continue working, I believed implicitly that this was a work event, but with hindsight, I should have sent everyone back inside. I should have found some other way to thank them, and I should have recognised that even if it could be said technically to fall within the guidance, there would be millions and millions of people who simply would not see it that way—people who suffered terribly, people who were forbidden from meeting

loved ones at all, inside or outside—and to them, and to this House, I offer my heartfelt apologies. All I ask is that Sue Gray be allowed to complete her inquiry into that day and several others, so that the full facts can be established. I will of course come back to this House and make a statement.

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

Dr Davies: My constituent Carol Ridgway faces eight weeks of stress and worry as she waits for an urgent appointment at the local breast clinic in north Wales. Despite the pandemic, 85% of patients in England wait only two weeks for their urgent suspected cancer referrals. What can my right hon. Friend do to ensure equality of healthcare across Britain?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am sorry about the case that he raises. Health of course is a devolved matter, but I thank our NHS colleagues across the whole of the UK. I point out that the Welsh Government will benefit from an additional £3.8 billion of funding this year, plus a further £270 million to support the response to covid.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the comments about Jack Dromey. We will, I think, be doing tributes in due course in relation to Jack.

Well, there we have it: after months of deceit and deception, the pathetic spectacle of a man who has run out of road. The Prime Minister's defence that he did not realise that he was at a party is so ridiculous that it is actually offensive to the British public. He has finally been forced to admit what everyone knew—that when the whole country was locked down, he was hosting boozy parties in Downing Street. Is he now going to do the decent thing and resign?

Hon. Members: Resign!

Mr Speaker: Order. I think someone will be going for an early cup of tea. Can I just say that the question has been asked? I want to know the answer and your constituents want to know the answer—*[Interruption.]* I do not need any extra help either.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making about the event that I attended. I want to repeat that I thought it was a work event. I regret very much that we did not do things differently that evening, as I have said, and I take responsibility and I apologise. As for his political point, I do not think that he should pre-empt the outcome of the inquiry. He will have a further opportunity, I hope, to question me as soon as possible.

Keir Starmer: Well, that apology was pretty worthless, wasn't it? Let me tell the Prime Minister why this matters. Yesterday in this Chamber, hon. Members told heart-wrenching stories about the sacrifices that people across the country were making. The House and the whole country were moved by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) as he talked about his mother-in-law dying alone. He was following the rules while the Prime Minister was partying in Downing Street. Is the Prime Minister really so contemptuous of the British public that he thinks he can just ride this out?

The Prime Minister: I heard the testimony of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I echo the right hon. and learned Gentleman's sentiments. It was deeply moving; nobody who heard that could fail to have been moved. I know that people up and down the country made huge sacrifices throughout the pandemic and I understand the anger—the rage—that they feel at the thought that people in Downing Street were not following those rules. I regret the way that the event I have described was handled. I bitterly regret it and wish that we could have done things differently. I have and will continue to apologise for what we did, but he must wait for the inquiry that will report as soon as possible.

Keir Starmer: When the Prime Minister's former Health Secretary broke the rules, he resigned and the Prime Minister said he was right to do so. When the Prime Minister's spokesperson laughed about the rules being broken, she resigned and the Prime Minister accepted that resignation. Why does the Prime Minister still think that the rules do not apply to him?

The Prime Minister: That is not what I have said. I understand the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes. As I have said, I regret the way things happened on the evening in question and I apologise, but if I may say to him, I do think it would be better if he waited until the full conclusion of the inquiry—until the full facts are brought before this House—and he will then have an opportunity to put his points again.

Keir Starmer: This just isn't working, Prime Minister. Everyone can see what happened. It started with reports of boozy parties in Downing Street during lockdown. The Prime Minister pretended that he had been assured there were no parties—how that fits with his defence now, I do not know. Then the video landed, blowing the Prime Minister's first defence out of the water. So then he pretended that he was sickened and furious about the parties. Now it turns out he was at the parties all along. Can the Prime Minister not see why the British public think he is lying through his teeth?

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Mr Speaker: Order. It was what the public think, not what the Member is saying. *[Interruption.]* I certainly do not need any help from round here. If somebody wants to help me, they can help somewhere else.

The Prime Minister: It is up to the right hon. and learned Gentleman to choose how he conducts himself in this place, and he is wrong—*[Interruption.]* He is wrong. I say to him that he is wrong in what he has said—*[Interruption.]* What he said is wrong in several key respects, but that does not detract from the basic point that I want to make today, which is that I accept that we should have done things differently on that evening. As I have said to the House, I believe that the events in question were within the guidance and were within the rules, and that was certainly the assumption on which I operated, but can I say to him that he should wait—he should wait—before he jumps to conclusions, and a lawyer should respect the inquiry? I hope that he will wait until the facts are established and brought to this House.

Keir Starmer: So we have the Prime Minister attending Downing Street parties—a clear breach of the rules. We have the Prime Minister putting forward a series of ridiculous denials, which he knows are untrue—a clear breach of the ministerial code. That code says:

"Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation".

The party is over, Prime Minister. The only question is: will the British public kick him out, will his party kick him out, or he will he do the decent thing and resign?

The Prime Minister: I just want to repeat: I know it is the right hon. and learned Gentleman's objective and he is paid to try to remove me from office—I appreciate that and I accept that—but may I humbly suggest to him that he should wait until the inquiry has concluded? He should study it for himself, and I will certainly respond as appropriate and I hope that he does, but in the meantime, yes, I certainly wish that things had happened differently on the evening of 20 May, and I apologise for all the misjudgments that have been made, for which I take full responsibility.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is a man without shame. The public want answers to their questions. Hannah Brady's father Shaun was just 55 when he lost his life to covid. He was a fit and healthy key worker. I spoke to Hannah last night, Prime Minister. Her father died just days before the drinks trolley was being wheeled through Downing Street. Last year, Hannah met the Prime Minister in the Downing Street garden. She looked the Prime Minister in the eye and told him of her loss. The Prime Minister told Hannah he had "done everything he could" to protect her dad. What Hannah told me last night was this: looking back, she realises that the Prime Minister had partied in that same garden the very day her dad's death certificate was signed. What Hannah wants to know is this: does the Prime Minister understand why it makes her feel sick to think about the way that he has behaved?

The Prime Minister: I sympathise deeply with Hannah and with people who have suffered up and down this country during the pandemic. I repeat that I wish things had been done differently on that evening, and I repeat my apology for all the misjudgments that may have been made—that were made—on my watch in No. 10 and across the Government, but I want to reassure the people of this country, including Hannah and her family, that we have been working to do everything we can to protect her and her family.

It is thanks to the efforts of this Government that we have the most tested population in Europe, with 1.25 million tests being conducted every day. We have been working to ensure that this population—our country—has the most antivirals of any country in Europe. It is because of the efforts of the Government, and of officials and staff up and down Whitehall, that we have driven the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe and one of the fastest in the world. That is the reason that we now have one of the most open economies, if not the most open economy, in Europe and the fastest growing economy in the G7. Whatever the mistakes that have been made on my watch, for which I apologise and which I fully acknowledge, that is the work that has been going on in No. 10 Downing Street.

Q2. [904959] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): Education is one of the biggest factors when it comes to levelling up. It is what ensures that people throughout the country have access to the same opportunities, and it is a key part of my mission to transform lives in Burnley and Padiham. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister work with me to ensure that Burnley becomes the best place for people to study, whether they are in primary or secondary school, looking for an apprenticeship in advanced engineering, or undertaking a degree in cyber-security?

The Prime Minister: We are investing in education up and down the country. I am delighted that Burnley College was successful in its proposal to become an institute of technology, and that Burnley is home to the growing University of Central Lancashire campus, which makes it a fantastic place to study in Lancashire.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I add my remarks to those already made about Jack Dromey? He was a feisty fighter for workers' rights, and an inspiration to many of us on both sides of the House because of the way in which he conducted himself. We will miss him, and I send condolences to Harriet and to the rest of the family.

The Prime Minister stands before us accused of betraying the nation's trust, of treating the public with contempt, of breaking the laws set by his own Government. A former member of Her Majesty's armed forces, Paul, wrote to me this morning. His father died without the love and support of his full family around him, because they followed the regulations, Prime Minister. Paul said:

"As an ex-soldier, I know how to follow rules but the Prime Minister has never followed any rules. He does what he wants and gets away with it every time".

The Prime Minister cannot "get away with it" again. Will he Prime Minister finally do the decent thing and resign, or will his Tory MPs be forced to show him the door?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I want to offer my condolences to his constituent who wrote to him, and just to remind him of what I said earlier. With the greatest respect to him, I think that he should wait until the inquiry has concluded.

Ian Blackford: It is an open and shut case: this was an event that should not have taken place. It broke the law, Prime Minister.

What is so galling about that response is that the Prime Minister feels no sense of shame for his actions. The public suffered pain and anguish at being kept apart from their families, and all the while the Prime Minister was drinking and laughing behind the walls of his private garden. The public overwhelmingly think that the Prime Minister should resign. Trust has been lost; the public will not forgive or forget. If the Prime Minister has no sense of shame, the Tory Back Benchers must act to remove him. They know that the damage is done. This weak and contemptuous Prime Minister can no longer limp on.

The message from the public is clear: remove this unfit Prime Minister from office, and do it now.

The Prime Minister: Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his political advice, which I will take with a pinch of salt since it comes from the Scottish nationalist party. I think that most people looking objectively at what this Government have delivered over the last 18 months would agree—and I renew my contrition for the mistakes that have been made—that we have delivered the fastest vaccine and the fastest booster roll-out in Europe, and the result is that across the whole of our United Kingdom we have a record number of people back at work.

Q4. [904961] **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): On Friday I met the chief executive of my local hospital trust, the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, to discuss how the trust was managing covid and the impact that it was having. That impact is stark. Between 12% and 15% of the workforce are away isolating, and 140 beds—about 20% of the total—are blocked because the hospital cannot get people back out into social care in the community. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend consider reducing the isolation period to five days if it is seen to be safe to do so, and also accepting any MACA—military aid to the civil authorities—requests that are received, to help get people back into the community and into social care?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are certainly looking at reducing the isolation period, and we hope to bring you more about that, Mr Speaker, as fast as possible. We will certainly look at all MACA requests, but more fundamentally what we can do to alleviate the pressures in my hon. Friend's hospital is to fix the health and social care divide. That is what this Government are also doing, after a generation of neglect.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Today's apology is too little, too late. If the Prime Minister were sincere, he could have apologised at any stage over the past 18 months, rather than waiting until he was found out. My constituents in North Down, and people across the UK, feel betrayed by the Prime Minister. We have had more than 150,000 deaths from covid over the past couple of years, and we have seen standards in public life trashed. For once, can the Prime Minister do the honourable thing and resign, for the sake of the public health message, and for standards in our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I can only repeat what I have said: I understand the hon. Gentleman's feelings about the effect of this pandemic on the country, and I certainly grieve for everybody who has died and who has suffered. On his political point, can I propose that he waits for the inquiry to report?

Q11. [904968] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): I recently visited my local jobcentre, and I am pleased to announce that the adult claimant count is down 28%, and the young adult claimant count is down 40%. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Stourbridge jobcentre for all its hard work, and for its dedication in achieving those results and contributing to the jobs revival that is happening across the west midlands, with 61,000 new jobs since March 2021?

The Prime Minister: Yes indeed, and I thank my hon. Friend for that. It is notable that the Opposition do not like to dwell on these points, but it is an astonishing fact that we have 420,000 more people in work now than before the pandemic began, and youth unemployment is at a record low.

Q3. [904960] **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Another week, another scandal for this Prime Minister and his utterly shameless Government. For two years my constituents made sacrifice after sacrifice, spending time away from their loved ones and missing out on important life events. Some paid the ultimate sacrifice, while he partied away. Figures released just last night show that 79% of people in Scotland think the Prime Minister should step down. Does he realise that it is now clear to all that, although he may not understand how to be socially distant from others, there is no doubt that he is morally distant from the rest of us across these nations, and that the best thing he can do now is to go? Resign, Prime Minister!

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman from the SNP, and I repeat the point I made earlier: I do not think that he should pre-empt or anticipate the inquiry.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): The Colne Valley regional park runs through my constituency and that of the Prime Minister. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the volunteers who tirelessly work to preserve that precious green space, and will he work with me to create better protections for that park moving forward?

The Prime Minister: I certainly will, and I join my hon. Friend in thanking the wonderful volunteers. I will do what I can to assist her in protecting that beautiful green space.

Q5. [904962] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This is a different topic from that raised by my right hon. and learned Friend, the Leader of the Opposition, but it is related. Last week at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister was asked whether his previous claims about inflation were unfounded. In his reply he told the House that he had said "no such thing". Within minutes the inevitable happened, and people were watching videos on social media, saying exactly that. Would the Prime Minister like to take this opportunity to correct the record and apologise for misleading the House on that matter?

Mr Speaker: That would be inadvertently misleading the House.

The Prime Minister: No, Mr Speaker, because I immediately said in my answer to the question that of course we have to be concerned about inflation at all times. What I said, I think on TV, was that some of the predictions then about inflation had not proved well-founded, but clearly inflation is a serious risk. It is going up, we need a strategy to tackle it, and that is what we have.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My constituent Grant Bailey went back to Afghanistan in September. He disappeared in December, around Christmas time. We think the Taliban have him. Can my right hon. Friend advise me and his family whether he knows anything about this man, who has him, and what is being done to get him home?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the case with me. I will organise a meeting for him with the relevant Minister as soon as possible to establish what we can do to help Grant.

Q6. [904963] **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has not apologised for breaking the rules and breaking the law; he is sorry because he has been caught. He is bang to rights. When my constituents were making unimaginable—unimaginable—decisions, he was hosting a boozy party in Downing Street. So how does he think he can still maintain one rule for him and another for the rest of the us? He cannot, and he must resign.

The Prime Minister: I refer to the answer I gave earlier.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This Friday, my private Member's Bill, the BBC Licence Fee (Abolition) Bill, gets its Second Reading. It will abolish the BBC licence fee and require the BBC to be funded by subscription. In this day and age it is ridiculous to have a state broadcaster, it is ridiculous that people are forced to pay a fee just because they have a television, and what is totally wrong is that people who believe the BBC to be institutionally biased have to subsidise it. Will the Prime Minister, if he is free on Friday, come along and support the Bill?

The Prime Minister: I have the highest respect for the media judgment of my hon. Friend. Though I understand some of his strictures about the BBC, I would also say that it is a great national institution. But I will study what he has to say with interest.

Q7. [904964] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): We have all had Prime Ministers who we disagreed with or we did not rate, but there has never been one who has debased the office in the way that he has. He is now forced to lie down in the back of his car to keep away from photographers. We all know that the Prime Minister was sacked from two previous jobs for lying, so can he explain to the House why he believes that the great office of Prime Minister can be held to a lower standard than those previous jobs that he was sacked from?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the point that the hon. Gentleman makes in the partisan spirit with which I think it was intended. I do not agree with him, but can I suggest respectfully that he waits until the inquiry is concluded, which I hope will be as soon as possible?

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Washing machine manufacturers are considering installing microfibre filter systems in all new washing machines. Will the Prime Minister ask his Ministers to look at—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a slight problem. Some Members want to catch my eye, but the longer this question takes, the less time there will be for other people to get in.

Alberto Costa: People are laughing at plastic pollution, Mr Speaker. Will the Prime Minister ask his Ministers to look into the viability of my Bill, which has cross-party support and seeks to introduce inexpensive microplastic filters on all new washing machines?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaign. I believe that we should tackle microplastic pollution, and I am glad that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking at the introduction of legislation for microfibre filters on washing machines as a cost-beneficial solution. I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs keeps him informed of how we are doing.

Q8. [904965] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I, too, wish to join colleagues in paying tribute to Jack Dromey. I knew him first in the early '70s and worked with him on the Grunwick strike. He will be greatly missed.

Thousands of men and women in Afghanistan supported the NATO mission and they have been abandoned. After six months, we do not have a credible route to help people out of Afghanistan safely. The most recent update from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is directly contradicted by the UN. While the FCDO claims that from spring the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will make referrals to evacuation schemes, the UNHCR's own website is clear that it makes no such referrals. Are the Government creating a Kafkaesque system to intentionally fail those we owe something to, or is this yet another case of the amateurism and hopelessness that prioritised Pen Farthing's pets over human beings?

The Prime Minister: I believe the hon. Member does a serious injustice to the efforts of local councils up and down the country to look after people coming from Afghanistan and I think he does an injustice to the efforts of the UK. We are proud under Operation Pitting to have already evacuated 15,000 people from Afghanistan. We have allocated £286 million in assistance for people in Afghanistan and we are continuing to offer safe passage to this country from Afghanistan.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that Eastleigh was formed as a railway town and, from producing locomotives and carriages to building gliders for the D-day landings, Eastleigh has a proud railway heritage. Given that pedigree, its excellent transport links and the need to level up the south, does he agree that Eastleigh would make the perfect home for the new headquarters of Great British Railways?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Eastleigh. As I told the House earlier, further details of the competition to identify the new Great British Railways headquarters will be announced in the coming weeks.

Q9. [904966] **Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): In my Stockport constituency, the average rent for a two-bedroom property is an unaffordable £800. Rents have significantly increased in the last 13 years. One constituent recently contacted me to explain that she and her husband, who are in their 70s and suffer from ill health, have just been served with a section 21 notice after living in the property for almost 20 years. The Prime Minister's own manifesto promised a better deal for renters, which included abolishing no-fault evictions.

So when will he scrap that practice and reintroduce the much-needed renters' reform Bill, which seems to have been kicked into the long grass?

The Prime Minister: One of the first things that I did when I became Prime Minister was to uprate local housing allowance so that people on social rent would be able to afford where they live more easily, as a key component of tackling the cost of living. We are also building record numbers of homes. I was very pleased to see a huge increase in the number of people able to get the homes that they need, but the hon. Member's point about renters is also very important, and that is why we are tackling the rights of renters as well.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): £56 million through the levelling up fund and £40 million through transforming cities—that is just some of the investment that we have recently secured for Stoke-on-Trent. Will my right hon. Friend agree that, after decades of neglect, this Conservative party is the only party that is levelling up opportunities in Stoke-on-Trent?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion for Stoke-on-Trent. In addition to all the things that we are supporting in Stoke-on-Trent, I am delighted to say that it will become home to the Home Office as well.

Q10. [904967] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): This session shows how much of a distraction the Prime Minister's behaviour has been. After a recent survey showed that 37% of small businesses felt totally unprepared for the introduction of import controls, rules of origin and the upcoming sanitary and phytosanitary checks, will he listen to the Federation of Small Businesses and introduce financial and technical support for those small businesses, or is he just too busy drinking in his garden?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is offering financial and technical support to businesses, which are responding magnificently. As we come out of the pandemic, as I said to the House earlier, we are seeing record numbers of people in work and youth unemployment at a record low.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The motto of England's smallest county, Rutland, is "multum in parvo"—much in little—and never has that been more true than in the last two weeks, with the greatest Roman discovery in 200 years and the discovery of an ichthyosaur, the greatest fossil discovery in 100 years. Will my right hon. Friend please support us to build a new tourism industry and two heritage museums in Rutland to preserve these amazing discoveries in our county?

The Prime Minister: I am agog. I long to come to see these extraordinary additions to the cultural heritage of Rutland. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing it to my attention, and I look forward to making a visit as soon as I can.

Q12. [904969] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The Government's flagship green homes grant scheme collapsed in a £1.5 billion shambles at the end of last year, with just 81 vouchers issued in Cambridge and just 85 issued in the Prime Minister's constituency. With energy bills about to go through the roof, what is it about this Government that makes them so peculiarly unable to run a basic loft-lagging scheme?

The Prime Minister: We are supporting measures to retrofit homes up and down the country to improve insulation. We are also supporting people with the costs of their fuel, and we will continue to do that through the warm homes discount, the winter fuel allowance and all the other payments we make.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Can the Prime Minister confirm to me and my Ynys Môn constituents that the UK Government are committed to at least one freeport in Wales? Will he update the House on how discussions are progressing with the Welsh Government?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is indeed talking to his counterparts in the Welsh Government about establishing a freeport in Wales. I urge our friends in the Welsh Government to agree those plans as a matter of urgency.

Q13. [904970] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Government commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to research the use of health and disability benefits, but they have yet to publish the findings. Their own protocol for publication states that social research

"must be released in a way that promotes public trust."

The cost of living crisis is hitting disabled people hard, at a time when many people are already struggling. It is surely time to start rebuilding their trust, so will the Prime Minister commit today to publishing that research?

The Prime Minister: We will do everything we can to support people throughout the recovery from the pandemic, we will support disabled people and we will continue to increase our support for families up and down the country. The hon. Lady requests that we publish the research, and we will do so as soon as we can.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued support for new nuclear. Following the Third Reading of our landmark Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill this week, will he put his weight behind my efforts and those of my Cumbrian colleagues to bring large and small new nuclear to Cumbria?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that one of the disasters of the Labour Administration was that, over 13 years, they allowed a total collapse in our nuclear power, which is one of the reasons why we have a shortage of energy. That is why we are now investing in small modular reactors, as well as investing in the big projects.

Q14. [904971] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister did not spot that he was at a social event. That is the excuse, isn't it? Come off it. How stupid does he think the British people are? The worst of it is that he has already managed to completely destroy Allegra Stratton's career and tarnished the reputation of Lord Geidt, and now he is making a fool of every single MP who cheered him earlier and everyone who goes on the radio and television to defend this shower of shenanigans.

Would it not be absolutely despicable if, in the search for a scapegoat, some junior member of staff ended up losing their job while he kept his?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful, as ever, to the hon. Gentleman—I think a former member of the Conservative party, as I understand it—for his party political advice. I do not agree with him. I have come to this House to make amends, to explain what happened on 20 May and to apologise. I really think, with all humility, I must ask him to wait for the result of the inquiry, when he will have abundant opportunity to question me again and to make his party political points again. Until then, I am going to ignore his advice.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Hundreds of respondents took part in the Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke Bus Back Better survey, in which 80% said they would use the bus more if services were improved. The Conservative-led Stoke-on-Trent City Council has submitted a fantastic Bus Back Better bid for £90 million to improve our infrastructure and our services, so will the Prime Minister make our day in Stoke-on-Trent and announce that that money is coming soon?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his fantastic championing of Stoke-on-Trent. I also thank him for volunteering to serve as a teacher again during the pandemic—a wonderful thing to do. I will certainly see what we can do to satisfy his request for more buses in Stoke as fast as possible.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the tributes to Jack Dromey, an outstanding trade unionist and Member of this House.

After another shameful week for the Prime Minister's Government, this has been a shameful attempt to apologise to the House today. Can the Prime Minister explain why the only person to have resigned so far following this scandal is Allegra Stratton, a woman, while he, the man who sanctioned and attended at least one party in 10 Downing Street, still sits in his place? Advisers advise and Ministers decide. So will the Prime Minister, for the good of the country, accept that the party is over and decide to resign?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I respect the point he is making, but I must say I disagree. I would ask him to wait and see what the inquiry says. I will be very happy to talk to him then.

Vaccination Strategy

12.43 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Minister to provide an update on the Government's vaccination strategy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. We have built three lines of defence to give us the best chance of living with covid-19 and avoiding strict measures: vaccination, testing and treatments. Vaccination is the most important of those three, especially in light of the new omicron variant. Recent data from the UK Health Security Agency shows that unvaccinated people are between three and eight times more likely to be hospitalised with covid-19, so every jab counts in keeping people out of hospital and saving lives.

Since omicron began making its way around the world, our strategy has been to massively expand vaccination. We set the highly ambitious target of ensuring that everyone eligible for a booster would be offered one by the end of December, and we met that target. Some 80% of eligible adults in England have now had the booster, including 87% of people over 50. That means that, per capita, we are the most boosted large nation on the planet. In addition, more than 1.4 million young people aged 12 to 15 have already had their first dose since the vaccine was rolled out to that age group in September, with thousands still getting jabbed every day. As of 10 January, eligible children aged 12 to 15 are being offered a second dose in their school. The vaccination effort is a vital part of ensuring the safe return of pupils to the classroom after Christmas, and the continuity of in-person education, which we know is so important for their development.

Throughout our vaccine programme, we listened to the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, whose clinical expertise is second to none. As we have done so, our vaccination strategy has been highly successful, allowing us to live with fewer restrictions than many other places around the world and keeping our children in education settings, where they belong. Once again, I underline my thanks to everyone who has made our national vaccination programme possible, including the JCVI, the NHS, our vaccines taskforce, the vaccinators and all volunteers across the country. I am sure that the whole House will join me in thanking them for everything that they have achieved.

Miriam Cates: I thank the Minister for her statement. The UK's vaccine roll-out has indeed been enormously effective, but in September the JCVI expressed concerns about a child vaccination programme because of uncertainty regarding the magnitude of potential harms. Following advice from the chief medical officer, the Government pushed ahead with the mass vaccination of healthy children on the basis that, although the benefits to children's health were marginal, it may reduce transmission and keep kids in school. Around 50% of 12 to 15-year-olds have now been jabbed, so what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of the vaccination programme in keeping children in face-to-face education?

Now that the omicron variant is dominant and more evidence is available, the benefits and risks of vaccinating children may have changed. What assessment has been made of the risk of hospitalisation of healthy children due to omicron compared with delta? Evidence is emerging that vaccination has minimal impact on omicron transmission, so what reassessment have the Government made of the potential future impact of child vaccinations on reducing transmission in schools? Given a recent Centres for Disease Control and Prevention study showing that the risks of myocarditis in young people following vaccination may be greater than previously thought, and compounded by multiple doses, will the Government urgently review the potential harms of vaccinating children?

This weekend, the NHS put out a press release encouraging more children to get jabbed, including the line:

"Young people can get their life-saving protection".

It also said:

"Vaccines will protect young people from Omicron".

Where is the evidence for those claims, and does the Minister believe that that communication meets the commitment not to put pressure on children? Lastly, given the evidence on transmission, will the Government push ahead with the compulsory vaccination of NHS staff, and will they insist on a booster dose for all staff every few months? If not, where is the evidence that compulsory vaccination of staff will increase patient safety in the long term?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise some of her concerns. We need to start from scratch, remembering that it is the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which is the highly thought of regulator, that has deemed the vaccine to be safe for this age group. As a result, the JCVI provided its recommendations, and our chief medical officers across all four nations added to that. The vaccine has already been given to millions of 12 to 15-year-olds in a number of countries, including 8 million in the United States. Data from those countries shows that the vaccine has a good safety record. I am completely confident that the JCVI would not make those recommendations if there were any doubt at all. That is why all eligible 12 to 15-year-olds are able to book their second jab. It is the best way to protect young people and make sure that they are kept in education. We all know that face-to-face education is one of the most valuable things for young people, and we will do whatever we can to keep them in that position.

We must recognise that myocarditis occurs as a result of covid infection as well. We need to get the balance right to ensure that we are doing whatever we can to protect the majority of young people and make sure that they are kept in education in a timely manner. I think it is right that we continue to follow the scientific evidence and the clinical advice, as we have done throughout this pandemic.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) for securing this urgent question; you, Mr Speaker, for granting it; and the Minister for her statement.

Our incredible NHS has moved heaven and earth during the vaccine roll-out and has achieved an extraordinary amount in the face of profound challenges. As the Minister makes clear, it is only through vaccination that we can begin to contemplate building a world beyond covid. I would therefore be grateful if she explained what assessment she has made of the current vaccine take-up rates, which have dropped to the lowest level since mid-October, and what plans she has to ramp them up again.

Will the Minister also clarify what action the Government will take to drive up vaccination rates among 12 to 17-year-olds, following media reports of children having to wait until February and travel 50 miles to get an appointment for their first covid-19 vaccination? Will she advise the House on what steps she is taking to persuade those who have yet to have the vaccine to do so as soon as possible, and what action her Department is taking to tackle the raft of misinformation about the vaccine that continues to circulate on social media and beyond, doing real damage to public health messages? I would also be grateful if she gave an assessment of the impact on vaccination rates of the introduction of NHS covid passes.

Over the course of the pandemic, immunocompromised, immunosuppressed and clinically extremely vulnerable people have been badly let down. They are crying out for further clarity, and recent reports highlight that more than 300,000 housebound people are yet to receive their booster. Will the Minister take this opportunity to provide the vital clarity that people need and set out the Government's booster vaccination strategy for housebound, clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable people?

Lastly, will the Minister outline what further steps are being taken to vaccinate the world? As the development of omicron shows, delay with regard to global vaccination has stark public health consequences here at home. With reports of the UK discarding hundreds of thousands of vaccines over the past few months, can she reassure the House that assisting with vaccinating the world remains a priority for her Department and this Government?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his measured approach. We have seen throughout the pandemic that everybody working together gets us where we need to be, which is making sure that people are safe.

The hon. Gentleman asked a few questions about the current vaccine programme and the uptake rate. I am delighted that about 80% of people over 18 have now been boosted, which is a fantastic achievement. Over 90% of the population aged 12 or over have had their first dose and 83% have taken up the offer of a second. I reiterate that the offer of a first and second dose is always there. If people have not yet come forward for their first dose, it is not too late: they can go to a walk-in centre or make an appointment through the national booking service or their GP to get that all-important vaccine.

With regard to 12 to 17-year-olds, the school-age immunisation service has started to roll out again this week. People can also take the out-of-school offer through the national booking service or the walk-in sites. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a case where somebody had to travel 50 miles. We did look into that situation, and it was not quite right. We have been in touch with that member of the public, and the situation has been resolved.

Housebound patients are the responsibility of the primary care network or the clinical commissioning group, depending on the local scenario. Every housebound patient has been offered their booster vaccine now, but if the time was not quite right, or any Member has taken up such a case with their CCG and not had a solution, I would be happy to take the case up on their behalf.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the ambition not just to vaccinate the UK but to make sure that people globally are protected. I am delighted to announce that, as of the end of last year, we donated 30 million doses, partly through COVAX and partly through bilateral agreements, which is a great achievement, and we have a commitment in place for 100 million doses by the end of June this year.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): This country has one of the best vaccination programmes in the world and the very best in Europe. We should remember that the foundations were put in place when, at the height of the first wave, the then Health Secretary bought 400 million doses of vaccine that we did not even know would work. That has meant that we are now emerging sooner and more broadly than nearly anywhere else. But that success was also because a lot of GPs in the NHS were diverted away from their normal work into the vaccination programme, and that has come with costs in terms of the other treatments they are not able to deliver. When will we see a workforce plan that takes account of the new responsibilities for vaccination that the NHS will have? When will the budget for Health Education England be agreed, because two and a half months before the next financial year we still do not know what it is? Will the workforce plan have independent forecasts so that we can make sure we are training enough doctors and nurses for the future?

Maggie Throup: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He has made it his ambition, as has the Department, to ensure that we have the right workforce in place. He raises a really good point about the vaccines and how we continue to administer them—not just the covid vaccine but the flu and other vaccines that we have throughout our lifetimes. We have learned an awful lot from rolling out the covid vaccine programme, and like my right hon. Friend I commend the vaccine taskforce for having the foresight to look beyond what some other countries did, to make sure we had the vaccines in place when we needed them.

We do need to look again at how we maximise what has been such good will. In terms of the vaccinators who have come forward, some were not trained as vaccinators before. As I travel around some of the vaccine sites, I meet people from all backgrounds who have taken up the challenge to come forward and become vaccinators. The other day, I actually met a builder who is now a vaccinator, and he is loving every minute of it. I also thank the volunteers who have come forward and made sure that this programme has been so effective. It is about bringing together what we have learned in this programme over the last year to make sure that we can roll out other programmes in an effective manner.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Once again Scotland has set an example for the UK, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all those NHS and frontline key workers involved in the excellent vaccination roll-out programme. We lead the way on first and second doses administered, and we rank second worldwide for the most successful booster roll-out programme, with over 80% of our adult population given their third vaccine. The rest of the UK also has one of the highest vaccination records in the world, along with most of Europe. Is it not well past time to begin a serious campaign of vaccine sharing and the vaccination of those who have so far been left behind in our global community?

Secondly, when the booster roll-out does wind down, will the UK Government commit to shifting the momentum from domestic vaccination to vaccination sharing with the poorest countries? While we welcome the 30 million doses that have been donated, they are a mere drop in the ocean in terms of what is actually required. Lastly, will this Tory Government finally show a shred of compassion for the plight of those around the world?

Maggie Throup: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about ensuring that rural communities have access to vaccines, and that is exactly what we have done through our programme. We have made sure that walk-in centres have been stood up, as well as other ways for people to access vaccines such as vaccine buses, so that community pharmacists can deliver in rural settings and among hard-to-reach groups. Whether in rural or urban areas, it is important that we use every possible route—for example, working through community groups, local leadership and faith groups—to put everything in place to ensure that everyone has access to the life-saving vaccines.

I reiterate what I said to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), that to date we have donated 30 million doses to COVAX and bilaterally. We will continue to fulfil our commitment to donate 100 million jabs globally by the end of June this year.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I was not expecting to be called, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) on securing this important urgent question. Reflecting on what the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), said about workforce planning, I know that in my constituency, Wealden, and across East Sussex, there is huge concern about accessing healthcare and treatment. Will the Minister explain what risk assessment has been done of how, if unvaccinated staff—as many as 88,000—leave the NHS, treatment will be made available and how my constituents will be able to access day-to-day healthcare and treatment?

Maggie Throup: I think my hon. Friend is referring to vaccination as a condition of employment. I should like to inform the House that already over 93% of the NHS workforce have had their first jab, which is incredible. It is the will of the House, expressed before Christmas, that we implement this policy. Peer-to-peer conversations are going on to make sure that people have the right information they need to take up the offer of a jab, which not only protects them but protects their patients, who are some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hard-working staff at St Thomas' Hospital in my constituency, who have helped many Members of this House to receive their booster jab, and to the many volunteers throughout Vauxhall. The Minister outlined that 90% of people have had their first dose and over 80% their second. With the emergence of omicron, we have seen that unless everyone is vaccinated, we are not safe. We are not safe until everyone is safe, but around the world there are still places where people are not receiving vaccines. Will she outline what work the Government are doing to make sure that there are enough vaccines globally to ensure equitable access for everyone?

Maggie Throup: I also pay tribute to the staff at St Thomas' Hospital. I visited the vaccination centre there and was really impressed by the way it is set up, with the paediatric side as well, and by all the volunteers who were there making sure that everyone felt comfortable about going forward. Some of the people there had thought for quite some time about taking the plunge and getting their first dose, so I thank the staff for their work.

The hon. Lady makes a good point when she says that we are not safe until everyone is safe. I reiterate our commitment to COVAX, not just through donating vaccines but financially as well. Just over a year ago, the first AstraZeneca vaccine jab in the world was given to a gentleman in Nottinghamshire. As a result of our collaboration with Oxford University and AstraZeneca, those jabs continue to be delivered at cost throughout the world. That is a really good outcome of the Government's investment.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Given its success, I believe we should now place our faith in the vaccination strategy and not in further controls. When I voted against plan B before Christmas, I said that more and more regulation creates more and more hypocrisy. Despite what is going on in Russia and the cost of living, we spent most of Prime Minister's questions debating the fact that the Prime Minister wandered out of his house, where he lives and works, and had a drink with colleagues. The truth is that the Government should learn a lesson from this. We must sweep away every last vestige of telling people how to live their lives. We have had enough of it. The British people have had enough of it. These controls are actually making things worse—for example, forcing staff to isolate and putting our NHS at risk—so please, let us free the people.

Maggie Throup: I reassure my right hon. Friend that we will not have the restrictions in place for a day longer than necessary. He is aware that the current plan B restrictions will be reviewed on 26 January.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Many hon. Members have constituents whose long-awaited treatments and operations are being cancelled because hospitals are full of the unvaccinated. We in England have one of the most indulgent approaches to the unvaccinated. Why does the Minister not follow the example of New Zealand, Australia and the rest of Europe and do much more to incentivise people to get vaccinated?

Maggie Throup: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are doing what we can to ensure that people get vaccinated. Some of the stats speak for themselves: people are eight times more likely to be hospitalised if they are unvaccinated and more than 60% of those in ICU are unvaccinated. We are not a nation that forces people to do things unnecessarily. The behavioural insights team across Government has been looking at different ways to get those who have not come forward yet to get their jab and at the pros and cons of different ways of doing that. At the moment, I think we have the right approach, which is explaining why it is important for them to come forward to get a jab.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The question of my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) was about whether there was a reassessment of the strategy on the basis of what we know now about omicron that we did not when the strategy was set out. Will the Minister answer that, particularly in respect of the policy of sacking NHS staff who are not vaccinated, given that we know that the rationale has disappeared because it does not stop people from catching it or from infecting others?

Maggie Throup: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, but I go back to the MHRA, which is globally recognised as one of the best regulators and has advised that,

"the benefits of vaccination still outweigh any risk in most individuals."

With regards to myocarditis, to which I think he was referring as well, it is greater in those children who have been infected with covid than in those who have been jabbed. I must stress, however, that instances of both those circumstances are extremely rare. The JCVI continually reviews all the data.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It is clear that the Government need a new strategy for driving up vaccinations among the unvaccinated. Around the country, there are practical examples of things that are working that they could roll out nationally. Will the Minister commit to looking at ideas such as vaccine tracing; the offer of an on-the-spot vaccination when somebody comes into contact with any part of the NHS; and the offer of free cabs for those who are struggling to get to a vaccination centre because of the cost or caring arrangements? Those things are working already, yet they are not being rolled out nationally.

Maggie Throup: I reassure the hon. Lady that many different measures are being put in place across the whole country depending on what works in different specific areas. For example, there are pop-up clinics in mosques and temples; there have been all-female clinics that help different communities; and there have been clinics in restaurants in certain parts of Bradford. There is a wide range of measures because, as she rightly indicated, there is not one solution for everybody. The fact that more than 90% of people have already had their first dose is a huge success, but the last few are the hardest to reach. That is why we are putting in place different measures to ensure that we do the right thing for individuals in different places and look at what will work for individuals across different communities.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): When what is at stake is the balance of health risk for children right across Wycombe and every constituency in the whole country, is my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) not absolutely right to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to task the JCVI and the medical officers with a reassessment of new evidence? My hon. Friend just said at the Dispatch Box that evidence is kept under continuous review—and she nods—so why can she not please say at the Dispatch Box that she will ask the experts to revisit the new evidence, just to check that the balance of health risk for children is still appropriate and that she is satisfied with the responsibility, which she bears, for the decision that has been taken?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend is quite right that we do bear responsibility. I do not take these decisions lightly at all and neither does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. That is why the JCVI and the CMO continually review not just the UK data but the national data for every age range, every vaccine and every eventuality. The CMO will have heard my hon. Friend's request and I am sure he will be completely focused on making sure that the JCVI continues to monitor the situation in the specific way my hon. Friend asks for.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I congratulate everyone in Sheffield—including GPs, the hospitals and the city council—who worked brilliantly together to deliver thousands of vaccines in the run-up to Christmas.

I want to ask about people with compromised immune systems, and I declare my own interest in that. Having the third dose, followed by a booster, is absolutely right, but to begin with there was a lot of confusion about whether the consultant or the GP should be responsible for contacting people. I think it has just about been sorted out, but I have received an email today from my constituent Jeanette, who says that although everyone in her situation should have received a letter offering the availability of new treatments, she got a letter but her husband did not; that although everyone should have been sent a PCR test in the post, she did not get one; and that although she was told to ring 119, when she did so she could not find the option to complain that she had not received a PCR test. Will the Minister have a look at who is responsible for the availability of new treatments and the sending of PCR tests, and at what happens when things do not happen properly?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important part of our strategy to make sure we can react quickly in respect of those with certain conditions. Giving them ready access to the antivirals is the third part of our strategy to combat coronavirus. GPs and hospital consultants should link up to make sure that the right conditions are considered. I advise the hon. Gentleman's constituent initially to contact her GP to make sure that she fits the category. If she has received the letter but no PCR test, she should contact 119—Test and Trace—

Mr Betts: She can't!

Maggie Throup: Or she should go online to find out whether there has been a mismatch in the data. If she has received the letter saying that she should receive the

[Maggie Throup]

PCR so that she can do one if she has symptoms, we just need to make sure that she gets one delivered to her home.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is great news that the Minister reports that 93% of NHS staff have received the vaccine—that is fantastic—and I commend every effort made to encourage NHS staff and all those involved in the delivery of care to receive the vaccine, but what will the Government do if, in a few weeks, a critically high number of people in the NHS have still not had the vaccine? Will they all face being sacked or moved in April? How would that protect the NHS?

Maggie Throup: As my hon. Friend said, to date over 93% of NHS staff have had their first jab. I want to put out a plea. We already have vaccination as a condition of deployment in the care sector and we did not see the cliff edge that so many people predicted. In terms of my own personal circumstances, my father was in a care home for over seven years and his carers became his family. We always do the best for our family and want to make sure that they are protected in the same way that we are protected, and that carries through to NHS staff as well, and to those in other Care Quality Commission-regulated organisations. It is about patient safety: at the end of the day, we are looking to make sure that every patient is kept safe.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I must say that I am amazed at the Minister's complacency about the potential loss of staff as a result of the vaccine mandate. The care sector has lost 54,000 people who refused to take the vaccine, with the result that hospital beds are blocked, care packages are not being given and care homes are under pressure. The social care sector is an indication that we cannot force people to take the vaccine, and the Minister's own assessment is that up to 88,000 staff could resist taking it. In the past week, 40,000 people in the NHS have been off work because they had to isolate, and we have seen the chaos that has caused. How does she intend to deal with the chaos of 88,000 staff not being available because of the vaccine mandate?

Maggie Throup: I do not recognise the data given by the right hon. Gentleman. We have already invested £465 million in a recruitment and retention programme for care home staff. It is important to recognise that caring is a worthwhile career. The carers I have met are really dedicated and get a lot from it. I come back to the fact that it is important to keep the most vulnerable in our society safe, whether they are care home residents or patients who are acutely ill in hospital.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): My sources in the NHS tell me that last week they received either from the Department or from NHS England instructions effectively on how to go about firing people from the NHS in April if they have not been vaccinated. That caused them considerable concern. The Government's own analysis, prepared by the Minister's own Department, is not of the position now; it is of the expectation of where we will be in April. Analysis from her own Department, signed off by her, thinks that 73,000 NHS staff and 38,000 domiciliary care workers will leave.

I want people to be vaccinated, but we know that the protection against infection wanes quite quickly from 10 weeks onwards, which means that we are not protecting others. I want people to be vaccinated, but I—and public health professionals—think that the best way is to persuade them, not threaten them with the sack. If people have not had their first jab by 3 February they will be unable to be fully vaccinated by April, so may I urge her, even at this stage, to come back to the House and reflect on whether threatening people with the sack if they do not get vaccinated is the right policy?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that persuasion is the right way to go. That is why the uptake went up tremendously among care home staff and since we implemented the policy for the NHS the uptake among NHS staff has increased tremendously as well, which is really encouraging. We want it to be a positive choice, and we want people to understand that they are protecting not just themselves and their families but the patients they care for, ensuring that they are safe. Those one-on-one conversations are ongoing to ensure that people understand that, from the perspective of patient safety, this is the right choice to make.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): With rates of infection high among teenagers, many are simply unable to get double vaccinated yet as they were infected in the period when they would have been eligible and had to wait 12 weeks to get the jab. Unfortunately for families hoping to travel in half term, they cannot access a covid recovery certificate through the NHS app or through 119, despite contracting covid being the reason that they are not double vaccinated. Families are facing the prospect of cancelling their travel plans for half term, which will have an impact not only on our constituents but on the travel industry. I know that the Department is considering a solution, but will the Minister give some clarity that that will be achieved before half term, to give people the confidence to make travel plans?

Maggie Throup: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, and it is not the first time the issue has been raised with me. We had that situation in the run-up to Christmas, and we are obviously now in the run-up to half term and Easter as well. I assure her that measures are being considered to see how to resolve the situation.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her efforts to save us from vaccine-only passports, leaving the option for testing on the table, given what we know about the impact of vaccination on transmission and that fact that with compulsory vaccination the Government's central assumption is the loss of more than 100,000 healthcare workers. She has set out that patient safety is paramount to her. Does she therefore share my concern that we risk lulling healthcare workers and patients into a false sense of security? Is it not the case that daily healthcare worker testing is a much safer option to rely on for the protection of patients?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point about daily testing, which is being carried out with certain cohorts of the workforce. The UKHSA continues to monitor the best way to ensure that the workforce, whether in the NHS or other parts of industry, protect one another as they go about their work tasks.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Having turned 60 yesterday—*[Interruption.]* It is very difficult to believe, isn't it, Mr Speaker, but you are not saying I am misleading the House, obviously. Having turned 60 yesterday, I feel I ought to ask a question about the elderly. Quite a lot of people in the elderly group who have had their booster vaccines will have had them in September and October of last year. I had mine at the beginning of November. What will our policy be from now, because, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) pointed out, the immunity that comes from the booster runs out somewhat after 10 weeks?

Maggie Throup: I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday for yesterday. He does not look a year older than 59—just one day older. He makes a good point. The JCVI, which provides advice for Ministers, has considered that question. Towards the end of last week, it felt that a fourth dose or a second booster was not appropriate at this time and that it was important to focus on first boosters and people coming forward for their first and second doses. But I reiterate that the JCVI continues to keep the question under constant review and, should the situation change, it will provide that advice.

Mr Speaker: I am going to hand over to my colleague in the Chair, but before I do so, to help the Minister I remind Members that we still have some nurses who can give injections at a pop-up in the House of Commons.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I declare my interest as a consultant paediatrician working in the NHS and as a volunteer vaccinator. I am very proud to be part of the vaccination programme that has undoubtedly saved so very many lives.

I want to focus on children. I have worked in hospital over the past month and have been looking after children who have had positive tests. That is not unexpected because the virus is high in the population and of course we test everybody. However, I have not been looking after children who were admitted because of covid. In September, we heard that the decision on whether to offer children vaccines was finely balanced. Indeed, the JCVI referred that decision to the chief medical officers, who finally decided, on the basis of educational disruption, to offer children vaccines. Given that omicron is less harmful than the variants we were considering at the time, has the Minister asked the JCVI and the CMOs to consider whether these vaccines are still, on balance, better for children than not—except, perhaps, in the context of travel?

Maggie Throup: I thank my hon. Friend for her role in vaccinating probably thousands of people by now. Everybody has played their part, using their skills and their time to roll out the vaccination programme in such an amazing way. I assure my hon. Friend, who obviously has an awful lot of expertise and knowledge, that JCVI continually looks at the data. We hear announcements from the JCVI and think they are just about what it has considered on that particular day, but I assure the House that it continually looks at the data to make sure that we move forward in the right manner.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As vaccination uptake increases, conspiracy theory-inspired groups have hardened their language and threats against those involved in vaccination delivery have also increased. Some groups—I will not name them, because what they do is so despicable—are attempting to disrupt vaccinations, and even to attack testing facilities. The threat posed by conspiracy theorist anti-vaxxer groups is real and cannot be ignored. What assessment has the Minister's Department made of how to counter those groups and safeguard the vaccine roll-out?

Maggie Throup: Misinformation costs lives. It is totally inappropriate, and there is no place for it in our society. As the hon. Lady rightly highlights, testing centres have also been attacked, which I am sure is under police investigation. I reassure her that we have a unit that considers such issues all the time, and numerous online presences are taken down on a regular basis. As she will imagine, various police investigations are under way.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): When the facts change, we are entitled to change our minds, and since we passed the regulated activity regulations in December we have had further evidence to suggest that the transmissibility of covid declines after 10 or 12 weeks, as has been mentioned. In light of that, has the Minister gone back to challenge the JCVI on its advice about whether we should compulsorily vaccinate health workers, particularly given that it now appears that the risk they pose to patients declines after a very short period, and especially given that we have the alternative of regular lateral flow testing, which will tell, more or less in real time, whether healthcare professionals pose a threat to their patients?

Maggie Throup: It is important to go back to some of the stats I set out earlier. Those who are unvaccinated are eight times more likely to be hospitalised, and more than 60% of people in intensive care units are unvaccinated. If we can stop people getting the virus in the first place, it will not be transmitted and people will not catch the disease and be hospitalised. It is important to note that it was the will of the House to introduce that policy in December. As I have said repeatedly, the JCVI keeps all the data under constant review, which obviously has an impact on Government policy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I wish to follow the question raised by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), because the reality is that the facts have changed, and depleting efficacy, as well as transmissibility, is presenting a challenge for the Government and their longer term management of covid. Rather than forcing NHS staff to have their first vaccine by 3 February, which will present a massive risk to the NHS—the Government's own assessment is that between 64,000 and 115,000 NHS and healthcare staff will be sacked—will the Government go back and review the issue, and ask the JCVI what the best strategy is for managing the pandemic from this point forward?

Maggie Throup: We have our plans in place. We have our vaccination programme, our testing, and our antivirals. Part of the purpose of the vaccination programme is to ensure that some of the most vulnerable in our society are protected. As I said earlier, having the vaccine as a condition of employment is about patient safety and ensuring that people who are in hospital or care homes are protected from this deadly virus.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have been a big advocate of the vaccination programme, and I got my jabs as soon as I could. Will my hon. Friend address a key issue of concern? The time gap between the different vaccines has been adjusted at various times and, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned, those who are extremely clinically vulnerable had their booster a long time ago and its effectiveness is waning. We know that Israel is already administering a fourth dose to the extremely clinically vulnerable. Will the Minister take that point to the JCVI, so that it can look specifically at the extremely clinically vulnerable and see whether they need a fourth dose?

Maggie Throup: Those who are clinically extremely vulnerable or immunosuppressed have already been offered a booster, so they have already received four doses. As I said earlier, at the end of last week the JCVI determined that at this stage it was not appropriate for others to have a booster or a fourth dose.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Titanic Exhibition Centre, which is the largest vaccination centre in Northern Ireland, is to close on Sunday 16 January. Has the Minister made an assessment, in her Department, of the impact that the closure of mass vaccination centres will have on the booster process throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Maggie Throup: As I understand it, the location of vaccination sites in the devolved nations is the responsibility of those nations. I can only speak for England in that regard, so the hon. Gentleman may wish to take the matter up with the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): May I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to my daughter, and to all her colleagues across the NHS who have worked on the frontline throughout the pandemic, caring for those who have sadly needed hospital treatment?

I have been very supportive of the Government's approach to the pandemic and their actions, but I tend to agree that as the facts change, we should change our approach. What we have learnt about omicron is that the rationale behind mandatory vaccination has now shifted from protecting others to protecting oneself. Should we not revisit that, given the figures that the Minister has been quoting about the vaccination status of those in hospital and in intensive care units?

Maggie Throup: When we protect ourselves by having a vaccination, we protect others. My hon. Friend mentioned omicron, but we have seen other variants before, and we will no doubt see more in the future.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Before Christmas, the JCVI issued the welcome guidance that five to 11-year-olds who are either clinically vulnerable or living with someone who is immunosuppressed should be vaccinated against coronavirus, but since then we have heard very little. Can the Minister tell me when the roll-out to five to 11-year-olds will start, whether it will take place in schools or in vaccination centres, and how those who are immunocompromised will be identified—this is very important to those who are living with someone in that position—given that their GP records will not show their condition? I declare a personal interest.

Maggie Throup: The fact that the hon. Lady has asked that question demonstrates that this is quite a complex matter. NHS England is looking into it, to work out the best way to roll out the vaccine to that particularly vulnerable group of five to 11-year-olds.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I often pay tribute in this place to the leadership on vaccines of Dame Kate Bingham. Speaking about the cancellation of the Valneva contract in Livingston, Dame Kate described the decision as "short-sighted", "problematic" and "inexplicable". She also said that it

"set aside the need to build resilience"

and "capability" through the

"flexible state-of-the-art"

technology that Valneva offered. Moreover, it would help us to tackle vaccine hesitancy and our international responsibilities, owing to the lack of cold chain problems. Will the Government listen to the sage advice of Dame Kate, and reinstate the Valneva contract as a matter of urgency?

Maggie Throup: I, too, pay tribute to the work of Kate Bingham. Without her leadership, we would be in a worse position in regard to vaccines.

The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of Valneva in the past, and, as I have said in the past, I cannot comment on commercial decisions.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I join the Minister in thanking all those who rushed out the booster programme in December, but some of our constituents have been confused by the two booking systems, the one for the GP centres and the national booking system. Will she commit herself to trying to establish a single booking system by the time we get round to the autumn boosters, or whatever we are going to have, so that we can see full capacity in all the sites that patients can use in one location?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I think what we have achieved in the last year is incredible, and we know that we can improve things such as booking services, which is one of the areas I am sure we will be looking at. My hon. Friend makes the point that sometimes people were not aware that slots were available through their GP and thought they had to go through the national booking service. These are lessons to be learned. We have achieved an awful lot in just over a year, and I am sure we will be looking into that as a matter of urgency.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the United Kingdom Government on one of the most successful and leading covid-19 vaccination programmes anywhere in the world. As we go forward, can I seek assurances that those who are immunocompromised and immunosuppressed, such as blood cancer patients, will have a real focus from the Department of Health?

Maggie Throup: I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that that will be the case. I have met a number of the charities concerned in this area, and I will continue to have meetings with those who represent the patients to hear their views.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): The House was asked before Christmas to vote for the mandatory vaccination of health workers on the basis of the argument that it would stop transmission. We now know that this is almost certainly not the case. I think we are almost at the end of this session, and it would be tremendous to hear a commitment from the Minister that she will formally request the JCVI to review the evidence behind this policy. The only argument she is giving for it is that it will help protect health workers, but that has to be a decision that they take for themselves. Rather than sacking compulsorily what may be over 100,000 health and social care workers, surely before the deadline is upon us we should reconsider this policy.

Maggie Throup: It is quite clear that the vaccine does reduce transmission. It is a matter of protecting the individual, but in these settings there are also some very vulnerable people who can ill afford to get more seriously ill. It is only right that we look at every aspect of this. It is not just about the omicron variant; it is about other variants in the future.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): We have already heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and others the expression attributed to John Maynard Keynes, but actually by Paul Samuelson:

"When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?"

Decisions about recommending vaccinations for 12 to 15-year-olds were regarded as very finely balanced in any case with delta as the predominant variant. Now we have omicron, that so-called fine balance, with all the complications of children's benefit versus societal benefit and the small but real risk of myocarditis, has clearly altered. Will my hon. Friend ensure that she reflects on that very wise quotation in this instance?

Maggie Throup: I refer back to the fact that the MHRA confirmed that the Pfizer vaccine is safe and effective in 12 to 17-year-olds, and that followed the rigorous review of the safety, quality and effectiveness of the vaccines in this age group. Obviously, the JCVI then made that recommendation, and the CMO has backed it up. It was based on those experts that this decision was made.

Afghanistan: Humanitarian Crisis

1.38 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): Afghanistan is facing a serious and worsening humanitarian crisis. It is affecting well over half the population, with 23 million people facing acute food insecurity. This is now the world's most severe food security crisis. The UN has this week requested nearly $4.5 billion for 2022—the largest humanitarian appeal on record, reflecting the magnitude of the humanitarian challenge ahead.

The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to address the situation, working with the UN Security Council, the G20, the G7 and countries in the region. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers have all been working extensively with world leaders. In August, the Prime Minister announced that the UK would double its assistance for Afghanistan to £286 million this financial year, and we have now disbursed over £145 million. That will support over 3.4 million people in Afghanistan and the region, providing emergency food, healthcare, shelter, water and protection. We are working at pace to allocate the remaining funding in response to the developing crisis and the new UN appeal. Further details were in the ministerial statement on 15 December. I thank the British people for donating £28 million to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal in December, of which £10 million was doubled by UK aid match funding. That has helped to provide lifesaving support.

We were particularly concerned about the impact of the situation on women, girls and other marginalised groups. Last month I, alongside the Minister of State with responsibility for south Asia, Lord Ahmad, met organisations representing women, LGBT+ and religious minorities to discuss support for their needs. In allocating UK aid, we want to ensure that women, girls and other marginalised groups have equal, safe and dignified access to assistance and services. We have pressed the Taliban to respect humanitarian principles.

Our partners report that aid is getting through. We continue to monitor the situation very carefully, especially in the winter months. Aid workers face challenges getting money into Afghanistan due to the banking system. We are working closely with multilateral organisations, banks and non-governmental organisations to address those challenges. We welcome the decision by the World Bank board in November to transfer £280 million to support the humanitarian response, but it is vital—it is vital—that the World Bank produces options to allocate the $1.2 billion remaining in the fund. It is important that donors across the world step up to the challenge, including by responding to the UN's call for additional funding.

Clive Lewis: Afghanistan, as has been heard, is facing an escalating and multi-faceted humanitarian crisis. In response, the United Nations launched its largest ever single country appeal, in part because the crisis in Afghanistan embodies a new breed of 21st century

[Clive Lewis]

international crisis, where the hazards of war collide with the hazards of climate change and a global viral outbreak. This has created a nightmarish feedback loop that punishes some of the world's most vulnerable and destroys their country's ability to cope. So far, the UK's response has been woeful. It took five months for the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme to be put into place, while our aid commitment to Afghanistan in 2021 was lower than what was delivered in 2019.

A heavy dose of realpolitik is now needed to address the immediate crisis before us. Let me ask the Minister for more detail on how the Government will square the circle of dealing with the Taliban and playing their part in supporting Afghanistan and humanitarian aid. Let me also ask the Minister what plans her Department has to deal with the multi-faceted nature of this crisis. The $4.4 billion the UN has appealed for is only a stop-gap. It will not stop escalation. But if we do not meet the appeal, it will be £10 billion next year and a lot more suffering.

After two decades of military intervention costing at least £27.7 billion, the UK must now step up to the plate to meet the $4.4 billion requested. The UN cannot deliver at the scale and speed needed by working alone, so will global Britain now show global leadership? Will the Secretary of State agree to help those in urgent need, including 1 million children who face starvation, by convening a conference, as former Prime Minister Gordon Brown is calling for, with the United States, the EU and other willing partners to agree new financing to fully cover our obligation to this appeal?

Vicky Ford: As I said in my opening remarks, the situation is enormously serious. Indeed, it is now the world's most severe food security crisis.

On the issues relating to supporting Afghan resettlement, of course everybody in this Chamber has had huge praise for all those who worked during Operation Pitting. It was incredibly challenging, but those on the ground, including the ambassador and his team from the Foreign Office, did amazing work. Since the evacuation, as the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) made clear last week, we have helped a further 1,500 to enter the UK, including female judges, human rights defenders and LGBT Afghans. At that stage, of course, she announced the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme.

On getting more aid into the country, as I said in my opening remarks it is incredibly important that the world steps up to this challenge, especially towards meeting the UN appeal.The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers, including the Minister for the region, are working closely with world leaders, including in the US, the EU and the UN. Indeed, my colleague the responsible Minister is in regular co-ordination with all key international agency leads at the UN, including those for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF, the World Food Programme and the International Rescue Committee. We will make more announcements in response to the UN appeal in the coming weeks, but I restate what I said in my statement about the importance of the World Bank giving options to unlock the $1.2 billion that remains in the fund.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome my hon. Friend's comments about co-operation with international organisations, particularly the Nobel prize-winning World Food Programme, which has done so much important work not just in the region, but around the world. What work is she doing with others in the region, including countries such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and even Iran, to get support together for those who are in the most vulnerable position that we have seen in generations?

This is not just about the misery that we are seeing in Afghanistan, where some people are even forced to sell their children. It is about a humanitarian response from the most generous country—from the United Kingdom—to people who are in desperate need and whom I hope will be supported not only to stay in their own homes and have a future, but to turn to opportunities that will build an economy and build the future that has been so cruelly torn away from them in recent months.

Vicky Ford: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs for his close interest in the subject and for mentioning the plight of children. We are deeply concerned by the forced marriage practised in Afghanistan, particularly for children, and we are very aware of the risk that more women and young girls could be sold into marriage as the humanitarian situation worsens.

My hon. Friend asks what we are doing about international engagement. Since August, our international engagement has been focused on securing a co-ordinated humanitarian response, agreeing a co-ordinated approach to the Taliban-led regime and, as far as possible, preventing economic collapse. We have played an active role in seeking to build a shared new international approach since the Taliban takeover, working with the UN Security Council, the G20 and the G7 and engaging with other countries in the region. For example, the Foreign Secretary recently travelled to India, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where she discussed Afghanistan and the importance of international co-ordination.

In October, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon—the Minister of State for south and central Asia, the United Nations and the Commonwealth—attended the annual open debate on women, peace and security at the UN Security Council, where he made it clear that the rights of Afghan women need to be front and centre. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and many other Ministers discussed Afghanistan with world leaders in the margins of COP26. We all urge the need to address the acute humanitarian situation. We are continuing to work very closely with countries across the world and across the region.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for securing this hugely important urgent question.

As we stand here today, the situation in Afghanistan is more perilous than ever. Since the withdrawal of British and NATO forces in August, the country has entered a catastrophic free fall. It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the country is hurtling towards a humanitarian cliff edge that places millions of Afghans, including millions of children, at risk of starvation.

The facts are truly horrendous. More than 90% of the country's health clinics and hospitals are without the funds that they need to stay open. Basic public services have been decimated, with teachers, doctors and nurses going unpaid. When you listen to those facts, Madam Deputy Speaker, you could be mistaken in believing that the situation in Afghanistan can get no worse and become no more perilous. Tragically, that would be misguided. With 97% of the Afghan population soon to be living below the poverty line, almost 23 million people are teetering on the edge of starvation. A further deterioration will have dire consequences for the people of Afghanistan and impact not the just the region but the UK, with more desperate people seeking sanctuary outside the country. We must ensure that our sanctions regime and our understandable desire to place pressure on the Taliban regime does not become an impediment to supporting the very people we seek to help. Whether we like it or not, some form of engagement is necessary if we are to support the people of Afghanistan.

After the chaos of withdrawal, after Brits and Afghans were left behind, after slashing aid to Afghanistan just last year only to U-turn and restore it, and after the damning whistleblower revelations, the Minister will understand why there is a chronic lack of confidence in the House about the ministerial leadership of her Department. Will the UK convene an urgent pledging conference, as suggested by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, to try to pressure the international community to meet the enormous need? What dialogue have the UK and other allies had with the Taliban—perhaps via the UN—over humanitarian access? Has the Minister met non-governmental organisations and civil society to discuss how the Government can better support their efforts?

The need could not be more urgent; nor could the situation be more grave. As a proud outward-looking country, we cannot turn our backs on ordinary Afghanis now. It is our moral imperative to act—and act swiftly—to help Afghanistan in its time of greatest need.

Vicky Ford: We are very concerned about the rapid economic contraction and the impact that that is having on the people of Afghanistan, especially as the cost of essential products is rising and people are struggling to withdraw funds. The World Bank predicts a 30% fall in GDP. It is a serious issue, and preventing humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan is in everyone's interests. That is why we have already disbursed more than £145 million of humanitarian support. The details on where all that support has gone were in the December written ministerial statement. Further money has been pledged from the UK, and Ministers will make further announcements in response to the UN appeal in the coming weeks.

I believe that working with the UN through that appeal—the largest appeal that it has ever launched—is critical. Our funding is going through the Afghanistan humanitarian fund, the World Food Programme, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Red Crescent, and other UN organisations, all of which are trusted partners. As regards sanctions, the UK led the way on the sanctions carve-out to ensure that delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan could continue. At present, we are hearing on the ground that aid is getting through. However, it is of course a particularly difficult time, because we know that winter is coming.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I would like first to raise the point that when children and young babies are sold into sexual and domestic slavery, we must not refer to that as marriage. I ask the Minister not to do so going forward.

What a shameful legacy we leave behind in Afghanistan, with millions on the brink of starvation. What conversations has the Minister had with Pakistan, which I think is already taking the most Afghan refugees? Will she ensure that we are working with people to create an understanding of what it is to live in a liberal democracy and not fuelling radicalisation in any way?

The Minister knows about the amount of work that I have done with many colleagues across the House to try to rescue Afghan women and girls, and Afghan female MPs in particular, but the Afghan resettlement programme is not working for the people whom I am trying to help. What assurances can she give that we will enable more women who could be killed by the Taliban to survive so that one day they can go back home and even help with the aid programme?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about children. She asks what we are doing with other countries in the region, including Pakistan. My colleague the Minister for south and central Asia, Lord Ahmad, is in regular contact with other neighbouring countries, and £30 million was allocated to help other countries in the region respond to the impact of the crisis on themselves.

We are committed to ensuring that at least half the aid reaches women and girls. Just before Christmas I met NGOs and organisations representing both women's and girls' organisation and LGBT organisations, and their feedback from the ground was incredibly helpful. The Minister for Afghan Resettlement made a statement on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme last week, and she mentioned that three cohorts of LGBT people have already come to the UK under the scheme. We will continue to prioritise those women who are most at risk, but we need to recognise that, although we are doing a huge amount to help resettle people in this country, we need to support people on the ground, which is why we are working with world-leading organisations to focus always on the most vulnerable, including women and girls.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Even before our chaotic withdrawal, it was known that the people of Afghanistan faced a humanitarian crisis this winter. In September the UN estimated that only 5% of Afghans had enough food to eat each day, so the UK Government cannot say that this famine has caught them by surprise. With 1 million children at risk of severe malnourishment and 23 million people threatened with starvation, less than 25% of UK aid money pledged to Afghanistan in 2021 had been disbursed by the beginning of December, which is shocking.

With the UN launching an appeal for nearly £5 billion in aid for Afghanistan, will the UK Government ensure that all the funds pledged urgently reach those in need? Can the Minister confirm what new money the UK will donate, above and beyond the previous announcements? Will the UK Government finally recognise that their ideological cuts to aid have cost countless lives not only in Afghanistan but across the world, and will they reverse that decision?

Vicky Ford: To correct the record, because it is important that we make accurate statements, between April and December 2021 we disbursed over £145 million-worth of aid, £135 million of which went into lifesaving humanitarian support inside Afghanistan, including for food, health, nutrition, shelter, water, sanitation and landmine action. Another £10 million went into neighbouring countries to support new and existing refugees.

We are working quickly to develop plans to allocate the remainder of the £286 million to ensure that it reaches the people who need it most. We will be making further announcements in due course. We made a written ministerial statement just before Christmas, and we are working with NGO partners, including the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the World Food Programme, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other UN organisations. Those partners on the ground are distributing the aid that is needed. The important thing is that the world needs to step up to this challenge. This is the biggest challenge, which is why the UN has launched this appeal today.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to try to get everybody in. It is therefore important that questions are short and to the point. We do not want a list of several questions; we want one question so that the Minister is able to reply accordingly.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): In my new role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghanistan, I look forward to co-hosting a meeting with the Minister for Afghan Resettlement at 2.30 pm alongside the all-party parliamentary group on women, peace and security.

Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on the UN appeal for $4.4 billion, since the end of Operation Pitting in August 2021 what commitments and, indeed, how much aid have this Government already provided to Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: Between April and December 2021 we disbursed over £145 million, including £135 million of lifesaving humanitarian support inside the country and £10 million to neighbouring countries.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The Taliban takeover caused an economic meltdown in Afghanistan. Banks ran short, millions lost work or went unpaid and the currency nosedived. Perversely, markets still have food, but the problem is there is no access to cash. People are starving, babies are malnourished, women are not allowed to work to feed their families and there is no money to heat homes. My Committee is clear: the Government must urgently fund emergency organisations such as the World Food Programme. Of the £286 million pledged, so far only £81 million has been disbursed. Can the Minister also update us on what steps are being taken to unfreeze assets and ensure that financial transactions linked to humanitarian aid are excluded from international sanctions, specifically including paying local aid workers? Then, can the Minister please monitor what the Taliban does with that?

Vicky Ford: There were a number of different questions. Just to be clear, £135 million of our aid has gone, to the end of December. No funds are going directly to the Taliban; they are going through the other organisations and trusted partners that I mentioned. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to mention the issues to do with getting money into Afghanistan and the banking system. We are working really closely with multilateral organisations, banks and NGOs to address these challenges. On the funding available to meet this crisis, it is really important that it is all unlocked, which is why I refer again to the importance of unlocking that $1.2 billion within the World Bank. Obviously we are a major shareholder in the World Bank. I spoke to our team at the World Bank just before Christmas. It is really important that we unlock that. Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to work with her colleagues in other Parliaments across the world who share her passion to encourage other members of the World Bank to focus on looking at the options for unlocking that vital cash.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on securing this incredibly important urgent question. We have heard rightly from the Minister about the urgency of the humanitarian crisis, but there is also a learning crisis in Afghanistan, and all the progress made in getting children into education has gone back to the beginning. What can the Minister tell us about the Government's efforts to ensure that teachers are getting paid, to sustain education for the generations to come in Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: As ever, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of girls' education. We are absolutely committed to girls' education across the world and we absolutely believe that all girls in Afghanistan have the right to education at all stages—both secondary and primary. We continue to provide emergency education funding through the UN system, and multilateral funding, including for Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. It is currently holiday time in Afghanistan. The schools are due to reopen in March. One of the key partners that we work with on providing education in Afghanistan is Save the Children, and I have a long-scheduled meeting with the head of Save the Children immediately after these exchanges this afternoon. I am more than happy to speak to my hon. Friend immediately after that meeting.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Taliban are a wicked regime responsible for murdering some of my friends. None of us wanted them in power, but Afghans have no choice. While humanitarian aid is desperately needed, it will never be enough. Millions are starving, the state has collapsed and the economy is in freefall. Further to the question just a moment ago from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), how does the Minister plan to unfreeze state assets, lift sanctions and get the Afghan economy turning again?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree with the hon. Member's sentiment. None of us wanted to be in this situation; it is absolutely dire. The impact on the people of Afghanistan and especially those in vulnerable groups, women and children is heartbreaking. We will continue to focus on

getting the aid and getting the international response. It is very important that the UN has launched that appeal today and we will continue to work with it on all sides.

We were very clear in our leadership in making sure that sanctions should not end up blocking that humanitarian aid, and I know that the Minister responsible will continue to ensure he is doing all he can with partners across the world and British leadership to ensure that that aid gets through. That is the immediate issue this winter, as well as continuing to press the Taliban to ensure that they keep their promises that girls can go back to school and that marginal groups will be respected.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I am looking forward to co-chairing the meeting on Afghanistan in about 15 minutes alongside the chair of the Afghanistan all-party parliamentary group, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan). The tragedy is that Afghanistan produces much of its food, and the markets are well stocked; however, the collapse of the Afghan economy means that people are unable to afford food, particularly during the winter months, before they can go to their farms in the countryside. My question is very similar to the previous two. What can we further do to help the Afghan economy to recover?

Vicky Ford: There are multiple causes of the crisis; my hon. Friend is absolutely right on that. I know that she has travelled to the country in happier times. We are working really closely with the World Bank and the UN to find solutions that will enable international non-governmental organisations to access currency in Afghanistan, which is absolutely crucial. We will make further announcements in response to the UN appeal in the coming weeks.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The situation is absolutely desperate and every penny counts, but how those pennies are spent matters. Yesterday, I spoke to an NGO working out there on the ground that said that, although of course it welcomes any money that it gets, the UK Government's rigid, bureaucratic approach means that the money has been delayed. The timelines to spend it have shrunk, so it is not spent as effectively as possible. The NGO has noticed that those inefficiencies have got much worse since the merger between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, just as the Liberal Democrats and others warned at the time. What we need now in responding to this dreadful crisis is not just more money but flexibility and timeliness in how it gets to our partners on the ground. Will the Minister commit to speaking to NGOs having those problems, and will the money be paid on time?

Vicky Ford: My colleague, the Minister for the region, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, is in regular connect with NGOs. We have already disbursed over £145 million, which is going into life-saving humanitarian support. It is going to key partners, not directly to the Taliban, which is important. It is also really important that we help to unlock the funding that is currently sitting in the World Bank. That is a key pot of money that needs flexibility to get to people on the ground. The hon. Member is right to raise the need to unlock bureaucracy; I would point to that as a particular concern in that area. We are working very quickly on plans to reallocate the remainder of the £286 million, but we want to ensure that it reaches the people who need it the most. We are also ensuring that no funds are going directly to the Taliban.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): At the start of the withdrawal, I had 656 constituents with families trapped in Afghanistan. Very sadly, the vast majority are still trapped in Afghanistan and want to leave. Therefore, the Afghan resettlement scheme has come as a big disappointment to all those families. What action will my hon. Friend take to enable those families who want to leave Afghanistan, and who assisted the UK and the USA when we were there, to leave and fulfil what they want to do, which is to live a proper and decent life?

Vicky Ford: The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme was announced by the Minister responsible, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), just last week. She pointed out that it is coming into place this year. We have announced an aim to settle 5,000 people in the first year of the ACRS. She also announced that, in the light of the emerging situation and the success of evacuation efforts, we will exceed that aim. The first to be resettled included women's rights activists, journalists and prosecutors, as well as Afghan families of British nationals.

I would encourage my hon. Friend to work with the Minister for Afghan Resettlement on any individual cases that he has, but I would also say, as this question points out, that we need to support those in the country; it is not going to be possible to resettle every single case.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry—this is terrible. Every single element of this was not only predictable but predicted repeatedly for 18 months and longer. Operation Pitting was a disaster. We did not actually prioritise the right people, or we have no confidence that we prioritised the right people. We have abandoned lots of people, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said. All of us have constituency connections with people who are stuck in Afghanistan, and the Minister has no means of enabling them to get to safety. We have abandoned them to a future where there is not enough food, there is not enough money to pay the bills, there is no electricity and most of the hospitals are not working properly. We have a complete disaster, and part of the blame for that lies at the Government's door.

Vicky Ford: During Operation Pitting, we worked at great speed. Our armed forces on the ground worked at great speed and in great danger to evacuate around 15,000 people to the UK. That was the second largest number evacuated by any country, behind only the United States. We are supporting people in Afghanistan.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): With a large Afghan community as well, I am hearing every day stories of relatives who are murdered, who are disappeared, who are hungry and who are suffering from medical emergencies. That includes the husband and two children of a constituent of mine who are trapped in Afghanistan. It is simply not the case that the relatives of British nationals in this country are getting the assistance that they were promised and need.

[Ms Karen Buck]

Please will the Minister take the desperate pleas of ourselves and our Afghan communities back and make sure they are heard in Government so that we can assist those people who may have a claim to come here?

Vicky Ford: I agree that this is a really serious and difficult situation, especially for the people in Afghanistan. That is why we have been focusing on working with others on getting humanitarian aid in. Since the end of Operation Pitting, the UK has supported nearly 1,300 people to leave Afghanistan, including 700 British nationals and eligible dependants. We will continue to work to ensure that those still in Afghanistan are able to depart the country safely if they are eligible. I would encourage the hon. Lady to continue to work with the Minister for Afghan Resettlement on individual cases.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for bringing forward this urgent question. Children facing starvation in a manner that was, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, entirely predictable and predicted deserve the attention of the most powerful people in the world. So can I ask the Minister a direct question that has already been asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) but that has not been answered? Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown has asked our Foreign Secretary to bring together an Afghan rescue conference so that those powerful people can do something about this issue. Is the answer yes or is the answer no?

Vicky Ford: Our Foreign Secretary, our Prime Minister, the Minister responsible and all members of the UK Government have been working with our international partners and showing international leadership on this issue. It is right that we work with the UN on it. The UN has today announced its appeal—the biggest appeal ever—and we will be making further announcements on that appeal and how we continue to work with the UN, which is the right organisation to be working with, in the coming weeks.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Frankly, what we are hearing today just is not good enough. We know that the situation is utterly dire in Afghanistan. Could I request that the Minister takes away what she has heard from both sides of the Chamber today and comes back to the House as soon as possible in the next few days with a statement about how the UK is stepping up its leadership on the humanitarian crisis and about what it will do to expedite the evacuation and resettlement of at-risk Afghans who are relatives of our constituents—I have 400 cases outstanding—to make sure there is a strong, clear message about how they could be evacuated for their safety? They are still at risk and they are now falling prey to the worsening humanitarian situation.

Vicky Ford: This is the most serious food crisis in the world. This is not the time for party politics. The UK has been leading the international efforts on this issue. The UN has just launched the world's biggest-ever appeal. We have been working, with UK leadership from the beginning, on this incredibly difficult situation with our partners at the UN and at the World Bank. We are leading the pressure to unlock the money from the World Bank, which is key to this issue.

I encourage the hon. Lady to please get behind the UN and behind the UK Government's efforts to bring the world together to help the people of Afghanistan, because that is vital for the people of Afghanistan right now.

Clive Lewis: Do your job.

Vicky Ford: There is no one working harder to get on with the job and to support people around the world than this Government. I find Members accusing us of not getting on with the job from a sedentary position really offensive to the people of Afghanistan.

A written ministerial statement updated the House just before Christmas. I have said from this Dispatch Box that the UK Government will come back with further statements in response to the UN appeal in the coming weeks. That is the right thing to do and it is right that we are working with the UN, other international partners and key NGOs. In terms of doing my job, as soon as I leave the Chamber I am going to meet Save the Children, one of our key partners on this issue, because it is really important that we continue to work with our key partners.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): The unfolding crisis in Afghanistan is nightmarish in its scale and complexity and the Social Democratic and Labour party entirely supports the pathway set out today for an international conference to intensify and galvanise global support.

We have heard about the efforts on the ground and know that only a tiny proportion of those affected will be able and seeking to leave Afghanistan, but the scheme is clearly inadequate. I am aware, from responses I have received, that the Northern Ireland Executive are ready and willing to accept a large number of refugees; will the Minister advise the House as to what discussions have been had with them? In the light of the comments from several Members, can she ensure that there will be a pathway to referral to the scheme from MPs' offices?

Vicky Ford: I will certainly get back to the hon. Lady about a pathway to referral to the scheme from MPs' offices. The Home Office leads on that, rather than me.

I say again that this is a really serious and worsening crisis. It is the largest humanitarian appeal ever made on record with the UN. We need to work with our partners at the UN and the World Bank to unlock funding for the humanitarian crisis and that is what the Government are doing. We will be getting on with that job.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I have to say that the Minister's response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) was unfortunate, because there is real cross-party concern on this issue. The Minister was right in her opening remarks to highlight the generosity of the British people, because they recognise our special responsibility to the Afghan people in the face of the unfolding catastrophe following our chaotic withdrawal. She has set out what the Government are doing, but

clearly it is not working. What further plans do the Government have to address the appalling situation in Afghanistan?

Vicky Ford: I think I have been very clear: we are working with the UN and other international partners and we want to unlock the World Bank funding that will make a considerable difference. We need to continue to work with trusted partners to make sure that the funding that we and others have pledged gets to those on the ground who need it most. We are also working with NGOs and other banks and, if it is possible, to tackle some of the issues in the payments system that are causing such complexity. We are working with our education partners and other NGOs and will make further announcements in response to the UN appeal in the coming weeks.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When something is not working, we have to look at it again, and that is why an international conference is necessary, to bring greater leverage to the situation and to achieve the outcomes we all want. One group of people that the Minister has not referred to is the democratically elected Members of the Afghanistan Parliament, who are now spread around the world. They know their communities in the same way that we know our communities. Will the Minister open up a dialogue with the very people who know whole communities across Afghanistan, to ensure that they have a say on the future?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady makes a very good point about speaking to many of those who have represented Afghanistan and who are now situated across the world— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Vicky Ford: The situation is enormously difficult, and being heckled by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) from a sedentary position is very hard. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia has a great deal of contact with experts on this issue— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Vicky Ford: About 15,000 people were brought to the UK. Many of them are still in hotels, but many more have moved into homes. We have the second largest resettlement scheme in the world, and it is really important that we continue to work with my hon. Friend the Minister for Afghan Resettlement on any individual issues that constituents may face.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) was right to praise the Minister for acknowledging the generosity of the British public, but I warn her that the anger and disappointment felt by people in this country at the failures of the British Government threaten to undermine everything that she has said to the House this afternoon.

Faith and community groups in my constituency are anxious to continue supporting the humanitarian effort towards Afghanistan. What work are the Government doing with faith and community leaders in this country to support their efforts and those of their members and communities?

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Member for again raising the issue of the generosity of the British people. They have been enormously generous, especially in response to the appeal just before Christmas, which was, of course, match funded with up to £10 million of additional funding from the UK Government. It is truly life-saving aid.

The hon. Member makes a very good point about outreach to faith and community leaders in the UK. I will certainly raise with my colleague Lord Ahmad what more we can do, especially in explaining to the people of the UK, who have such generous hearts, what we are doing in the country in this very difficult situation.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): A constituent has been to see me a number of times, desperately worried, in tears, heartbroken and concerned about her sister, who worked in the special forces with the UK and NATO and is at risk. For obvious reasons, I will not name my constituent or her sister. I have raised the issue with the Ministry of Defence, which wrote back to me on 18 November and said that it was confirming her eligibility. My office has raised the issue with the Home Office as well. Will the Minister please look into this particular case? I am very happy to send her all of the details straight after this statement, because I am desperately worried that the situation is getting worse.

Vicky Ford: This is heart-wrenching. We all have cases involving families who have been separated and of constituents who have come here from Afghanistan and are very concerned about the impact this is having and the risk to their families in Afghanistan. I point again to the fact that the Minister for Afghan Resettlement announced a new scheme just last week. The hon. Lady should raise her case with the Minister responsible. If she would like to send it to me, I will forward it to her. It has to go through that scheme, which is one of the most generous in the world, with 5,000 people this year, but it cannot be every single person.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The World Health Organisation predicts that 1 million Afghan children under five will die of starvation this winter alone; another 2.2 million will suffer acute malnutrition. The progress achieved by the people there over 20 years has been irreversibly wiped out as a result of this humanitarian disaster. Fears of misuse of donor funds and of validating the Taliban remain valid, but given the urgency of tackling the crisis, does the Minister agree that the UK Government must do more? If this is truly not a time for party politics, will she, as my colleagues requested, say yes to the international conference of 68 nations that Gordon Brown has suggested?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady is right to raise what the WHO has been saying. This is the most severe food crisis in the world. That is why the UN has launched its appeal, and it is right that when we are working and engaging with other countries, we engage with that appeal. I cannot make further announcements today,

[Vicky Ford]

but I have said that Ministers are expected to make other announcements in response to the UN appeal in coming weeks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. The United Nations revealed yesterday that it needs £5 billion in aid for Afghanistan to avert a humanitarian catastrophe. There have been 40 years of constant suffering. Viewing this morning, as everyone has, the pictures and stories on TV and other media showing young children and women in pain and starving to death was terribly upsetting—it is hard not to be upset by those pictures. How can the Minister ensure that the humanitarian aid gets to those who need it the most and need it right now?

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his constant interest. As I said, we want to make absolutely sure that the aid gets to those who need it. That is why our funding is being channelled through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, the World Food Programme and other UN organisations, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. They are the right organisations to work with to ensure that aid gets through. Aid is currently getting through, although obviously the winter is a concern.

Points of Order

2.26 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I raised the issue of the supply of funding for the Afghanistan crisis being less than 25% by the end of November/beginning of December. Looking back on the record to a reply given by the Minister for the Middle East, North Africa and North America, he said the figure was £70 million, which is indeed less than 25%. I appreciate that the sum might have been increased during December, but it still falls 50% short of the funds allocated for 2021. Will you advise me and the Minister on how to set the record straight?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the point of order, but as he knows, it is Ministers, not the Chair, who are responsible for their words in the Chamber. Those on the Government Front Bench, including the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, will have heard what he said, and I am sure that the hon. Lady will seek to correct the record if a mistake has been made.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My constituent, a survivor of child abuse, has worked with the National Crime Agency during recent prosecutions, but she has been waiting since July for a decision on a family permit application to the EU settlement scheme. I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is the Immigration Minister, on 2 November, but have not received a reply.

I have raised the matter on multiple occasions with UK Visas and Immigration, but again, replies have not been forthcoming. My constituent was told that a decision was made on 20 December, and UKVI confirmed that to me, but she has still not been told what the outcome is. It completely ruined Christmas and new year for her and her children. I have chased up the case repeatedly, but I cannot get that decision. This is torture for my constituent. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you provide guidance on what I can do, what mechanisms are available to me, to get that decision, so that this woman can have some peace in her life?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. I am obviously disappointed, as I am sure she is, to hear that her letter and representations have not received a response. I would hope that a response would now be forthcoming speedily, especially as there are Ministers and Whips on the Front Bench who I am sure will convey that back to the Home Office.

In terms of how the hon. Lady might pursue the matter further, she may wish to discuss the issue with Clerks at the Table Office, who can offer advice. I also know that if issues of delays with Ministers are raised with the Leader of the House at business questions, he agrees to take them back to Ministers, so that might be another route that she might wish to pursue through business questions.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have informed the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland of my intention to raise this point of order. In July last year, he released a Command Paper on the troubles in Northern Ireland and the related legacy issues. In his statement to the House, he said that he would be

"introducing legislation by the end of the autumn",—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 390.]

but no legislation came forward. At the last oral questions, just before Christmas, I asked him where the legislation was and he replied:

"We have not had pauses".—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 366.]

This week, a Government briefing to the *PoliticsHome* website about that legislation said that

"a government source told PoliticsHome that they needed more time to 'get it right' and that the legislation might not make it onto the statute books until late spring or early summer."

That strikes me as a clear breach of the ministerial code, which is clear in its intent. Ministers should talk about legislation and how legislation will be handled in this place by talking to this place in an oral or written statement, preferably an oral one so that we can cross-examine it at the Dispatch Box.

Can you confirm, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you or Mr Speaker have been informed of any intentions for that legislation? If not, it is a discourtesy to Mr Speaker, to the House and certainly to all people in Northern Ireland, for whom anxiety has been provoked by talk of the legislation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. He raises a number of issues. Decisions about when to make written or oral statements are obviously for the Government rather than the Speaker, but as he will know, Mr Speaker has repeatedly made it clear that substantial policy announcements should be made first to the House. I would expect the Government to observe that in relation to this important issue.

With regard to breaches of the ministerial code, if the hon. Gentleman wished to raise that, it would obviously be a matter for the Cabinet Office. I will ensure that Mr Speaker is aware of his point about possible changes to policy, but I hope that the Government Front-Bench team have heard that and will feed it back to the Northern Ireland Office.

Digitally Altered Body Images

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

2.33 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require advertisers, broadcasters and publishers to display a logo in cases where an image of a human body or body part has been digitally altered in its proportions; and for connected purposes.

To set the tone for this speech, I will describe an advert put out about a year ago by Dove called "Reverse Selfie". It starts with a young girl looking at her phone. On that phone, there is a picture of her. She may be in her late teens or early 20s. It starts to scroll backwards. She sees the comments underneath the photo of "you look amazing" suddenly disappearing, with all the likes slowly drifting away. Suddenly, the filter changes and so does her hair colour. The size of her face, including her nose, changes. Blemishes on her skin suddenly reappear.

The process goes further. The girl puts the phone down and lies backwards and there behind her is a picture of her family that reappears on the wall—she has scrubbed it off—and a picture of her favourite teen band. Furthermore, the image shows make-up, including lipstick, coming off. Finally, what is left in front of us is a girl no older than 13 or 14. The advert finishes with a pertinent line: "The pressure of social media is hurting our girls' self-esteem." This is an all-too-common story happening up and down the UK to our daughters, our sons, our granddaughters and our grandsons. The advert is only a minute long but it encapsulates perfectly the problem facing our media-hungry society.

Don't believe me? One in five adults feel shame about their body. In teenagers, it is one in three. The Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into body image found that concerns about the way we look start younger, last longer and affect more people than ever before, with 61% of adults and 66% of children feeling "negative" or "very negative" about their body image. NHS England data released over the summer showed that there were 2,682 admissions of children under the age of 17 with a primary diagnosis of eating disorders between April 2020 and March 2021—an increase of 34% on the previous year. This issue is here, stark and getting worse. I have seen it in my own practice as a GP before being in this House, and I fear the numbers will only increase from the 1.25 million people who have suffered with eating disorders and the 1 million people in the UK using steroids, many in pursuit of achieving an image that is simply unattainable no matter what they do. The problem is palpable, prolific and pervasive.

The growth of influencers' collaborations and sponsored posts, particularly on social media, has added to the ever-growing list of tools advertisers have at their disposal, often featuring images that can be secretly edited. This, combined with the amount of time we spend endlessly scrolling through social media, has created a perfect storm for physical and mental health. Constantly seeing altered images warps our sense of reality and drives an aspiration that can never, ever be achieved. Even the social media companies know this, as the Facebook leaks have shown. We are setting up a generation to fail, and it is hurting us all.

[Dr Luke Evans]

It comes as no surprise that the Women and Equalities Committee has reported on body image, the Advertising Standards Authority has opened an inquiry and a call for evidence on the issue, and the Health and Social Care Committee will, in the coming weeks, open its inquiry into body image. The UK is waking up to the issue, as have other countries across the world, with legislation in place in Israel and France and currently being brought forward in Norway. Body image is an issue that is multi-faceted and covers multiple Government Departments, with no silver bullet. We all understand that it requires a layered response from the likes of the Education Department, together with the draft online safety Bill and the assessment of risk. All these are rightly being looked at.

My Bill is a simple stepping stone—a brick in the foundation to help tackle the problem. I am proposing a new law in Parliament that calls for commercial images featuring digitally altered bodies to be labelled with a logo where the body proportions are artificially doctored. To put it simply, if someone is being paid to post a picture on social media that they have edited, or advertisers, broadcasters or publishers are making money from an edited photograph, they should be honest and upfront about it. This is not about stopping people touching up their wedding photos or removing the red-eye on a post; it is targeted at those with significant, far-reaching influence and those with commercial intent.

This area is already regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority and there are some similar precedents already in place. We have the "P" for product placement on TV, disclaimers on political adverts, and "Not actual video game footage" notices on adverts for video games. In more recent times, the ASA has done a significant amount of legwork on what is commercial and who the rules apply to, and the use of #ad on posts. The ASA advises:

> "In most cases, the use of #ad (or similar) is the clearest way of communicating the commercial nature of social media content. Alternatively, a platform's own disclosure tools, such as Instagram's Paid Partnership tool, can also help to distinguish advertising from other content…If an influencer fails to sufficiently disclose that a post is in fact marketing, then not only are they breaking the CAP Code, they—and the brand they're working with—may well be breaking the law."

My proposal is simply a translation of current practice into the digital world of body image.

Some detractors will wag their finger and say that this is the nanny state in action, but if anything it is the opposite. Those who put forward that position know full well that a perfect market needs perfect information, and this Bill is a step towards that. It does not ban changes; it simply empowers the individual to know that what they perceive is not reality, thus giving them information and, importantly, choice. However, the Bill would provide backup for the Secretary of State, should the industry not take action itself. Others argue that the evidence is not clear. They argue that logos and labels do not work and that in some cases labelling can even worsen outcomes. I would simply argue that the evidence is relatively scant and thin, as most would concede, and that the precautionary principle applies here, given the scale of the problem.

Having my Bill in place will primarily prevent people and companies from feeling the need to doctor images in the first place. This is already evident from the many social influencers and companies that are shunning tools and filters because they see the negative connotations being perpetuated across society and see that brands are actively choosing to dissociate themselves from digital enhancement. But alas, many are still caught up in the arms race for the perfect selfie, which is why this Bill has a place.

In closing, I find myself in a very strange position. I actually do not want to see such a logo on an image, ever. Why? Because I hope that we can foster a society that aims for body positivity without physiques that are impossible without digital manipulation. Failing that, or until then, the Government must consider primary and precautionary measures to help to curb the dramatic rise in poor mental wellbeing, the mass individual self-loathing that we have across the UK and the serious mental health disorders such as anorexia and bulimia that are becoming florid. I believe that my Digitally Altered Body Images Bill is a small but fitting way to start this journey.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dr Luke Evans, Jeremy Hunt, Julian Knight, Neale Hanvey, Dr Lisa Cameron, Simon Jupp, Caroline Nokes, Jim Shannon, Wera Hobhouse, Dean Russell, John Cryer and Steve Brine present the Bill.

Dr Luke Evans accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 February, and to be printed (Bill 227).

COMMERCIAL RENT (CORONAVIRUS) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

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

That the Order of 24 November 2021 (Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

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

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—*(Gareth Johnson.)*

Question agreed to.

Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill

[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of Session 2019-21, The impact of Coronavirus on businesses and workers: interim pre-Budget report, HC 1264, and the Government response, HC 119.]

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

REVIEW OF AWARDS

"(1) The Secretary of State must no later than three months following the day on which this Act is passed conduct a review to assess whether sections 15 and 16 of this Act have been interpreted consistently by approved arbitration bodies.

(2) In conducting a review under subsection (1), the Secretary of State shall have regard to published awards.

(3) If a review under subsection (1) identifies material inconsistencies in the interpretation of sections 15 and 16 of this Act, the Secretary of State must issue further guidance or amend existing guidance to arbitrators about the exercise of their functions under the Act."*—(Seema Malhotra.)*

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to conduct a review of awards to assess whether sections 15 and 16 of the Act have been interpreted consistently and publish or amend guidance as necessary.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.44 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government amendments 1 and 2.

Amendment 9, in clause 2, page 2, line 40, at end insert—

"(6) Notwithstanding subsection (5), the provisions of this Act shall extend to a business tenancy irrespective of whether the property comprised in the tenancy is occupied by the tenant."

This amendment broadens the definition of business tenancy to cover arrangements in which the property is not occupied by the tenant.

Amendment 13, in clause 7, page 5, line 19, at end insert—

"(2B) The Secretary of State must ensure that bodies approved under subsection (1) have sufficient numbers of arbitrators (whether alone or as a member of a panel of arbitrators) required to conduct arbitrations under this Part."

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to ensure that the approved arbitration bodies collectively have sufficient capacity to hear all arbitrations under this Part.

Amendment 10, in clause 9, page 7, line 7, leave out from "beginning" to the end of line 8 and insert "25 March 2022".

This amendment revises the period for a reference to arbitration to be made in order that it is consistent with the Code of Conduct.

Government amendment 3.

Amendment 14, in clause 11, page 8, line 21, leave out "supporting evidence" and insert

"any evidence relevant to the proposal."

This amendment would require a formal proposal put forward under this section to be made on an open-book basis.

Amendment 15, in clause 17, page 11, line 13, after "practicable" insert

"and no later than 14 days".

This amendment would require awards in arbitrations which do not have an oral hearing to be made within 14 days.

Amendment 16, in clause 19, page 12, line 6, replace "may" with "must".

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to make regulations specifying limits on arbitration fees.

Amendment 11, page 12, line 13, before "When" insert "Subject to 6A,".

This amendment is consequential to Amendment 12.

Government amendments 4 to 6

Amendment 12, page 12, line 19, at end insert—

"(6A) When the arbitrator makes an award under section 13 or 14, the arbitrator may also make an award requiring that a party at fault pays costs which it has caused the other party to incur.

(6B) For the purposes of 6A, a party is at fault where the arbitrator considers that the conduct of the party before or during the proceedings is unreasonable or improper."

This amendment would empower the arbitrator to make an adverse costs award where the arbitrator considers that a party has acted unreasonably or improperly.

Government amendments 7, 8 and 18 to 21.

Amendment 17, in schedule 2, page 19, line 6, leave out sub-sub-paragraph (a).

This amendment would extend the debt claims over which a party could apply to the court for the proceedings to be stayed to claims made before 10 November 2021.

Seema Malhotra: It is a pleasure to speak to new clause 1 and amendments 9 to 17, which stand in my name and in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

A process for resolving commercial rent arrears is very much needed, as dealing with the financial pressures brought on by covid is vital for landlords and tenants alike. Against that backdrop, Labour broadly welcomes the Bill, but we believe that the Government can and should do more on business support. That context is important because covid is not over. Business costs continue to rise, and they are also driven by rising fuel costs and inflation. Economic forecasts for the next three to five years project low growth, high inflation and high taxes. Managing financial pressures and supporting viable businesses to do so—that is the helping hand that we need in place as businesses navigate the uncertain road ahead and as some sectors recover faster than others.

To access the opportunities that we seek to ensure that the Bill provides, we need to be sure of the consistency, affordability and accessibility of arbitration and to ensure that the system operates effectively and fairly. On that basis, we have tabled new clause 1 and our other amendments in a positive spirit, to continue the dialogue that we had at the earlier stages of the Bill, because we support it and want it to work as effectively as possible.

On consistency, the Minister will appreciate that there will be retail and hospitality businesses with numerous landlords, and landlords with numerous tenants; businesses may therefore be party to more than one case under the new system. Predictability and consistency will be vital if those businesses are to have faith in the system, so

[Seema Malhotra]

our new clause 1 would require the Secretary of State to conduct a review of awards to assess whether clauses 15 and 16 have been interpreted consistently. The review would need to be conducted

"no later than three months following the day on which this Act is passed",

and where the Secretary of State identifies material inconsistencies, he would need to publish or amend guidance to arbitrators as necessary. We believe that such a review would be welcomed by landlords, tenants and arbitrators and would ensure that the system is well understood.

On the accessibility and affordability of the new scheme, the definition of "business tenancy" in clause 2 has important consequences. Only tenancies in which the tenant is in occupation of the property fall within the Bill's scope and can therefore access the arbitration scheme that it establishes. Let me give the House two examples of circumstances that could fall outside the Bill because of that definition.

First, Sir Paul Morgan, a specialist in property arbitration, has set out the case of a tenant who leaves a property unoccupied because of covid restrictions and does not now intend to reoccupy it when the restrictions end. As Sir Paul explains, the tenant may have a viable business but may not wish to reoccupy the particular premises for which the rent was due. Under the Bill as it stands, there would not be a business tenancy in such a case and the tenant would not be able to claim the benefit of the Bill in relation to that property, where the company was a tenant of that property during the period that is protected.

Secondly, there might be a situation where there is a head lease and a sub-lease on the property, for example where there is a franchising arrangement and the franchisee is the sub-tenant. In such a situation, the head lessee does not occupy the property and therefore could not benefit from the reliefs under the Bill, whereas the sub-tenant could.

Labour's amendment 9 would fill those gaps, broadening the definition of "business tenancy" to cover arrangements in which the property is not occupied by the tenant. Unless the Minister can confirm that in the examples I have given it is intended that the leases would fall outside the new regime, I very much hope that the Government will recognise the gap and support our proposed changes.

We have tabled amendment 10, in relation to the period for reference to arbitration, in the same spirit of constructiveness. Clause 9 establishes a six-month period for a tenant or landlord to make a reference to arbitration, for which the clock starts on the day on which the Act is passed. We recognise and support the need to act quickly, but want to ensure that the full six months is available to tenants and landlords. The code of conduct suggests that the arbitration scheme will be operational on 25 March 2022, but what happens if the legislation passes before that date? Will that mean that parties have less than six months to make a reference? What if the legislation is not passed until a later date? Presumably, the current code of conduct would then need to be amended and existing protections extended. Amendment 10 reflects the suggestion by Bill Chandler of Hill Dickinson LLP that the date for referrals to open be fixed as 25 March 2022 irrespective of whether the legislation is passed. I would be grateful for the Minister's feedback on that and on the importance of these questions in relation to improving accessibility to and the clarity of the new regime.

Let me turn to the question of cost. The scheme will be a success only if it is affordable. In Committee, the Minister acknowledged the importance of affordability and suggested that he was working with relevant bodies that may be appointed to agree cost schedules. Could the Minister update the House on those discussions? Clause 19 gives the Secretary of State the discretion to specify ceilings for arbitration fees in secondary legislation. Given the concerns of stakeholders and the financial pressures they are facing, the Secretary of State should be required to set a limit on arbitration fees, and that is the intention of amendment 16.

On county court judgments, the Minister will know that many commercial tenants were deeply frustrated that the temporary protections introduced to assist businesses struggling to pay their rent did not include protections against county court judgments and High Court judgments. UKHospitality and others have been calling for this protection for months. While it is welcome that the Government have finally listened to industry and to Labour, and improved the provisions that would stay any debt proceedings made after 10 November, choosing this cut-off date has had some perverse consequences.

As we heard in Committee, the result of this arbitrary date means that any landlord who started proceedings before 10 November is now arguably in a better position than those who held off and pursued negotiations with their tenant. Surely this cannot be the Minister's intention. As the British Retail Consortium explained, the more aggressive the landlord, the better the position they are now in on county court and High Court judgments. That is why we have tabled amendment 17, which would remove this arbitrary cut-off date. As a result, a party could apply to court to stay any debt claim that is made by a landlord and relates to protected rent debt, pending a resolution whether by negotiation or arbitration. We see this as an issue of basic fairness. Labour does not believe that landlords or tenants should be punished for in effect doing the right thing and seeking to negotiate a settlement.

I turn now to Labour's amendments designed to ensure that the new scheme operates effectively. First, on arbitrators and arbitration bodies, arbitral bodies and their members will be absolutely critical to the success of this arbitration scheme. The Government have taken a market-based approach to the running of the arbitration scheme, which will have a list of approved arbitral bodies, rather than a single provider. In Committee, we heard the concerns of stakeholders who wanted to understand what skills and expertise would be required of arbitrators. While some thought that financial and accounting qualifications were critical, others suggested that legal qualifications would be paramount given the complexity of the cases. I would welcome any update on the Department's discussions with stakeholders and about the approval of suitable arbitral bodies.

As well as ensuring that arbitrators are suitably qualified, it is vital that there is sufficient capacity. The Government's impact assessment assumes 8,200 cases going to arbitration in its central scenario. While the appointed arbitral

bodies will maintain their own lists of arbitrators, in a system where the Secretary of State may appoint several bodies, it is the Secretary of State who ultimately must ensure that there is sufficient capacity. The intention of amendment 13 is to make that an explicit and ongoing duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that the arbitral bodies appointed have sufficient numbers of arbitrators to hear and report on all cases as quickly as possible. If the impact assessment's estimate is too conservative, our amendment would require the Secretary of State to appoint additional arbitral bodies to work with those bodies already appointed to increase their list of approved arbitrators.

Stakeholders have also made it clear to me how vital it is that there is consistency across the new system in how different arbitrators interpret the legislation and any guidance under it. For example, an arbitrator must dismiss a reference to arbitration where it determines that the tenant's business is not viable. As such, how arbitrators interpret viability is of central importance.

On the conduct of parties, it is welcome news from stakeholders that the vast majority of landlords and tenants have already reached agreement on their covid rent arrears. The British Retail Consortium estimated in December that 80% to 90% of its members had reached agreement. For the minority of businesses that are yet to reach agreement, the arbitration scheme provides a lifeline for an independent and binding arbitration. However, we believe that the Bill could be improved to further ensure a fairer arbitration process.

Clause 11 requires a reference to arbitration to include a formal proposal for resolving the dispute. The other party may then put forward their own counter-proposal. Both must be supported by supporting evidence. However, a requirement to submit supporting evidence is not the same as full disclosure on an open book basis. As the Property Litigation Association makes clear, parties are not required to provide any evidence which might be adverse to their proposal. This lack of an obligation to make full disclosure prevents the other party from making an informed counter-proposal and, arguably, ultimately the swift resolution of the dispute. That is why our amendment 14 revises clause 11 and requires a formal proposal to be accompanied by all evidence relevant to the proposal, whether helpful to that party or not.

We are pleased to see the Government table Government amendment 4. Although a 50-50 split is fair in most cases, it is right that the arbitrator has the power to change how the arbitration fees are split, particularly if one party has acted unreasonably. However, we believe that the Bill should go further than that as it is vital that tenants and landlords are incentivised to approach the arbitration process fairly and in the spirit of resolution. That is why we have tabled amendment 12, which would provide the arbitrator with the power to make an adverse cost award, where one party has caused the other to incur costs by acting unreasonably. As Sir Paul Morgan said in his written evidence, that would be nothing new. In the case of many tribunals where the general rule is that each party will bear its own costs, the tribunal is typically given such a power.

On swift resolution, the regime is intended to deliver swift resolutions for disputes, yet the Bill does not do everything possible to secure them. While clause 17 requires the arbitrator to make their award within 14 days in a case in which an oral hearing is held, where no oral hearing is held the arbitrator is required to make their award as soon as reasonably practicable. My understanding from debate in Committee is that the likelihood is that most arbitration hearings will not be oral hearings, but on the basis of paperwork. Can the Minister explain the logic here? Why is there no backstop requiring the arbitrator to make their award within a specific timeframe where there is no oral hearing, which, as I say, we understand is expected to be the majority of cases. Labour's amendment 15 intends to ensure that awards are made within a specific timeframe irrespective of whether there is an oral hearing.

In conclusion, in the current climate viable firms risk going to the wall. We believe that the Government can and should do more. From business rates to energy costs, the Government have let down British businesses and the impacts are now a part of a cumulative rise of cost pressures on businesses. In the context of commercial rent debt, we welcome the relief this Bill offers to commercial tenants facing the risk of eviction, bankruptcy or debt enforcement, and we welcome the prospect of resolution on covid rent arrears offered to landlords and tenants that have not been able to reach agreement. That is why the Opposition have taken a constructive approach to scrutinising this legislation, and I hope that, in recognising the spirit in which our amendments have been tabled, the Minister will respond favourably on the points we have raised today.

3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): Before I respond to the Opposition amendments, I would first like to thank the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for their continued constructive engagement with the Bill and for their contributions to date.

The Bill is key to ensuring we support viable businesses that will continue to thrive and contribute to our economy in a way that does not risk the insolvency of their commercial landlords. We remain committed to these principles. The arbitration system is designed to be a quick, effective and impartial solution for rent debts that cannot otherwise be resolved, and we currently expect that all applications for arbitration will be made within six months and that cases should be resolved as soon as practicable afterwards.

Requiring a review of the arbitration process within three months of the Bill being enacted could slow down the process by adding additional steps and requirements for arbitrators that have already proved their suitability for the role. It might also delay the resolution of cases while arbitrators await the findings of the review before making awards.

Under the Bill's existing provisions, the Secretary of State can already request a report from approved arbitration bodies covering the exercise of their functions under the Bill, including details of awards made and the application of the principles set out in the Bill in the arbitrations they oversee.

Additionally, there is a requirement for arbitrators to publish the detail of awards made, including the reasons behind them. This will show how arbitrators have applied the principles of the Bill in coming to their decisions. We will carefully monitor the position, and if there is a

[Paul Scully]

need to revise the guidance, such as to clarify or add new information for arbitrators, the Secretary of State is already able to do so.

I believe that requiring a review would not benefit the aims of the Bill or, indeed, the people who would want to use the new arbitration system to resolve rent disputes, and I therefore hope new clause 1 will be withdrawn.

On amendment 9, as hon. Members will be aware, the Bill defines a business tenancy as a tenancy to which part 2 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 applies—that is to say it is a tenancy comprised of property that is or includes premises that are occupied by the tenant for business purposes. I reassure hon. Members that the Government intend such property to be considered occupied even if it has been mandated to close for some time in full or in part. A tenant will still be in occupation if they are operating their business remotely and intend to return, so I do not believe amendment 9 is necessary. I hope it will be withdrawn.

I should say that we also anticipate courts will take a pragmatic view of occupancy, given the underlying rationale behind the Bill to introduce a system of binding arbitration for businesses that have built up rent debt as a result of Government-mandated closures.

On amendment 13, the operation of approved arbitration bodies follows a market-based policy approach, leaving it to arbitration bodies to manage their internal capacity processes. Our engagement with arbitration bodies suggests that this is the right approach. Looking purely at the number of arbitrators disregards the fact that an arbitrator will be able to take on more than one case at a time. Although the application process will contain a question on the number of arbitrators available, we recognise that this will provide an under-representative picture of capacity in the market, so I am not able to accept the amendment.

On amendment 10, I am grateful to the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston and for Brentford and Isleworth for seeking to ensure consistency between the Bill and the code of practice. I reassure them that the Government's intention under both the Bill and the code is for the Bill, including the arbitration system it establishes, to come into force as soon as possible. We want the arbitration system to start as soon as possible given its importance to supporting resolution of protected rent debt and a return to normal market operation. The aim remains to bring the Bill, including the arbitration system, into force by 25 March 2022. That is reflected in the code of practice, as updated on 9 November 2021. I am happy to consider whether clarification would be useful within the code. The code outlines the processes and principles that we are seeking to introduce through the Bill. It has given, and continues to give, businesses the opportunity to negotiate in line with those principles until the Bill comes into force.

The March timing is linked to the expiry of the moratorium on forfeiture and the restrictions on use of the commercial rent arrears recovery regime. The Government have been clear that they intend such measures to remain in place until the Bill is passed, if that is earlier than their expiry.

I turn to amendment 14. Clause 11 as it stands must be read with section 34 of the Arbitration Act 1996, which states:

"It shall be for the tribunal to decide all procedural and evidential matters".

That provides arbitrators with the discretion to call for further evidence where that is considered necessary. There is also no express limit in the Bill on the types of evidence that parties can put forward to support their proposals. We are aiming for a quick and efficient process to restore businesses to normality. The aim of requiring supporting evidence is therefore to help focus participants' minds on the most pertinent evidence that will support their proposals. It will have to be sufficient to show why the proposal is consistent with the principles and should be adopted. That will help arbitrators to resolve cases quickly. A widening of the clause could lead the paper-based arbitration process to become lengthy, inefficient and costly for the parties, who must meet their own legal and other costs.

I turn to amendment 15. As I have previously explained, clause 17 establishes the timeframe for making awards, requiring arbitrators to make an award as soon as is practicable, or within 14 days in the case of an oral hearing. While we expect that most cases will be resolved quickly, the clause also provides arbitrators with the necessary flexibility to take additional time to make decisions on more complicated cases. One or both of the parties may each simply submit one formal proposal that is final, or one or both may decide to submit revised proposals as final proposals. They may also agree to extend the time limit for submitting initial or revised proposals. That means that it is hard for an arbitrator to know exactly when final proposals have been submitted and when the clock on the 14-day time limit would start running.

Arbitrators may need to request further information after receiving proposals. It would therefore be impractical to impose a time limit. Imposing a 14-day time limit for issuing awards following an oral hearing, as the Bill does—although the time limit can be extended—is less problematic because the arbitrator will have seen the final proposals and had time to consider them before the hearing. They also have an opportunity to ask questions about them during the hearing, which would conclude on that set date.

On amendment 16, I agree that fee levels are an important consideration. The Bill adopts a market-based approach. Arbitration bodies are best placed to decide on fee levels given their experience in costing arbitration schemes to make it affordable for all and attractive enough for arbitrators to want to take on cases. The Secretary of State's powers are intended to be used only when circumstances determine that to be appropriate. Setting a limit on fees at this point could reduce the number of arbitrators able to act, which could undermine the arbitration mechanism in the Bill. There is no evidence that such a limit is needed. However, if it is, the Secretary of State is prepared to exercise the power as appropriate based on the available evidence.

On amendments 11 and 12, I agree that it is important to encourage behaviour in line with the code of practice and the Bill's general principles. A key aim of the Bill is to restore businesses to normality as quickly as possible. We have carefully designed the process with arbitrators to make it quick and cheap to navigate, and accessible without further support. The amendments, however, could result in prolonged arguments on costs, appeals and enforcement, delaying a return to that normality

that we all seek. They could also encourage the use of legal and other support where that is not needed, lengthening the time to resolution and potentially increasing costs for all parties.

The amendments could create a situation in which one party's viability or solvency could be endangered through having to pay costs other than arbitration fees. Widening the discretion to include other costs could also lead to an uneven playing field, especially for smaller businesses who could end up paying high legal costs for larger companies. Under the Bill, the arbitrator has discretion to deviate from the general rule of evenly splitting the costs of arbitration fees between parties where appropriate, based on the circumstances of the case, such as when one party has not reasonably co-operated.

On amendment 17, the Bill as drafted allows for a stay of debt claims that include ringfenced debt and are issued between 10 November 2021 and the Bill coming into force. The Bill enables ringfenced debt under those claims and under judgments made in respect of such claims to be subject to arbitration. I understand the concern about the date, but it is not an arbitrary date, because 10 November 2021 follows the Bill's introduction and the Government's announcement of the policy. The Bill seeks to introduce proportionate measures that address the interests of both landlords and tenants, whereas the amendment would allow for arbitration of protected debt which was subject to earlier proceedings or judgments when the parties could not have known that this was proposed at the time when the proceedings were issued, so reopening those situations.

Let me now deal with the technical amendments tabled by the Government and the substantive amendment that we are tabling at the request of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Amendments 1 and 2 are technical amendments to make it clear that the definition of "service charge" in clause 2 covers both fixed and variable costs, as well as costs incurred by the landlord insuring against loss of rent. That has always been our intention, and the amendments help to make it clear, ensuring that all relevant costs and charges are within the scope of the arbitration process.

Technical Government amendments 3 and 8 make it clear that the provisions of clauses 10 and 24, in so far as they relate to company voluntary arrangements or certain restructurings, apply to limited liability partnerships. That is in addition to their usual application to companies. These are minor clarificatory amendments to improve the technical drafting of the Bill.

Amendments 4 to 7 are minor and technical, and clarify the operation of arbitration and all hearing fees and expenses. Amendments 4 and 7 make it clear that the general rule is that the party that has paid fees is to be reimbursed half the amount by the other party, but where appropriate, the arbitrator may determine a different proportion, including zero. Amendment 5 makes a small correction to clause 19(6) to make it clear that except for reimbursement of arbitration or oral hearing fees, a party must meet its own legal or other costs. Amendment 6 makes it clear that costs incurred in connection with arbitration are not recoverable under an existing clause in the lease. Allowing cost recovery via the lease concerned would undermine the specific provisions in the Bill on fees, expenses and costs. It would also put the party able to rely on the lease terms at an advantage, as they could be more confident about investing money in their case, in the knowledge that the costs could ultimately be recovered from the other party. In addition, allowing this could potentially put the viability of the other party at risk, even when an arbitral award had been handed down in that other party's favour.

I turn now to amendments 18 and 19. The Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Department for the Economy have requested the removal of the existing delegated power for them to make regulations for purposes corresponding to the purposes of the Bill, set out in clause 28. This decision was taken for several reasons, which include the availability of existing dispute resolution facilities, plus a lack of compelling evidence that rent debt in Northern Ireland is on a scale to require additional measures. The rationale for the policy in England and Wales remains strong, and this is where our evidence of rent arrears threatening jobs and business insolvency is focused. The removal of clause 28 necessitates an amendment to the Extent provision in clause 30(2), which currently refers to this provision.

Amendments 20 and 21 ensure that clause 24(4) extends to Northern Ireland in relation to company compromises and arrangements, but not company voluntary arrangements. That reflects the territorial extent of the Companies Act 2006 referred to in this provision.

I commend the amendments to the House.

Seema Malhotra: On the basis of the Minister's comments, particularly those relating to ongoing review, and other comments relating to the amendments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw new clause 1.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

"Rent" and "business tenancy"

Amendments made: 1, page 2, line 19, leave out sub-paragraph (ii) and insert—

(ii) which is a fixed amount or an amount that varies or may vary according to the relevant costs (or a combination of the two),".

This amendment clarifies that the expression "service charge" includes any amount payable under the terms of a tenancy for something mentioned in clause 2(2)(c)(i), whether it is a fixed amount or a variable amount (or a combination of a fixed part and a variable part).

Amendment 2, page 2, line 22, leave out from "costs"" to "in" and insert

"includes costs incurred by the landlord in connection with insuring against loss of rent or".

This amendment clarifies that the costs of insurance against loss of rent are within the expression "service charge", in addition to insurance costs relating to the demised premises and any common parts.

Clause 10

Requirements for making a reference to arbitration

Amendment made: 3, page 8, line 12, at end insert

"(as well as to companies)."

This is a drafting amendment to make clear that clause 10(6) (which applies provisions of the clause to LLPs) operates in addition to the rest of the clause

Clause 19

ARBITRATION FEES AND EXPENSES

Amendments made: 4, page 12, leave out lines 14 to 18 and insert

"(subject to subsection (5A)) also make an award requiring the other party to reimburse the applicant for half the arbitration fees paid under subsection (4).

'(5A) The general rule in subsection (5) does not apply if the arbitrator considers it more appropriate in the circumstances of the case to award a different proportion (which may be zero).'"

This amendment clarifies that the rule in the current clause 19(5)(a) (that the party paying the arbitration fees is to be reimbursed half of the amount) is the general rule, although the arbitrator is able to determine a different proportion, including zero, where appropriate.

Amendment 5, page 12, line 19, leave out "Otherwise" and insert

"Except as provided by subsection (5) and section 20(6),".

This corrects a small error in clause 19(6). The word "Otherwise" at the start of clause 19(6) currently refers back to clause 19(5), but it also needs to take account of the provisions of clause 20(6) which makes provision corresponding to clause 19(5) for oral hearing fees.

Amendment 6, page 12, line 19, at end insert —

"(6A) Legal or other costs incurred in connection with arbitration (including arbitration fees) are not recoverable by virtue of any term of the business tenancy concerned."

The amendment clarifies that arbitration costs are not recoverable under a tenancy term enabling recovery of enforcement costs relating to a breach of covenant under the tenancy. The parties' rights and obligations in relation to arbitration costs are governed by clauses 19 and 20.

Clause 20

ORAL HEARINGS

Amendment made: 7, page 12, leave out lines 36 to 40 and insert

"(subject to subsection (6A)) also make an award requiring the other party to reimburse the applicant for half the hearing fees.

'(6A) The general rule in subsection (6) does not apply if the arbitrator considers it more appropriate in all the circumstances to award a different proportion (which may be zero).'"

This amendment clarifies that the rule in the current clause 20(6)(a) (that the party paying the oral hearing fees is to be reimbursed half of the amount) is the general rule, although the arbitrator is able to determine a different proportion, including zero, where appropriate.

Clause 24

TEMPORARY RESTRICTION ON INITIATING CERTAIN INSOLVENCY ARRANGEMENTS

Amendment made: 8, page 14, line 37, at end insert

"(as well as to companies)."

This is a drafting amendment to make clear that clause 24(4) (which applies provisions of the clause to LLPs) operates in addition to the rest of the clause.

Clause 28

POWER TO MAKE CORRESPONDING PROVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Amendment made: 18, page 15, line 33, leave out clause 28.

The responsible Northern Ireland minister has informed Her Majesty's Government that the powers to be conferred by clause 28 are no longer needed. This amendment would omit the clause, which would otherwise require the approval of a Legislative Consent Motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Clause 30

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Amendments made: 19, page 16, leave out lines 14 and 15.

The reference in clause 30(2) to clause 28 is no longer correct if clause 28 is left out of the Bill. The rest of clause 30(2) (which provides that Part 4 of the Bill extends to the whole of the UK) is reproduced in Amendment 20, so the whole of clause 30(2) can be omitted.

Amendment 20, page 16, leave out lines 18 and 19 and insert—

"(a) in section 24—

(i) subsections (1), (2)(c) and (3), and

(ii) subsection (4) so far as relating to a compromise or arrangement under section 899 or 901F of the Companies Act 2006,

(b) Part 1 so far as relating to the provisions mentioned in paragraph (a), and

(c) this Part."

This amendment and Amendment 21 secure that clause 24(4) extends to Northern Ireland in relation to company compromises and arrangements, but not company voluntary arrangements. This is for consistency with the extent of the legislation covering those matters.

Amendment 21, page 16, leave out line 21 and insert—

"(a) in section 24—

(i) subsection (2)(a), and

(ii) subsection (4) so far as relating to a company voluntary arrangement,".—*(Paul Scully.)*

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 20.

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

3.14 pm

Paul Scully: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a pleasure to lead the Bill on Third Reading. I thank Members on both sides of the House for their support and for the many insightful contributions we have had throughout the Bill's passage—I say that slightly tongue in cheek, because the Bill has gone through in good time. That is because of the collaboration we have had and the understanding of the need to pass this legislation with good speed, but there has none the less been some really constructive scrutiny. I am especially grateful to the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for their positive engagement throughout.

These debates, and indeed the continued challenges presented by the ongoing pandemic, have emphasised just how important it is that we continue to support tenant and landlord businesses in navigating the impacts of the pandemic. The Bill does that by facilitating the resolution of certain pandemic-related commercial rent debts and supports landlords and tenants on the road to recovery. It is a purposefully focused and narrow Bill, addressing rent debt accrued by businesses mandated to close if that rent debt is attributable to a protected period as set out in the Bill.

The Bill establishes a temporary binding arbitration scheme for such rent debt, which will be delivered by independent arbitral bodies. There has been welcome

debate about the specifics of the scheme, especially around the fees, as well as about the ability of arbitrators to determine the viability of businesses. We will continue to assess the impact of the cost of arbitration on businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, to ensure that the binding arbitration scheme is not prohibitively priced. Guidance will be published for arbitrators, with comprehensive input and engagement from arbitrators themselves. Arbitral bodies will be empowered to deliver the scheme with confidence.

Following agreement on Report, we have made some technical amendments to better achieve the aims of the scheme. Those minor changes include clarifying certain provisions, including the definition of "service charge", but we have also made a more substantial amendment in removing the delegated power for Northern Ireland to introduce similar provisions to those in the Bill. That was done at the request of the Northern Ireland Executive. They initially looked at this and wanted to be included, but as they looked further they realised that sufficient provisions were already in place. However, we are grateful for their engagement on the Bill.

The outstanding commercial rent debt still poses a significant threat to commercial tenants and landlords in England and Wales. I welcome the recognition from both sides of the House of the need for the Bill.

I thank the Clerks of the House for expertly steering the legislation through the House. I also thank my private office—Rhianna Patel and Guy Brindle—and the officials who have worked on the Bill: Charles McCall, Carl Creswell, Jessica Barnaby, Radhika Sundaram, Hamza Shoaib, Geraldine Haden, Jane Chelliah-Manning, Matthew Beese, Henry Hutton, Louise Dobrin, Sarah Machen and Jahan Meeran.

This Bill demonstrates the Government's commitment to supporting the orderly resolution of commercial rent debt accrued during the pandemic, and I am pleased to have supported its passage. On that basis, I commend it to the House,

3.17 pm

Seema Malhotra: As we move on to Third Reading I would like to thank the Minister for his engagement with us and for meeting us outside the formal Committee and other stages of the Bill. I also thank the Whips on both sides, the civil servants, the Clerks of the House, all those who gave evidence, Parliamentary Private Secretaries and all colleagues who contributed to proceedings on the Bill.

Labour supports the Bill. Where we believe that it could be further improved we have laid out our arguments, and I hope that such debate will be helpful as the Bill is taken forward in the other place. Labour recognises the need for a fair arbitration system to deal with these difficult rent arrears. No otherwise viable business should face an overwhelming burden from rent arrears incurred as a result of a very difficult time during lockdown and through no fault of their own. Neither should those businesses feel that they are on their own without due arbitration, without a burden-sharing process and without a Government and a Parliament on their side. At the same time, we recognise that commercial landlords also need a clear and predictable mechanism through which to seek to recoup levels of rent arrears fairly, recognising the ability to pay as viable businesses navigate the ups and downs of our economic recovery.

Crucially, the guiding mechanism of any arbitration system must ultimately be fairness and must be in the long-term interests of British businesses and jobs. By ensuring that the arbitration process must aim to preserve viable businesses and do so fairly, while also preserving landlords' solvency, the Bill offers a balanced arbitration process. As such we support it.

The timing of the Bill, however, was somewhat disappointing, because we called for action over rent debt and wider business costs earlier last summer, ahead of the end of restrictions; indeed, I met UKHospitality, the British Beauty Council, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Night Time Industries Association and many others. The Minister will have had such meetings too, and heard of the huge ongoing burden that businesses were facing over rent payments; yet it seemed to take the Government months after we, and other stakeholders, made that call to produce the Bill and to set out the arbitration process for rent arrears. In that time, the covid pandemic continued to hit businesses hard, in sometimes predictable and sometimes unpredictable ways as new waves were coming through, particularly those on the frontline of our high streets and communities.

Rent debt remains a heavy burden for those businesses and their commercial landlords. Indeed, the Bill's impact assessment notes that, according to the Treasury analysis, the total amount of deferred rent liabilities may be at around £9 billion by March 2022. It is likely that businesses and landlords could have been helped by the legislation being introduced a little earlier, but we move forward, and as the Bill moves forward the issues around affordability and accessibility should be further tested. The Minister alluded to that in his speech on Third Reading.

Businesses up and down the country have had a very tough Christmas period, despite the period of October to the new year being called the golden quarter for many hospitality and retail businesses, in which they hope enough revenue can be made, particularly in December, to make up for and steer through the fallow months of January and February. That period has been incredibly difficult this time around. UKHospitality found that the average hospitality venue lost over £10,000 in the weeks leading up to Christmas, with Christmas day takings down 60% compared with those in 2019. A December survey—the period between some of the stages of the Bill—by the Night Time Industries Association found that the outstanding business debt from their members was, on average, around over £200,000 per unit.

Businesses need help with their rent debt, but they will not be able to access it if the cost of arbitration in the Bill is too high. It is vital that the Government continue to listen to the views of Members of this House, and Ministers should ensure that arbitration fees are capped. It is also vital that all viable businesses can access the arbitration process, including those that no longer occupy their premises. I heard what the Minister said in relation to how the courts might interpret that in the context of the intentions behind the Bill, but that issue may well be raised further in the other place. The Government must ensure that there are enough arbitrators, as we have raised, to deal with all cases, and that the arbitration system works consistently and fairly.

We recognise that, as the scheme comes in over March and into April, businesses will also be hit by the hike in national insurance contributions, as well as the

[Seema Malhotra]

ongoing labour shortages, supply chain shortages, rising prices and rising inflation. It is why, in the context of business cost challenges, we continue to believe that the hike in national insurance contributions will be the wrong move at the wrong time. It will be right when viable businesses, we hope, start to recover, and when the arbitration process comes in and they are expected to repay any rent arrears. It is critical that any arbitration system that is created is administered within the context of a wider supportive environment for businesses. I hope that the Minister will keep that under review, and perhaps raise the issue with his Treasury colleagues.

Labour supports the Bill, which addresses a commercial issue on which we have called for action. It provides a fair system for helping landlords and tenants to find a solution to rent arrears under a binding arbitration system. Its measures must be kept under review so that the outcomes that it is intended to achieve are supported, and the process does not otherwise become one that loses the confidence of those it is there to support. On that basis, I wish colleagues in the other place every success in their ongoing scrutiny of the Bill as it moves forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

GLUE TRAPS (OFFENCES) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Glue Traps (Offences) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or another public authority; and

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

GLUE TRAPS (OFFENCES) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Glue Traps (Offences) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees and other charges under the Act.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

3.25 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That, in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, Ms Theresa Middleton CBE be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years from 27 January 2022 to 26 January 2027.

Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, as amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, provides that three lay members should be appointed to the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. On 26 January 2022, Mr Shrinivas Honap's term as a lay member of SCIPSA will come to an end. I would like to thank him very much for his very distinguished service, which he continues to this House as a lay member of the Commission.

When vacancies arise, the statute requires that members be selected by Mr Speaker through a process of open and fair competition. Therefore, in line with the statute, a process has been conducted on merit, and on the basis of fair and open competition, to find his replacement. Subject to the agreement of the House today, Ms Theresa Middleton CBE will become the new lay member of SCIPSA.

An explanatory memorandum is available to Members in the Vote Office. Hon. and right hon. Members will note that Ms Theresa Middleton is a recently retired director at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, for which she had worked since 1999. She has extensive financial and programme management experience, particularly of large and complex transformation projects, having been director of a major HMRC tax transformation project.

The recruitment board felt that Ms Middleton's experience, temperament and professionalism would make her an asset to SCIPSA, that she would be able to provide challenge with confidence, insight and authority and that her experience and expertise would complement the skills and qualities of the existing lay members. Subject to the agreement of the House today, we wish Ms Middleton well in this role, and I commend the motion to the House.

3.27 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise briefly to support the motion. As the Leader of the House has outlined, there has been a fair and rigorous process. It has been done entirely in accordance with statute. I just wish to add for the record our thanks on behalf of the Commission and the House to the board members who conducted the recruitment competition, chaired by Clerk Assistant Sarah Davies. We thank our former colleague, Sir David Crausby, Diana DeCoteau, head of reward and employee engagement, and Isabel Doverty, independent panel member. I know that a fair and rigorous recruitment process takes time, thought and effort, and I wish to add for the record our thanks to them. I look forward to working with Ms Middleton soon on SCIPSA.

3.28 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I echo what has been said and offer my thanks to those involved in the recruitment process and to those who have given their service. I also pass on our best wishes to Ms Middleton, who seems to be an eminently suitable appointee for the role.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Richard Thomson: I had just finished, but I will find something else to say.

John Spellar: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I have no knowledge of or animus towards the individual concerned, but once again it is the great and the good. She is someone who has just recently retired from HMRC. How cosy that they all slot into these positions. It is never truck drivers who are keeping the country going, or nursing sisters who are keeping the health service going, or those from a whole range of occupations—it is always out of the quangocrats and retired civil servants. I would hope that the Scottish National party and our own Front Benchers would be saying, "We need a broader range of people in public appointments, and not just the same merry-go-round of the great and the good"—however good they may be, and who knows whether they are great.

Richard Thomson: I feel like I have been given an unexpected opportunity to hold court, which I shall not take. Nevertheless, the right hon. Gentleman is correct: we are very much of a bias towards the good, rather than the great, and it is perhaps unfair to load all those concerns on to this particular appointment. I am sure the Leader of the House will have plenty to say in response to that. All public appointments, in our opinion, should be drawn from the truest possible breadth and depth of the talent that is available.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House we shall take motions 7 and 8 together.

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

Civil Aviation

That the draft Transport Act 2000 (Air Traffic Services Licence Modification Appeals) (Prescribed Aerodromes) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 15 November 2021, be approved.

Enterprise

That the draft Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 and Pubs Code etc. (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 30 November 2021, be approved.—(*Andrea Jenkyns*.)

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

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

3.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 January 2022

[Philip Davies *in the Chair*]

Access to Radiotherapy

9.30 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate. This is in line with current guidance from the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the estate. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room. I call Grahame Morris to move the motion.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to radiotherapy.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and if it is not too late I would like to wish you and the Officers of the House a happy new year.

I am delighted to have secured this vital and timely debate on access to radiotherapy services. On occasion, it may seem like groundhog day: we come here on a fairly regular basis and outline the case for more investment in radiotherapy services. However, the covid crisis has brought many of these issues into sharp focus, and indeed there is a growing cancer backlog crisis that the Government really must address.

I also want to thank the Chamber engagement team for its fantastic work. This is the first time that I have had any interaction with the team, but it has been most helpful in engaging the public ahead of this debate. I am immensely grateful to the team for carrying out a survey over the course of only a few days—over this weekend, really. We had over 800 responses, and I thank all the respondents for taking the time to express and submit their views and experiences. I believe that those contributions, a couple of which I will refer to, will significantly enrich the debate. I am eagerly anticipating what I am sure will be comprehensive and compelling contributions from colleagues in the Chamber, many of whom I have served with and been involved with in debates like this previously.

It is only right that I begin by declaring an interest. I have the privilege of serving as vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, and I am also one of the vice chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer. I also want to thank Macmillan Cancer Support and Radiotherapy UK, the charity with which I am associated, for their assistance in preparing for today's debate. I am immensely grateful to colleagues from the all-party groups who have come along today; I know that there are many pressing demands on Members' time.

The reason the debate is so important is that cancer will affect all of us at some point in our lifetimes. I want to take this opportunity to mention a good friend of mine, Nick Munting, who, as some might know, is a chef in the House of Commons and has very recently been diagnosed with cancer. I wish him all the very best for his speedy recovery.

I have personally had cancer on three occasions—a type of lymphatic cancer called non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Without the care and treatment that I received from the NHS, I would not be here today. I thank the dedicated staff at the Macmillan cancer centre at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle, and those working at cancer hospitals throughout the country, for the excellent work that they do in diagnosing and treating cancer patients. I have received a plethora of cancer treatment. I have had the works: surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy—including advanced radiotherapy.

There is a reason why I am concentrating on radiotherapy today. Radiotherapy is by far the least understood of the three pillars of cancer treatment, with chemotherapy and surgery far more widely understood and referred to in public life. Despite that, one in four of us will have radiotherapy at some time in our lifetime. I want to begin by highlighting the many advantages of this highly specialised treatment and the major breakthroughs that there have been over the last 10 years.

Unlike other cancer treatments, modern radiotherapy is accurate to within millimetres, limiting damage to healthy cells around the cancer. A specialist in the field and a dear friend, Professor Pat Price, explained in simple terms to me, as a layman, the concept of a banana in a box. Imagine that the tumour is a banana in the box. With older, less precise forms of radiotherapy, the whole box would be irradiated and there would be considerable collateral damage to healthy cells. With modern, advanced precision radiotherapy techniques, just the banana would receive the high dose of radiation, and there would be no collateral damage. That significant advance has come about because of digital technologies and advances in this form of treatment. It is especially useful for treating cancers in areas vulnerable to damage, and it requires fewer patient visits than other treatments. Unlike surgery, it does not take up intensive care capacity, and unlike chemotherapy, it does not impact on the immune system.

Furthermore, radiotherapy is the most cost-effective treatment. Typically, a patient can be cured at a cost of about £6,000. If we contrast that with the cost of some chemotherapy drugs, which for individual treatments may run into hundreds of thousands of pounds, there is a cost argument for expanding radiotherapy, in addition to its effectiveness as a treatment. In many respects, it is a silver bullet. It is often referred to as a "Cinderella" service: it is immensely effective, but it suffers from chronic under-investment and suboptimal clinical commissioning. Let me remind the Minister that the UK spends only about 5% of the cancer budget—I do not mean the entire NHS budget; I mean just the cancer budget—on radiotherapy. Compared with what is spent in many other advanced European countries, that is a very small proportion; the European average is about 10% of the cancer budget.

In England, access to treatment can depend on people's postcode; often, patients in more affluent, urban areas benefit from the most modern equipment, and from ease of access because of excellent public transport provision. In contrast, patients in less affluent, more rural areas, such as mine—Easington in County Durham—do not enjoy the same levels of access. My constituents make

[Grahame Morris]

up a proportion of the 3.5 million people in England who do not have a radiotherapy centre within the recommended 45 minutes of their home.

That statement of the situation was supported and confirmed by a number of the respondents to the survey carried out by the Chamber engagement team. If I may, I will refer to a couple of their contributions. A lady called Penelope had positive experiences of accessing the service herself, but feared for others who might not be so fortunate. She said:

"In my experience, which involves my father's radiotherapy last summer, he did not have to wait long, but he lives in Berkshire…near several hospitals, and I think the situation is very different in other areas of the country."

Similarly, David said:

"My own wait time…before the covid situation was only weeks, and by that time I had already started other treatment regimes as well. I am lucky to be close to a centre of excellence: the University Hospital Coventry and Warwick. This is not normal though, a close friend, now passed on, had to drive from their home near Boston in Lincolnshire to the Leicestershire Infirmary for treatment, when there was a possible 'slot'. That was a 4-hour round trip as neither the Boston nor Lincoln hospital had"

radiotherapy

"facilities. Lack of facilities meant the cancer spread out of control and he died."

Radiotherapy is needed in almost half of treatments, but according to Cancer Research UK, only 27% of UK cancer patients actually receive it. I respectfully point out to the Minister that we will never level up the country while access to life-saving treatment depends on people's postcode—where they live—entrenching already existing regional health inequalities.

Let me also address some of the workforce issues. The radiotherapy workforce are at breaking point. A survey conducted by Radiotherapy UK and the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine in October 2021 found that almost 80% of professionals were considering leaving their position or knew a colleague who was. That was echoed by members of the radiotherapy workforce who submitted their views to the survey. A lady called Lauren said:

"Most radiotherapy staff can travel over an hour as that is their nearest radiotherapy centre. Increasing working hours and increasing workload is leading to more staff wanting to leave the profession in addition to the fact most of us have to travel long distances to find a centre to work at. Due to housing not being affordable in the locations of radiotherapy centres,"

which are often in big city centres. The Minister can address that fairly simply, and we have a solution—investment in IT networks, which I will come to in a moment—that we have put to successive Ministers who have occupied the post.

The tariff system generating income to trusts is based on the number of patient visits. Those perverse tariffs mean that radiotherapy trusts with advanced machines that can treat patients in fewer sessions are incentivised to treat patients less effectively over more treatments. That is a ludicrous, perverse incentive that I am sure the Minister could do something about.

Similarly, trusts seeking to replace ageing machines—the advice is to replace radiotherapy machines after 10 years—are required to conduct 9,000 treatments even to be considered for funding. The pandemic saw referrals plummet and services overstretched, so centres are not reaching that threshold and are therefore blocked from providing patients with access to the latest life-saving technologies. We have poor patient access and exhausted, demoralised staff, with senseless bureaucracy and a tariff system promoting less effective treatment. That is a pretty poor report card.

That was the state of radiotherapy even before the covid-19 pandemic. Holly, a radiotherapy professional, said:

"Currently we are having to delay patients due to poor staffing levels, this started way before the current surge in omicron cases. We have been understaffed for some time, and this has been made so much worse by omicron, we are having to close machines to make sure we have staff to cover"

the covid patients. She added that

"those that are in are getting burnt out by having to work longer, more days and harder each shift, meaning it's a cycle of being off ill."

Covid has created a cancer crisis that the current system cannot effectively manage. On that note, I want to pay tribute to the Catch Up With Cancer campaign, which was launched in conjunction with Craig and Mandy Russell, who very sadly lost their daughter Kelly to bowel cancer when her treatment was delayed owing to resources being transferred to the treatment of covid patients. Some of us here today handed in to 10 Downing Street a petition, signed by more than 300,000 members of the public, calling for action on the issue.

Of all the health backlogs, the cancer backlog is the most time-sensitive because, for every month that diagnosis of treatment is delayed, cancer survival rates can drop by as much as 10%. These are life-and-death issues for many tens of thousands of people. Without urgent action, cancer experts predict that survival rates in the UK may fall back to where they were 15 years ago, resulting in tens of thousands of extra cancer deaths. I know the Minister is new to her post, and I do not want to be unfair, but there is a crisis. I have been with colleagues to see a succession of Health Ministers, on many occasions, to set out proposals to improve the position. The lack of action is frankly lamentable, and many thousands of people will pay the price.

Before the pandemic, the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy branded radiotherapy "Britain's secret lifesaver". Ministers and NHS leaders need to recognise that it could be a game changer; it could have an immense impact on tackling the covid-induced cancer backlog, but to do that, it needs sufficient investment.

The all-party group has put together a six-point covid-19 recovery programme. I urge the Minister to look at that and to implement its proposals, which were developed not by me or other parliamentarians but by experts in the field—radiotherapy specialists and oncologists—who understand their patients and understand the service and how we can improve it.

The first point in our six-point plan is that we need to appoint a Minister in charge of and accountable for the transformation of radiotherapy. We need to invest in IT solutions to modernise radiotherapy. The problem that radiotherapy is available in only relatively few urban centres could be mitigated, to a degree, with modern IT that allowed specialists hundreds of miles away to interpret digital imagery and advise on the appropriate treatment.

We need to replace ageing machines—those that are more than 10 years old—and forget the bureaucratic nonsense about machines having to have done 9,000 treatments, because referrals for treatment have reduced due to covid. We need to invest approximately £200 million in the highly specialised workforce, where staff redeployment will be insufficient to fill the gaps.

We need to improve capacity and access by placing radiotherapy machines in some of the planned new diagnostic hubs. Ministers often respond to debates such as this one by referring to the £130 million that the Government promised to improve diagnostic services. That is welcome, but we need to address not just diagnosis but treatment. Radiotherapy is a quick and highly effective treatment, so I urge the Minister to consider using these machines in the diagnostic hubs.

Finally, we need to raise the profile of radiotherapy, ensuring full awareness among the public of the treatment's curative and palliative potential. The six-point plan is underpinned by a need for a national strategy. The lack of a cohesive national approach has caused unacceptable inequality and disparities between trusts in different parts of the country.

It comes down to this: every day, every week and every month that the Government fail to take sufficient action, the public suffer, money is wasted and patients die. The Government are in denial about the situation and there is a huge disconnect in ministerial statements. Just last week, I heard the Leader of the House say that the situation had been normalised, but that is far from the truth. We cannot ignore the cancer crisis any longer.

I want to ask the Minister a number of questions, which I hope she will address in her response. I hope she understands the frustration felt by radiotherapy staff, but I want her to make a commitment to investigate the bureaucracy that is holding back radiotherapy trusts and denying patients the most effective treatment. Will she act urgently on that? Is she aware that the Government have not reported radiotherapy-specific data, which we refer to as the radiotherapy datasets, since May 2021? Will she publish the datasets that are available next month? Those will show clearly the levels of treatment that radiotherapy machines have been involved in during this period compared with previous years. That will make perfectly clear the level of the backlog, which estimates from the frontline put at between 50,000 and 60,000.

Will the Minister outline the plan in the event that radiotherapy services find they are no longer able to cope? Finally, will she agree to a meeting with radiotherapy commissioners, the Secretary of State and representatives of the radiotherapy community, in order to address these essential life-or-death issues? It has been useful for me to open the debate, but I know colleagues have issues that they would like to put to the Minister, so with that, I will conclude.

9.50 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate. The Mount Vernon Cancer Centre in Middlesex provides non-surgical specialist cancer care to a population of more than 2 million in the UK. About a third of the Bedfordshire clinical commissioning group's cancer patients attend the service to receive radiotherapy. My constituents have to travel more than 50 miles to access treatment. Between 2019 and 2020, 800 patients undertook the three-hour round trip across Bedfordshire multiple times to reach lifesaving care.

A survey undertaken by the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre heard from many patients who have chosen not to have radiotherapy. The biggest factor in people's decision on whether to go ahead with the lifesaving treatment was the location of the treatment centre. Some patients simply cannot afford to travel so far, others are in too much pain, and some could not find the time due to family and work commitments.

The inaccessibility of radiotherapy is stopping people getting the care they need. One patient with stenosis of the spine found it so difficult to travel that they opted for a watch-and-wait approach rather than radiotherapy. Another reported a journey time of five hours door to door. The average radiotherapy uptake in Luton and Bedfordshire sits at under 35%, which is lower than many other CCGs. There is an undeniable crisis in the accessibility of radiotherapy in the UK, and lives are literally on the line.

Many of us will be familiar with the heartbreaking statistics being shared. Fewer referrals to a specialist doctor mean that the proportion of cancers diagnosed while still highly curable has fallen to 41%. Waiting lists stand at a record level and the backlog of care is only growing. Of course, the pandemic has had a major impact on NHS waiting times, but the cancer waiting time crisis is rooted in underfunding, under-resourcing and understaffing. The pandemic has only illuminated the problems. The 18-week waiting time target has not been met for five years. This is not new, but it is getting worse.

There are proposals for a more local additional cancer care unit, alongside Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, to offer treatment services that are more accessible for those in need, but that requires equipping new centres, recruiting more doctors and tackling chronic staff shortages. Cancer care needs proper investment. Funding is at the crux of whether patients can receive radiotherapy and whether they survive. It is down to the Government to step up and ensure that cancer patients can access the care they need and deserve.

9.54 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to my friend, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), for securing this debate and for an excellent speech, which contained some points that I make no apology for repeating because this issue matters hugely.

I lost my mum at the age of just 54. Eighteen years on, of course I still miss her massively; I miss especially the grandmother she would have been. Few issues that we deal with in this place are more personal than cancer. Half of us will have the disease at some point in our lives. Cancer touches absolutely every family.

The good news is that, increasingly, cancer is a disease that need not be a death sentence, partly because of the advances in radiotherapy. Radiotherapy kills cancer cells through radiation targeted at a tumour. It is becoming more and more precise, and is able to cure cancers that would otherwise be untreatable, with fewer side effects, as the hon. Member for Easington set out.

[Tim Farron]

Just over 50% of people with cancer should expect to receive radiotherapy, yet, as has been said, Cancer Research UK estimates that only 27% of cancer patients in the UK actually receive it. The clue to why that is is that the UK spends only about 5% of the cancer budget on radiotherapy. The equivalent average spend of similar countries in Europe, Australia and so on is about 11%. The total budget for radiotherapy each year is £383 million; compare that to the £2 billion spent on cancer drugs every year, even though radiotherapy is eight times more likely to be curative than chemotherapy.

That historic underinvestment—the responsibility of lots of Governments of all colours—is undoubtedly a reason why the UK has some of the worst cancer survival rates in Europe. Lives are being lost needlessly because the UK is so painfully slow at keeping up with and grasping the opportunities that radiotherapy provides. That is why we set up the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, which I am privileged to chair. I send huge thanks to Members from all parties, especially the hon. Member for Easington, to leading clinicians across the country and to the charity Radiotherapy UK, which is led by the rightly much esteemed Professor Pat Price, who has already been mentioned.

We set up the APPG in spring 2018. We booked a room in 1 Parliament Street. A handful of MPs turned up, but 50 or 60 of the leading oncologists in the country turned up and crammed into the room—they would not be allowed in today because of covid restrictions. Why had those people left their massively important jobs for the day, just to come to London for that meeting? It struck me then that it was because there is no radiotherapy lobby. I am not in any way going to criticise pharmaceutical companies, but we know that they are large and they have large coffers. We all get letters most weeks from constituents asking for this drug or that drug to be commissioned, and very often that is right. There is no such lobby for radiotherapy.

Lobbying, in its purest and most fair form, is about being in the room with the people who make the decisions. Radiotherapy has not had someone in the room with the people who make decisions. That is the best I can come up with as an excuse for why this Government and previous Governments, including the one I was part of, have not taken radiotherapy anything like as seriously as it should be taken, why we are investing such a paltry amount in radiotherapy, and why we are so far behind comparable countries.

At the local level, a bad situation is made worse because access to radiotherapy is simply not fair or equal. In south Cumbria, cancer patients have to travel each day all the way to Preston to our nearest radiotherapy centre. The Rosemere unit at Preston is excellent, but dangerously distant. The National Radiotherapy Advisory Group stated that it is bad practice for patients to have to travel for more than 45 minutes for treatment, yet not a single person in my huge constituency reliably lives within 45 minutes of radiotherapy.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of driving constituents to Preston for their treatment. I have seen how people from Kendal, Windermere, Grasmere, Grange, Coniston, Sedbergh and other communities have to make round trips of between two and four hours every day for weeks on end. I have seen their exhaustion and the impact on their health. I have seen people whose lives would have been longer if they had had radiotherapy turn it down, because they physically could not cope with the travelling. I have seen clinicians who have chosen not to refer people for radiotherapy, understandably but sadly, because they knew that their patient's condition would be made worse by those long, gruelling journeys. In Cumbria, because NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care will not act, those longer journeys mean shorter lives.

For 13 years, we have run a campaign collectively in Westmorland, calling relentlessly for a radiotherapy satellite unit to be placed at Westmorland General Hospital. We also campaigned to bring chemotherapy to Kendal and were successful in that fight. I am proud of everyone who supported our radiotherapy campaign, but we have submitted petitions with more than 10,000 signatures; I have had numerous Westminster Hall debates; I have met countless Ministers from all three parties that have been in government during my time in Parliament; we have marched for the hospital in our thousands; a team walked from Preston to Kendal just to make the point; 1,000 people wrote detailed, personal, heartbreaking stories to explain why we need the unit in Kendal; and we have demonstrated that there is clearly enough demand for at least one linear accelerator at Kendal, drawing patients from the south lakes, Furness and the western dales. With an ageing population in our community, there is also clearly a growing need.

We have the space at the hospital, designs have been done, the bid has been written and rewritten, and the inaction of managers in NHS England and Ministers in the Department of Health is inexcusable. It is a reminder of why rural communities feel so taken for granted and ignored by the Government and by NHS bosses nationally and regionally. Talk of levelling up the north is meaningless when Ministers appear not to realise that there is 100 miles of England north of Preston until the next nearest cancer centre.

Networked satellite radiotherapy units have been a huge success elsewhere in the country and, once they open, have been shown to increase the number of people able to take up that life-saving treatment. Satellites save more lives. Today, I ask the Minister to instruct NHS England to work with our local trusts in Cumbria and Lancashire finally to deliver our long-awaited satellite radiotherapy unit at Kendal. Our community will listen carefully to her response.

Radiotherapy, as the hon. Member for Easington said, provides the Government and the NHS with their best way through the cancer backlog. Owing to the pandemic, 740,000 cancer referrals have been missed. Therefore, at least 60,000 people are out there with cancer, but undiagnosed. That is terrifying. There is also an enormous backlog for treatment, with people dying as a result. In the Morecambe bay area, about half of cancer patients are having to wait for more than the scheduled 62-day limit to get their first treatment. As the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), rightly said, it would take the NHS working at 120% of its existing capacity for two solid years just to get back to where we were in March 2020. The need for an urgent and ambitious boost to cancer care is therefore obvious, but we see next to nothing specific from the Government.

Money was pledged for diagnostic hubs, but just on Monday this week, I discovered that in South Lakeland we will not see ours until next year. Where is the urgency? The Government and the NHS have done so well—commendably—on the vaccine roll-out. Why will they not treat cancer and the cancer backlog in the same way, with a ring-fenced and targeted programme to catch up with cancer?

Radiotherapy is covid-secure and non-invasive, carries no infection risk, does not need intensive therapy unit beds or precious operating theatre time, does not compromise one's immunity, is curative, palliative and, per capita, incredibly inexpensive. We could massively increase capacity very quickly. It has been the stand-out treatment in covid, often substituting for surgery, and it is the obvious first choice for getting through the backlog of cancer cases.

As an all-party group, we first wrote to the Secretary of State on 1 April 2020 to highlight the key role that radiotherapy needed to play to tackle the covid-induced cancer backlog. Since then, multiple spending reviews and Budgets have been passed with no significant investment in radiotherapy. The oft-repeated £130 million announced in 2016 as part of the long-term plan was spent long, long ago, so I hope that the Minister will not trot that out again. Yet a relatively modest investment of £850 million over three years could have a guaranteed and dramatic impact on cancer survival. I hope the Minister will take up the hon. Member for Easington's request that she meet us as an all-party group and, more importantly, the clinicians, so that we may talk her through this all-party plan backed by the clinicians, which will help her out and help her deal with the backlog.

The Minister should tackle perverse tariffs that do active harm to cancer treatment, and she could do so at no cost whatsoever to the taxpayer—it is about spending the money differently and less foolishly. Staff are restricted from using centres with more modern, precise kit that can treat patients in fewer sessions; instead, they must treat less effectively and over more sessions because, stupidly, the tariff rewards the number of visits, not the precision or effectiveness of treatment. The Government must be pragmatic and accept the offer from the private sector to centrally commission its capacity—at cost and not for profit—to deliver treatment on the NHS to clear the backlog and to save lives.

We must especially care for, value and boost the workforce. Radiotherapy oncologists, radiographers, engineers and physicists—dedicated, passionate professionals—are close to breaking point. The survey by Radiotherapy UK and the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine, to which the hon. Member for Easington referred, showed that 75% of those professionals believe that their unit could not meet pre-covid capacity with the kit they have. Some 80% reported seeing more advanced tumours than ever before in their careers and, as has been said, nearly 80% had thought about leaving the profession.

In Cumbria and right across the UK, radiotherapy treatment and the outstanding workforce have so much more to offer in the fight to save lives than successive Governments have seen fit to acknowledge. All parties bear responsibility for that. I ask the Minister to be a laser trailblazer and to deploy radiotherapy at its full capacity, so we can end needless deaths and catch up with cancer.

10.6 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate, and not for the first time—he is a repeat offender. His determination and laser focus on this issue are really important in trying to save lives.

I hope it is not too mawkish if I say a few words about my own experience of cancer, even though I have not had radiotherapy, because radiotherapy is not normally used to treat my form of cancer—melanoma—although it is for other forms of skin cancer such as squamous and basal cell carcinomas. The timing of my cancer was amazingly fortunate. It was three years ago yesterday that I went to my GP with a dodgy mole—I urge anyone who ever worries about a mole to get it checked out, because my hon. Friend is absolutely right that early detection saves lives. I was very fortunate that my GP sent me straight to a dermatologist, who cut it out for the first time within 10 days. The second bout was two weeks after that.

I was fortunate that all that could happen very quickly. If I had gone to the doctor on my birthday last year or this year, I do not think I would have got the same speedy response. I had a stage 3B melanoma—incidentally, I must say to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that satellites are not always good. A microsatellite from a melanoma is a really bad thing. If I had left it another three months, it would probably have been a stage 4, and there are only four stages.

I was also fortunate that two weeks before I went to the doctor, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence allowed the use of immunotherapy for melanoma in an adjuvant setting at stage 3, rather than just at stage 4. I hope the Minister will confirm that NICE is looking at the use of the various kinds of immunotherapy in an adjuvant setting for people with stage 2 melanoma.

I say all that because I was told at the time I had a 40% chance of living a year—three years have now passed so I am very grateful that the immunotherapy I received has dramatically improved my chances of living. I say gently to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that, sometimes, the drugs are a really important part of the cancer treatment package. I do not think there is a competition between different parts of the package; there are clearly instances where drugs, chemotherapy or radiotherapy is the right route.

My anxieties are that, first, we have a massive catch-up job to do, and secondly, that I do not think we had the capacity needed to tackle the problem even before we went into covid. We have a growing population in this country, and a growing number of cancers, but last year's figures show a nearly 10% fall in the number of people receiving radiotherapy. That is not good news in any shape or form. There may be people whose deaths from cancer are unknown to us because they ended up not being diagnosed and then died with or of covid, so they may not appear in the statistics, but they will certainly appear in many people's family statistics and life experiences.

There are things that the Government could do immediately, many of which have already been laid out by hon. Members. Something needs to be done about the workforce, because every part of the cancer pathway

[Chris Bryant]

has a shortage of staff. A lot of staff have been redeployed during covid to help run A&E departments. Nurses, hospital orderlies and receptionists from the same teams have ended up being redeployed to other parts of the operation. They have been very happy to do that, but it has meant that, in nearly every cancer discipline—the one I know best relates to dermatology, obviously—there is now a series of vacancies.

A lot of staff are burnt out, exhausted, demoralised and uncertain whether they want to stay in the profession. I think this is the fifth Minister to whom I make the same plea: that she and the Government look at the series of things we could do to enable people who have recently left the profession to come back. That might include financial rewards. We could do more to enable people to stay all the way through to retirement age. A significant number retire early, partly because of that sense of burn-out. They do not necessarily want a financial reward; they would actually quite like a sabbatical of a couple of months or something like that, simply to recharge their batteries so they can come back into the profession and not retire early. We certainly need to do something about the problem that doing extra hours or sessions is now barely worth it for many people, because the financial reward is minimal. A major issue will come up very shortly relating to pensions and pension funds for many doctors in many of these disciplines.

In all those areas, the Government could do far more to increase capacity now, then they have to look at increasing capacity for the future. One of the most important parts of the process is diagnosis. We do not have enough radiologists, radiographers, histopathologists and pathologists in the UK. There is a massive shortage—something like a 10% vacancy rate. We are not even allowing enough people to train this year to fill the vacancies that exist now, let alone the additional vacancies that there will be in five or 10 years' time, so we are building up a bigger problem for ourselves.

That takes me to my biggest concern of all. Before covid, every winter we were running the NHS at 95% capacity. It is pretty difficult to run anything at 95% capacity, because the moment you have a crisis of any kind whatsoever, you are stuffed. It is a bit like those baggy gym shorts that have an elastic band in them. When someone gets beyond a 34-inch, 36-inch or 38-inch waist, suddenly there is no more stretch in the pants, as you know, Mr Davies—*[Laughter]*—because you understand the science of elastic bands, obviously. However, I make a serious point. We have run the NHS far too close to complete capacity for far, far too long, and not only in intensive care units, where we have many fewer beds per 100,000 people than any country in the European Union or any advanced country in the world. We also have many fewer hospital beds per 1,000 people than any other advanced country in the world. We need to look at the long-term issues and say to ourselves that, if we really want an NHS that will not be crippled by a pandemic or by winter, we have to invest significantly in the future. Every single time a Minister stands up, they always say very nice things. The Minister who is here today has lots of clinical experience of her own, and we are enormously grateful for the work that she has done in the NHS during the pandemic. However, in the end, warm words butter no parsnips—not that one really wants butter on parsnips. I love a parsnip, although it is odd that we are the only country in Europe that actually eats them—mostly they are fed to cattle, but that is by the by.

The serious point is that we need to invest in every single part of the NHS. The cancer catch-up is a matter of life and death. I think that, if I had gone to the GP yesterday, my life would not have been saved. That is a distressing thing to be able to say to one's constituents. I hope that the Minister will come up with some answers for us.

10.15 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, Mr Davies, and also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). We in this House are very blessed that he is here today because he had early treatment and was able to respond to it. I spoke to him personally at the time, and I know that others did. We are very thankful to God that he is here today and able to participate in this and many other debates in the House on a regular basis. We thank him for that.

I also thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for setting the scene. We are greatly indebted to him for his leadership, for his interest in this subject matter and for every occasion on which he comes forward. We are also indebted to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) as well. We are all on the all-party parliamentary group on cancer together, so we have regular contact with one another and with others as well. I give credit to both hon. Gentlemen for their leadership and contributions, and to others on the APPG for bringing this forward.

It is nice to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), in her place. I always look forward to the Minister's contribution. I believe that we will get a response that helps us to address the issues that we are raising today. I believe that we are greatly blessed to have the Minister in her place; she has a particular interest in this subject matter and is eager to secure change.

The debate today is about change; it is about making sure that we can move forward. I probably cannot even quantify—the hon. Member for Easington might be able to—the number of times we have asked about radiotherapy services. We have asked about these services before, met the Minister before and sent letters before, but we do not seem to be getting to where we want to be. That is what the hon. Gentleman said in his introduction. That is where we are.

There is a staggering backlog of an estimated 47,000 people missing a cancer diagnosis in the UK, and Macmillan estimates that the backlog of those waiting for a first treatment stands at 32,000 in England alone. Only last week in my constituency—this is not the Minister's responsibility, to be fair, as it is a devolved matter—I met someone who was eagerly seeking an early meeting with a consultant and doctor about cancer. It is so important that she gets that; she is very worried about her circumstances. When I became aware of them, I was also concerned. We need to address that issue.

Radiotherapy in particular is one of the mainstays of cancer treatment. Modelling suggests that between 40% and 50% of people diagnosed with cancer should receive radiotherapy as part of their treatment. If it is part of

their treatment and they cannot get it, we have a severe problem. The difficulty lies in workforce shortages, to which the hon. Member for Easington referred. They remain the biggest challenge facing the NHS and access to radiotherapy today. The Chancellor's October Budget, unfortunately, missed a key opportunity to tackle this issue. Can the Minister give us some indication of the discussions that she has had with the Chancellor about what can be done to address the shortfall?

Macmillan Cancer Support says:

"The pandemic has both laid bare and exacerbated the terrible strain the cancer workforce has been under for many years."

I know that the pandemic has exacerbated that incredibly. It is frustrating to know that the waiting lists that we had in 2019 are the waiting lists of 2021—and now 2022. It is essential that the budget for Health Education England is confirmed immediately, ensuring an increase in funding to train the cancer workforce that the NHS desperately needs.

Too few cancer patients have full access to a cancer nurse specialist, which is crucial in reducing costs and improving patient outcomes. It is very clear that in the reform of the NHS priority must be given to training these nurse specialists and ensuring that the funding is there to pay them for the extra responsibility that they take on and for the workload that they take off their colleagues, the doctors. Perhaps the Minister could give us some idea of what is going to happen in relation to that issue in the reform of the NHS.

Again, I am deeply grateful to Macmillan Cancer Support for the information that it has sent me. It estimates that in order to help meet the Government's NHS long term plan, we need an additional 3,371 cancer nurse specialists, which means doubling the number of cancer nurses by 2030. In introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Easington mentioned that issue and I mention it again now, not simply to repeat it but to underline gently the importance of having those nurses in place. It is a major ask but not an impossible one, or at least it should not be impossible.

How do we get those nurses? First, we get the finance in place. An estimated total of £124 million is needed to train the next generation of cancer nurses by 2030. Again, what has happened in the discussions that the Minister has hopefully already had, or will be able to have, with the Chancellor? That process must begin with bursaries, which give the incentive and encouragement, if it is needed, to enable not just young students but mature students—those with mortgages and debts to pay, and perhaps children to care for as well—to be able to take the step into nursing. I make that comment because of a particular example that I know of. The dream of one of my constituents was to go into nursing. She worked in a shoe shop and her husband worked in landscaping; both of them had low-paid jobs. When she made the decision to follow her dream and go into nursing, she simply could not make ends meet, which is why bursaries are important.

I know this girl personally, so I know that she has endless compassion. She worked to become an intensive care nurse. She is a clever lady who wanted to make a difference in this world, but simply could not do so. She went into care work during covid and is making a difference in a nursing home, but will she ever become an ICU nurse, as she wanted? She thinks not, but I would like to think that the differences we make in this place and the decisions that we take will enable people such as Sarah to do the good that they want to do in the world, because there are many people out there who just love to help other people. We in this House—you, Mr Davies, and the rest of us here—are MPs who wish to help people; indeed, that is our job.

In 2020, the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy reported that a fifth of radiotherapy machines were older than their recommended lifespan of 10 years. NHS England must ensure a sustainable future so that machines are upgraded on a rolling basis and when they need to be. That process must be continuous, so we need an action plan to make it happen. Again, I ask the Minister a question: what has been done to address the need for that additional investment? Unfortunately, it is a fact that this comes down to finance.

Additional investment in radiotherapy would be best spent on upgrading existing machines and software rather than on increasing the overall number of radiotherapy machines or centres. Cancer Research UK has said that even if new centres were built, it would be very difficult to find the staff to run them. We need a co-ordinated and strategic plan that considers all the potential issues for the future, especially in rural areas such as the one that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale represents. As he often says, in rural areas staff shortages are often the most severe that they are anywhere.

In the long term, consideration must be given to introducing innovative technology to transform care. For example, there are a limited number of magnetic resonance linear accelerators, or MR linacs for short, in the UK. They significantly increase the precision of analysis and therefore the effectiveness of treatment, which is really important. The Government must consider how to manage funding over a long term, to expand access to MR linacs and other cutting-edge technologies. That also includes purchasing new radiotherapy technology to evaluate its efficacy as a cancer treatment.

I will finish with this comment: the fact is that much greater investment is needed. We should remember that radiotherapy is used for half of cancer treatments, so it is critical for addressing cancer. Cancer affects many people and we need to give radiotherapy the priority that it deserves, getting the nurses and the equipment in place urgently. Unfortunately, there are literally millions of people whom radiotherapy can save and thereby extend their life. It seems to be agreed by all those who have spoken in this debate, and I believe that it will also be agreed by all those who will speak after me, that we must do all that is possible to do in this place in that regard.

10.24 am

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), both for securing this important debate and for being such a consistent champion on this issue. We have heard some excellent contributions and I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have spoken—my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—for raising issues about investment, the

[Feryal Clark]

workforce and the bureaucracy that surrounds radiotherapy. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Easington, who speak with authority on the issue as a result of their experiences.

We have heard that radiotherapy is a vital tool in our fight against cancer and that it is one of the three pillars of treatment alongside surgery and chemotherapy. The fact that radiotherapy is needed by one in four of us across our lifetime should be a stark reminder of how important today's debate is. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Easington in paying tribute to the work of charities such as Radiotherapy UK and the Catch Up With Cancer campaign for keeping this important issue on the agenda.

Hon. Members will know the impact the pandemic has had on cancer treatments and the devastating backlog that it has caused. In my own constituency of Enfield North, data from Macmillan shows that 73 people are missing a cancer diagnosis and a further 57 are waiting for their first cancer treatment. The backlog in treatment, coupled with the severe workforce crisis, which every Member has highlighted and which is rapidly stretching across our health service, means that we are facing a situation where outcomes for cancer patients are being put at risk. As we have heard, radiotherapy is a vital tool in our fight against cancer and should play a key part in our work to help overcome the backlog that affects both patients and staff.

As highlighted by all hon. Members, with the pandemic impacting so much of the NHS's operations, radiotherapy provides a covid-resilient form of cancer treatment by not having an impact on the immune system or requiring admission into intensive care. It is very cost-effective, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington, with the average cost of radiotherapy care ranging from £4,000 to £7,000, making it cheaper than the often costly options of surgery or chemotherapy. Despite that, radiotherapy has been consistently overlooked when it comes to policy, so it has often faced a lack of investment and understanding by policymakers and successive Governments.

As we have heard, just 5% of the cancer budget in the UK is spent on radiotherapy. That means that despite significant global advancements in radiotherapy technology, patients in the UK are continuing to miss out. Half of all NHS trusts are using machines that are older than the recommended 10-year life span.

Grahame Morris: I apologise for breaking the flow of my hon. Friend, but these are important statistics. One worth remembering is that in over 50% of cancers, radiotherapy or precision radiotherapy would be effective as part of treatment—perhaps not exclusively. Actually, when I had my treatment, I had everything: I had surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. However, it would be effective in over 50% of cases. It is currently only given to 27% of cases, so even before we start tackling the backlog, there is a huge capacity issue, and I hope my hon. Friend recognises that, and that the Minister will address it.

Feryal Clark: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I absolutely agree with him. As was mentioned, many patients do not even have the luxury of being treated by old technology. More than 3.5 million people in the UK do not have radiotherapy centres within the recommended 45 minutes of their home, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford and others. That has led to a situation where, rather than meeting the international guidance of 57% to 60%, just 27% of cancer patients in the UK are given radiotherapy. Patients are receiving a raw deal at every turn in the UK, putting their treatment and their long-term outcome at risk.

It is not just patients who are feeling the strain; radiotherapy staff, like many of their colleagues across the NHS, are feeling undervalued and under-resourced. A workforce survey carried out by Radiotherapy UK showed that 80% of radiotherapy staff were considering, or knew of someone considering, leaving the profession; 90% felt that the Government did not recognise the significant role that radiotherapy plays in reducing the cancer backlog; and 75% felt that they did not have the capacity to reach a pre-pandemic service level. A plan to improve provision of radiotherapy, or any other treatment across the NHS, will not be successful if there is not a robust workforce strategy behind it.

Grahame Morris: We need a plan.

Feryal Clark: Absolutely. I ask the Minister what other hon. Members have also asked today: how do the Government expect to tackle the cancer backlog when staff feel like no-one is listening to them? NHS staff have made immense sacrifices during this pandemic; they deserve to be heard and respected instead of having their concerns ignored.

The staff who remain in radiotherapy are met with barrier after barrier when it comes to improving the experience of patients and the effectiveness of treatment. I run the risk of repeating points, but these are key issues and need repeating. In order to justify investment to fund a new and updated machine, NHS trusts are required to conduct 9,000 treatments per year. During the pandemic, when we have seen referrals plummet and services stretched to breaking point, that target is plainly unrealistic for many trusts. It leaves staff with faulty, unreliable equipment that frequently breaks down, and patients with delays, postponements, cancellations and a much more challenging experience of treatment. I join with many other Members who spoke this morning in urging the Minister to carefully examine the situation, and look at what can be done to remove the bureaucracy that is stopping the advancement in equipment that is evidently needed.

When we know that every four-week delay in treatment for a cancer patient increases the mortality rate by 10%, the lack of investment in such a core pillar of cancer treatment is putting lives at risk. The failure to address these issues will leave the 40% of cancer patients who need radiotherapy as a curative treatment, either on its own or in combination with other methods, in a grave situation. Failure will also have a knock-on effect across all treatment pathways, increasing the pressure on already stretched cancer services as well as primary care providers.

Finally I ask the Minister, do the Government accept that radiotherapy needs an increased level of support to properly fulfil the important role it plays in overcoming the backlog in cancer treatments? Furthermore, will the Minister commit to a plan to improve both workforce numbers and satisfaction, given the increased pressure

that the situation is producing on services such as radiotherapy? Cancer patients have suffered so much over the course of the pandemic; they deserve better than this. It is about time that the Government acted.

10.34 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I should declare an interest before I start: I am still working as a cancer nurse in the Royal Marsden Hospital in London. I have spent 20 years looking after patients who are having chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, so no one is more passionate than I am about this issue.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate, raising the profile of radiotherapy and the important work that the all-party parliamentary group does. Very few of us have not been impacted by cancer in some way, whether as a patient—the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) eloquently described their experiences—or as a relative, friend or healthcare professional. We know the devastation that cancer can bring, whether through the diagnosis and living with the disease, experiencing the side effects of treatment or, unfortunately for some, the effects it can have on life expectancy.

I reassure colleagues that during the pandemic, cancer has remained an absolute priority. We have kept cancer services going throughout periods of lockdown. There is no doubt, though, that patients were reluctant to come forward with signs and symptoms, particularly during the first lockdown. We actively encouraged many patients with a cough not to come and see their GP as a first point of contact. Since then, however, an absolute tsunami of patients has come forward—so much so that we are working through more than 10,000 cancer referrals a day.

I encourage Members to look at the data for actual treatment. Data such as that about the 62-day rule shows that the cancer backlog is not necessarily in treatment—in patients waiting for surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy—but in the diagnostics procedures. They are where the greatest pressure is at the moment.

Grahame Morris: I appreciate the Minister's giving way. Statistics are important as a tool to identify where the obstructions are in the system. I completely agree about the importance of early diagnosis, but will the Minister publish the radiotherapy datasets that will be available next month, so that we can see the true nature of the backlog?

The profession—the frontline—tell a story rather different from the impression that the Minister has just given: that there are issues with treatment, and not just with diagnosis. The radiotherapy datasets, which have not been published for over a year but are available, will clarify that position.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am not saying that there are no pressures on the treatments for cancer patients, but the greatest pressure is at the diagnostic end. We will be publishing data, but I caution Members on the data for radiotherapy. A lot of the cancer data is based on first treatment and, as Members will know, radiotherapy is often an adjuvant treatment given further down the line. The measurement of access to radiotherapy, compared with treatments such as surgery or chemotherapy, is much more difficult to establish.

I also caution colleagues, a number of whom have said similar things in this morning's debate. Radiotherapy is a specific specialist treatment. As the hon. Member for Rhondda pointed out, for many cancers it cannot necessarily be given instead of surgery or chemotherapy; it is part of a package of treatment and these are clear, clinical decisions that need to be made jointly by the oncologist and their patient.

Grahame Morris: We have a little bit of time and these are important points. Many of us have been making them, not just to this Minister—who, to be fair, is newly in place—but to her predecessors.

There are points of contention about the effectiveness of radiotherapy, but there have been some incredible advances in recent years. I am not claiming expert technical knowledge, but radiotherapy has been applied very effectively against lung cancers; that was never the case before. There is now a possibility of expanding the service to provide much more effective treatments, for cases which previously could be treated only through surgery and chemotherapy.

Maria Caulfield: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I may be a new Minister, in post for weeks rather than years, but I have 20 years of oncology experience, and in my experience radiotherapy has a fantastic role to play. It is indeed the case that significant progress has been made, particularly in the field of lung cancer, with stereotactic radiotherapy to specific areas. However, radiotherapy will target a specific area; it will not give systemic treatment, like adjuvant treatment to prevent recurrence or neoadjuvant treatment for metastatic disease, where the disease is in multiple parts of the body. As Members of Parliament, we need to be cautious that we do not give patients the impression that they should be asking for radiotherapy instead of surgery and chemotherapy. There needs to be a discussion with their oncologist and their medical teams as to the appropriateness of radiotherapy. Yes, it is often cheaper than chemotherapy to give. Yes, it is a quicker treatment and sometimes—not always—has fewer side effects. But it has to be a clinical decision. There are important reasons why radiotherapy is given to some patients and not others. That is something that patients really need to have a discussion—

Chris Bryant: We all understand that clinical decisions have to be made. Our anxiety is that clinical decisions sometimes end up being made because there is not enough availability of facilities or staff, or—the third aspect to this—because lots of patients simply are not presenting at the moment. They are not coming in the doors of the NHS because of covid. That potentially means—for instance, in relation to bowel cancers, lung cancers and melanoma—that we will see people presenting much later and therefore there will be a much more dangerous prognosis for them.

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely take that point on board. There are clinical reasons, if a patient has presented later, why radiotherapy may or may not be suitable. Again, they are clinical decisions that a patient needs to be discussing with their oncologist.

[Maria Caulfield]

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the issue of satellite units. Again, I would just be slightly careful. Cancer alliances are mapping out cancer services in their areas, and I am very happy to meet colleagues who would like better provision in their local area, but they also need to meet their cancer alliances, which are looking at service provision locally.

I would just caution Members on the issue of having multiple sites for radiotherapy. These are specialist treatments, needing specialist equipment and specialist staff. I went into oncology more than 20 years ago, when surgery was done by general surgeons. They were doing mastectomies on women and colostomies on bowel cancer patients. Moving surgery into being a specialist field, with specialist provision, has transformed the way that we are able to look after women who are going through mastectomies, and bowel cancer patients, who may not necessarily need a colostomy now, because surgical treatments have advanced so much. There is sometimes a rationale for those services to be offered by specialist units, rather than multiple satellite sites.

Tim Farron: I want to answer a point that the Minister made earlier. Obviously, during the pandemic, radiotherapy has been used as substitutionary treatment for people who would otherwise have had chemotherapy or surgery, because it is a covid-secure treatment. But my main point is with regard to what the Minister just said about satellites. Has she looked at the data and evidence from those satellite centres that have been opened in the last few years?

For instance, at Hereford, we saw a doubling of the number of patients being treated at that new satellite centre. Why? Well, there was an assumption that the parent centre people, from that postcode, were simply transferred to Hereford. No, it turned out that a lot more people, who would not travel or who were not referred because of the travelling distance for treatment at the original place, were then referred for treatment and therefore had a longer life expectancy because of the satellite centre. With more networking capability, it is of course possible now to treat in specialist ways, with the best people, remotely and through these satellite centres. The Christie has just opened its third satellite, so surely, for more rural communities such as mine, and also in east Lancashire, the time has come to ensure that no one is left behind.

Maria Caulfield: There are satellite services—absolutely. We have seen them not just for radiotherapy, but for chemotherapy and even surgery. But it has to be a local decision, because local oncologists have to feel that they are able to support the multidisciplinary team who support the radiotherapy process, ranging from diagnostics through to the treatment itself. That has to be in place, so it does absolutely need to be done on a local basis, but I am happy to meet colleagues if they feel that the case is not being heard locally.

I want to emphasise this point, because a number of hon. Members talked about the commitment to cancer services. Our elective recovery programme has committed £2 billion this year and £8 billion over the next three years to step up activity and tackle backlogs. That will have a knock-on effect in improving radiotherapy access, because some patients cannot have radiotherapy until they have had surgery. Ensuring that we are tackling some of the backlogs to treatment resulting from covid is absolutely important.

There have been huge improvements in radiotherapy over recent years, not just in provision but in technique. We are able to deliver more targeted treatment, resulting in fewer hospital visits, because we can now give radiotherapy to a more targeted area of the body, resulting in fewer side effects from the treatment, and also give fewer fractions of radiotherapy, so that patients can get their total dose much more quickly. That maximises service capacity and minimises patient time in hospital.

Furthermore, we have invested £250 million into two proton beam therapy facilities, one based at the Christie in Manchester and the other at University College London. In addition, all radiotherapy centres in England are now able to deliver stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy. Both these treatments are able to target radiation at cancer cells more accurately, improving patient outcomes. I am really pleased to say that, as part of this year's spending review, £32 million was made available to support the replacement of 17 linear accelerators aged over 10 years, all of which are on order and will be delivered by the end of March 2022.

NHS England is committed to improving the facilities for cancer patients, and has also offered NHS radiotherapy providers the opportunity to participate in a cloud-based technology called ProKnow. To date, 43 of the 49 radiotherapy providers have joined up. This technology, which will help satellite units, enables clinicians to collaborate virtually within and across organisations, to plan treatments, undertake peer-review assessments and participate in large-scale audits and quality improvement processes, ultimately benefiting patients.

A number of Members talked about the cancer workforce, because it is great to have state-of-the-art technology and multiple units providing radiotherapy, but if we do not have the staff to manage them and provide treatment we shall not make progress. Health Education England is continuing to take forward the cancer priorities identified in the NHS's long-term plan. It is prioritising the training of 250 nurses to become cancer nurse specialists, 100 chemotherapy nurses and 58 biomedical scientists, and it is updating the advanced clinical practice qualification in oncology.

Further than that, particularly around radiotherapy, Health Education England is investing £52 million in the cancer and diagnostic workforce, increasing the number of clinical endoscopists and training more radiographers in image interpretation. That is all part of the radiotherapy process. As of August there have been an additional 4% of doctors working in clinical oncology, which is the field that manages radiotherapy, and there have been a further 5% working in radiology since August 2020.

We are making progress, but it is not just about the numbers of staff; it is about the skill mix and ongoing staff training. Very often, not being able to expand a role or take on exciting and innovative developments can make staff feel frustrated, but the cancer workforce is growing. Between 2016-17 and 2019-20, the cancer workforce grew by 3,342 full-time equivalents, compared with the ambition of 2,943. We are ensuring that there are more staff coming through into the workforce to deliver radiotherapy.

The shadow Minister touched on the importance of not only recruiting staff but retaining and developing them. I fully take on board colleagues' comments and concerns. We are committed to investing in radiotherapy equipment, the staff that deliver radiotherapy and the innovation in radiotherapy. We are also committed to making it more accessible to patients, and to reducing the side effects—there are side effects from radiotherapy as well—and to making sure it is a fundamental part of cancer treatment, whether that is in the neoadjuvant setting, adjuvant or for those with metastatic cancer as part of the palliative treatment service.

Feryal Clark: I thank the Minister for all the information about the machines and investment into radiotherapy. Are the figures that she set out for replacing what is already out of date, or is there a plan to increase investment in radiotherapy treatment? As we have all said, radiotherapy accounts for 5% of the cancer budget. Is there a plan to increase that, or is it about replacement and keeping up what we already have?

Maria Caulfield: It is about replacing existing equipment, but also investing in new. Some of the equipment is 10 years old. Radiotherapy has changed a lot over those 10 years, so the replacement equipment can do more than what it replaces. As I pointed out, we are also investing in new radiotherapy equipment, with £250 million into two proton beam therapy facilities at Christie's and at UCL—new facilities that will be able to provide state-of-the-art radiotherapy treatment. I hope I have reassured Members that we are addressing this as a top priority.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way before she sits down? She sounds very like she is finishing.

Maria Caulfield: I was finishing, but I will give way one more time.

Chris Bryant: The Minister may not be able to answer the question today about adjuvant provision of immunotherapy for people with stage 2 melanoma, but if she could write to me, I would be very grateful.

Maria Caulfield: My understanding is that it is available for stage 3 melanoma, as the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, and that it is still in clinical trials for stage 2. It is available within clinical trials. We expect the data to come forward shortly and then a decision will be made. That is where we are with melanoma.

Tim Farron: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will give way one more time.

Tim Farron: The Minister is being very kind and I really appreciate it. I have two quick points that I do not think she has mentioned. First, will she take up the request from myself and the hon. Member for Easington for a meeting with the APPG for radiotherapy? We would love to meet her.

Secondly, I do not think she referred to the tariff situation. A lot of the issue is that we need more money. We want the Minister to accept—it is not just her fault; it is the fault of every party in this place, over decades—that we are behind comparable countries and we need to strengthen radiotherapy. The reality is that there are lots of state-of-the-art machines out there, in trusts up and down the country, that are not being used because the tariff is stupid. It incentivises trusts to do second-division radiotherapy, if I can put it that way, because more visits equal more cash, rather than targeted and specific radiotherapy—stereotactic, as she mentioned, for many cancers—because the tariff rewards number of visits, not precision or effectiveness of treatment. Would she look at that? It is free.

Maria Caulfield: I am very happy to look at the tariff situation, but my experience is that when a clinical oncologist is referring someone for radiotherapy, that decision is not based on whether they have smaller numbers of fractions as opposed to traditional courses. I am very happy to meet the all-party parliamentary group to discuss that further. I reassure patients that clinical decisions are what decide the type and the number of fractions that a patient needs for their treatment.

Radiotherapy is a priority cancer treatment and this Government are absolutely committed to investing not just in the equipment, but in the workforce that provides it. I say a huge thank you to all the staff across the NHS, particularly in cancer services, who kept going through all the pandemic lockdowns, made sure that cancer patients got their treatment, and helped to support them and their families through what is a very difficult time.

10.54 am

Grahame Morris: This has been a really good debate. It is one we have had on a number of previous occasions.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their excellent contributions. I also welcome and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), and pay tribute to her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who did an excellent job and had a terrific understanding of the issue. I also thank the Minister for her response.

It has been an honour to open this debate. Once again, I thank those members of the public who shared their experience, and I thank the Chamber engagement team for their excellent work. It is the radiotherapy patients, their loved ones, the workforce, and, indeed, those who live with the everyday reality of this situation, whose interests we serve and whose insight is so valuable.

I hope the Minister, who has not answered all the questions—I know it is difficult—will have a look at the debate in *Hansard* and respond to them. I am grateful that she has agreed to have a meeting, but I want her to bring an end to radiotherapy's status as a Cinderella service and give it the time, focus and investment required to put the UK on a path to ensuring that we have truly world-class cancer services.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to radiotherapy.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Direct Ferry Links: Scotland and Mainland Europe

11 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current guidance from the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the parliamentary estate, and to give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

I will call Kenny MacAskill to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30 minute debates.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I beg to move,

That this House has considered direct ferry links between Scotland and mainland Europe.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

Connectivity is critical, if not king, in the 21st century. As coronavirus has shown, telecommunications are vital, allowing for home working and for businesses to operate, even during lockdowns. Zoom and Teams have come to the fore, even in this House, and have proven essential for many, but other, more established, physical methods of connectivity are equally vital.

Road, rail and air have shown how essential they are in a globalised world, and have been supported by Governments both sides of the border, even before coronavirus struck. Yet there is one major aspect of connectivity where Scotland has been left high and dry: direct ferry links to mainland Europe. It is not just a long-standing issue, but a long-standing omission. It was a major gap even before the impacts of coronavirus and Brexit, which have simply compounded the existing need.

Road freight has been hit hard, through driver absence and customs nightmares, let alone additional bureaucracy. Trade, which could have gone swiftly and with ease from a safe Scottish harbour, has been struggling to access routes south and, even then, facing delays and backlogs at English ports. The spectre of arterial routes becoming truck parks as lorries backed up and loads rotted in the back would be laughable if it were not so tragic.

At the same time, the cost of fuel has rocketed. Not only have there been challenges with fuel shortages, but profitability has reduced through having to trunk our goods to ports a considerable distance south, whether to the Tyne or Humber—or even far beyond to the channel ports. The former are a considerable distance, but the latter, especially for seafood or other perishable items, already meant an absurd journey, and it is one that has been made so much worse through additional delays and impediments.

There is yet another compelling reason for investing in maritime links, beyond the connectivity they provide. Despite COP26 taking place in Glasgow, little thought has been given to improving maritime links because of their environmental benefit. There are issues with maritime fuel, and action to address that—whether through reducing the pollution from marine diesel or exploring alternative fuels, such as batteries—is essential. However, it is still better for our environment to load freight aboard one ship than to have dozens, if not hundreds, of lorries struggling down congested roads.

These risks were known to be looming on the horizon, as were the opportunities that would be beneficial economically, socially and environmentally. It is not as if many of these events were not foreseeable, even for those who only foresaw sunny uplands for Brexit. Customs delays were always going to kick in and other nations, such as Ireland, prepared, but shamefully that was not done in Scotland, by either the Scottish or UK Governments. As a result, many businesses have paid a heavy price.

It is not as if Scotland lacks access to the seas or is devoid of ports. The nation has the facilities and, historically, the links. Scotland was always linked by sea routes to Europe, which continued even when the major trade moved to the west coast and the Atlantic. Pantiles, on the roofs of many homes in my East Lothian constituency, testify to links with the low countries. Along the shores of the Forth and the port of Leith, where I was born, street names are equally redolent: Baltic, Cadiz and Hamburg, although that name was changed to Hamburgh in the first world war.

More recently, the superfast service that sailed from Rosyth to Zeebrugge was enjoyed by many, benefiting both trade and tourism. That port and the facilities constructed for the ro-ro services still exist. Despite the valiant efforts of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), it currently serves as a safe harbour for berthed covid cruise ships with the ro-ro infrastructure moribund, rather than providing a major link for Scottish trade and tourism. There are other options, including in existing harbours and in the potential for a new port at Cockenzie in my own constituency.

The historic links and the infrastructure remain, so why has there been no progress in launching routes over past years when they would have been welcomed, or now, when they are essential? It is not as if the maritime sector globally, let alone in Europe, has been idle. Other nations have acted, and so must Scotland. Ireland, seeing the problems that Brexit would bring, prepared and added significantly to the services already operating.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The hon. Member mentioned exports and trade. Is it not time that we had a substantial maritime support policy from the UK Government to support trade post Brexit, as he outlined is the case in Ireland? The low countries, which he also mentioned, have a direct support package to increase trade post Brexit.

Kenny MacAskill: I think that is something that should be done by the UK Government, but, as I will go on to say, transport—certainly maritime transport—is largely devolved, which is why my demands are not simply to the UK Government, but to the Scottish Government.

As I was saying, despite distance and sail times being longer, Ireland ensured alternatives to the land bridge that was the previous favoured route for many. That meant sailing to a port in Scotland, Wales or England

and then journeying on via the UK motorway network to the channel ports. Not for them a Boris bridge or any other delusional nonsense. Instead, Ireland arranged to sail direct to Europe. Direct freight routes were expanded and passenger services increased, thus avoiding customs backlogs, reducing road journeys, avoiding the difficulties of driver absences through illness or self-isolation, and making environmental gains.

In Ireland, three main operators now offer passenger services. Brittany Ferries, Irish Ferries and Stena Line offer services, with some sailing up to five times a week from Cork, Dublin and Rosslare, heading to Roscoff, Bilbao and Cherbourg, ensuring access to their principal markets and allowing for inbound as well as outbound tourism. Those are not the only routes available across the Irish sea to access Europe. Other services provide for freight only, whether for vehicles with haulage or unaccompanied freight. Since Brexit, services and routes have increased, allowing further options and avoiding the problems that have arisen, especially at the channel ports.

Scotland and Ireland have similar sized populations, and both are dependent on trade and tourism. For both countries, Europe is a big and major market. In several instances, Ireland is a direct competitor, yet Irish maritime links are growing almost exponentially, and Scotland remains tied up in port with increasing paperwork. It is not only Ireland that has been acting to increase maritime links. Countries across Europe have been taking action to address the challenges that they faced—even if not the Brexit-imposed customs debacle—allowing for new opportunities for trade and tourism.

Many have accessed funding from the EU, but all have been financially assisted by government to develop. A tender has been issued to re-establish a ferry link between Greece and Cyprus. Support funding of €5.5 million is being provided for a three-year service, with the possibility of an extension beyond. Other nations have acted similarly. Stockholm in Sweden to Rostock in Germany is to begin this spring. Yes, it is having a state subsidy, but it is saving on CO_2 and other costs—and it is not just in the Baltic, but in the North sea, as a Norway to Netherlands service is to commence in April.

So why are we devoid of action in Scotland? Transport is largely devolved, and therefore much of the failure to date and, indeed, the action that needs to be taken rests with the Scottish Government. They have failed to show any sign of urgency, let alone any sign of ambition for the country. Instead, they have remained thirled to a free market dogma that might be expected of London, but which could and should be rejected by an Administration with Scotland's interests at heart. Although a four-nations approach may have merit in aspects of health policy, with ferries it leaves Scotland isolated, sucking everything into the ports in England and leaving Scotland marooned.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Does my hon. Friend share my deep regret that a comparative drop in the ocean of investment would be sufficient to move this project forward? The reluctance of the Scottish Government to do so undermines Scotland's case for independence and the valiant work and efforts of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman).

Kenny MacAskill: I absolutely commend the efforts of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) that it is a very modest investment that would have significant returns.

However, the UK Government cannot absolve themselves of blame. Their free market dogma has privatised critical infrastructure such as ports, although that is a debate for another day. More importantly, they promised to match or exceed the benefits of EU membership that once applied. The motorways of the sea scheme, which was created to establish maritime links between nations, was once available due to EU membership; it has not been replaced by any scheme, let alone a better one.

Both the UK and Scottish Governments claim they support the establishment of new services but insist that they must be market driven, which means they must be entirely self-funding, with no state support. A new venture is therefore expected to launch without any state ballast—or even a lifeboat to ensure survival—which does not apply to other modes of transportation. No one would dream of suggesting that a haulier was required to provide the road network or that a rail freight operator should build a rail line, even though that is state support—albeit in a different way. Expecting an operator to acquire ships and launch the service without any support is equally perverse. Why should we not give assistance to start maritime links, matching support for road and rails and replicating what is standard in other countries?

The M74 extension, the Aberdeen western peripheral route and upgrades to the A9 are all about improving Scottish connectivity, and they are not left to the haulage sector. Scotland rightly lauded new rail links that have opened—such as Stirling to Alloa and Airdrie to Bathgate, both of which have proven spectacularly successful—while support is being given to reopen new stations, with East Linton and Reston to come. Even aviation has seen support, with bail-outs keeping airlines alive and a route development fund once provided, as I will expand on. Why the preclusion of maritime links?

The UK Government's market-driven dogma, which neither applies to other transport modes nor is echoed in other lands, might be expected of a Tory Government, but it has shamefully been mirrored by the Scottish Government. Communications from the Scottish Transport Minister have parroted the UK line and ignored the steps that have been taken by other small and even competitor nations, such as Ireland and Norway. As a result, Scotland is losing out.

Two matters make that position particularly perverse. First, Scotland routinely funds ferry services. Considerable financial support is rightly given to back both Caledonian MacBrayne and NorthLink ferries; CalMac receives upwards of £120 million per annum, and even more is provided for boats and piers. Orkney and Shetland services receive approximately £45 million per year in support. No one would question that: it is essential, as they are lifeline services and neither roads nor railways can be provided. It is a sensible provision of public funds.

Why is it legitimate and sensible to support internal maritime links but refuse to do so for external ones? Why should a Government argue that an island nation that has to trade with Europe and encourage European

[Kenny MacAskill]

visitors should not support maritime services? Why can maritime services not be supported when, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath said in his intervention, only a fraction of the funds already spent on maritime support would be required and the economic returns would be considerable?

Secondly, Scotland previously operated a route development fund to establish direct air links. That was seen as essential to growing trade and in-bound tourism, as well as, given the environmental impact of aviation, to avoiding an additional flight almost invariably to a London airport. That was supported by all major parties and applied until EU regulations brought it to a halt in 2007. EU regulations no longer apply, so why no Brexit bonus? In any event, as with motorways of the sea funding, the EU and nations such as Ireland and Norway now see the benefit of state support for vital connectivity—and for reducing carbon emissions by reducing road freight and growing unaccompanied trailer use. Scotland is losing out to Ireland and other nations in competitiveness and convenience. Scottish trade and tourism are suffering, and promises from COP26 ring hollow.

Demands on the public purse are many, and resource is limited, especially post covid. However, the UK Government are still able to find funds for High Speed 2, even in a truncated form that will come nowhere near Scotland. Millions were also wasted on seeking to reopen a channel port when ports were available in Scotland and only the ferry service was lacking. That attitude might be expected from a Tory Government thirled to a market-driven dogma and oblivious to Scottish needs, but it is entirely inexplicable for an Administration that claim to have Scottish interests at heart. What does it say when the Administration of Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale were more radical in providing air routes for Scotland than Nicola Sturgeon's are in providing maritime links?

Scotland deserves better. It requires connectivity in all forms of transport, as in telecoms. It needs ferry services to Europe. Will the Minister commit to funding an equivalent to the EU motorways of the sea scheme, applicable to all parts of the UK, including Scotland? Finally, the Scottish Government must establish a ferry service route development fund to launch and sustain those routes. Scotland deserves no less.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): As ever, Mr Davies, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I start, as is customary, by congratulating the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) on securing the debate and making his case so passionately. I also thank the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) for their considered interventions.

The UK Government fully recognise that quality transport links are essential to economic growth, job creation, social cohesion and many other areas, and we are committed to progressing our work on increasing connectivity throughout the entire UK and beyond. I will come to some of the specifics that the hon. Member for East Lothian mentioned, but I first must correct the impression that he has given that there is no interest or investment in improving connectivity throughout these isles. First, specifically on maritime, there is investment going into Scotland, as we speak, to improve port facilities. If he looks to the other side of Scotland from where he represents, at Greenock, there is considerable investment going into the ocean terminal, specifically to boost the tourist offer. Leaving aside the disruption caused by covid, the demand there is increasing enormously. There is investment going in.

More generally, the hon. Member for East Lothian will be aware that the Government commissioned the Union connectivity review—it recently reported—which looks specifically at key transport links by all modes, whether rail, road, air or maritime, right across the UK and beyond, to complement the EU's Trans-European Transport Network, or TEN-T. That looks at transport corridors as a whole. It might be that, to improve connectivity or capacity between two points, the right intervention is somewhere else. For example, he referred to HS2. It will benefit Scotland by significantly reducing rail journey times from Glasgow and Edinburgh to London.

Kenny MacAskill: Does the Minister accept that, even in Northern Ireland, much freight is now heading south to the Republic to take direct ferry access to Europe, rather than following the land bridge? Accordingly, even in Cairnryan, Scotland is losing out.

Iain Stewart: I am very happy to respond to that. If the hon. Gentleman reads the Union connectivity review—it is a mark of considerable regret that the Scottish Government, out of pure dogma, refused to engage in the review—a central recommendation was to improve the A75 from Cairnryan to the main motorway network, which is one of the key impediments to freight and other traffic moving between the UK and Northern Ireland. So yes, we are aware of that, and we are taking steps to improve it.

To complete my point on HS2, another recommendation of the connectivity review was to improve connectivity between the HS2 line and the west coast main line, and to upgrade the west coast main line to achieve journey times from Glasgow and Edinburgh to London that mean it will be much more advantageous to travel by rail than by air, improving the environment.

Douglas Chapman: The Minister seems to be getting sidetracked by rail. It is important to stick to the maritime issues. We have seen massive investment, as part of the levelling-up agenda that his Government support, in Tilbury, Teesside and, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) mentioned, the channel ports, so why are we not getting the same level of investment in maritime in Scotland? Brexit has had a huge impact on Scottish exports. We need to remedy that, and it is up to the Minister to bring forward proposals that will support Scottish exports as we move forward.

Iain Stewart: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly fair point. I will come on to some of the specifics of maritime in the next eight minutes. However, it is only right for me to point out that the impression that the Government are not interested in connectivity in all its forms is simply not true.

Neale Hanvey: Will the Minister give way?

Iain Stewart: I will give way one last time and then I must make progress or I will not get round to the maritime points.

Neale Hanvey: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being a good sport. On HS2 and the benefits it may deliver at some distant point in the future, dependent on the project's development and links, if we are trying to achieve a comprehensive transport strategy, does he not think it would be a useful investment, and small in comparison with the massive investment in HS2, to support the development of maritime connectivity as part of that comprehensive transport link? Will he commit to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) at some point in the future to discuss maritime strategy in more detail?

Iain Stewart: Indeed. The Union connectivity review is across all modes of transport. I do not think only one single intervention is important. I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues. I know the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife has been to see the Secretary of State for Scotland to discuss the specifics of the Rosyth-Zeebrugge route.

Let me make some progress on this. I understand that the proposed ferry link would replace a service that was previously run by DFDS Seaways from Rosyth to Zeebrugge. That started as a combined passenger and freight service in 2002 but was changed to freight-only in 2010 due to insufficient demand. Even after cost-saving measures were taken by the operator, including changing to freight-only and double-stacking the containers, the route continued to make losses, and a fire on board sealed the fate of the service in 2018. I understand the opportunities such a direct ferry link could present, encouraging passengers to use fewer short-haul flights and diversifying the connectivity.

Leaving aside all the other arguments about Brexit—I am sure we could have a fascinating debate about that—it is surely a truism that it is better to have more diversity in transport links, so that if one is constrained for whatever reason, such as industrial action on the continent or whatever, there are alternatives. Indeed, there are services from Zeebrugge to the UK—I think there is a daily service at least from Zeebrugge to Hull. What I cannot do is commit today to one specific route—that has to be a commercial matter. But the infrastructure required is there at both ends so there would be no need for additional infrastructure at Zeebrugge or Rosyth.

The one bit of additional resource that would be required, which is not impossible and I understand discussions have already happened, is to have Border Force manpower at Rosyth to deal with passengers and freight coming in. Those discussions can happen and that could be put in place, but the request must come from the operators who wish to establish such a service.

Let me put this discussion into the broader context of changing international shipping patterns, particularly freight. The hon. Member for East Lothian may not know that I spent seven years serving on the Transport Committee, so this is a subject I have given some consideration to. Looking at the scale and patterns of international shipping, particularly from the far east to Europe, the vessels are becoming larger and larger. Whereas in the past they would come from the far east and serve various European ports and then return, now they tend to come to one port, such as Felixstowe or Rotterdam.

Douglas Chapman: I think there is a case to have a regional ferry port serving a major international port such as Zeebrugge or Antwerp. That is where the links are made: containers and lorryloads of goods are moved to those larger ports to be distributed from there. For the life of me I cannot understand why the receiving port in this case—Zeebrugge—has access to a Brexit resilience fund, while we in Scotland do not have a similar fund to go to. It seems logical that, if we are making a huge change, through Brexit, to our trading patterns, the UK Government should put something in place to help us deal with that.

Iain Stewart: The hon. Gentleman actually finished my point for me. By having that one stop in Europe, there have to be additional feeder services. Felixstowe and Port of London are massively expanding their operations—a lot of the ferries are going though. These are commercial matters. It is not for a Government to say, "We want this route rather than that route." Through the connectivity review, we are looking at transport connectivity in the round.

I am conscious of time, but I want to mention the environmental aspect. We have the Maritime 2050 strategy; the industry is making considerable advances to decarbonise its operations. That is a UK Government-funded scheme, to help that transition and realise some of the ambitions from COP26 in Glasgow. I understand the tourism point, too. As international travel hopefully returns to normal levels in the near future, that could be an attractive destination and boost the visitor economy in Scotland and throughout the UK.

As the hon. Member for East Lothian said, it is primarily a matter for the Scottish Government if they wish to develop this specific route. My understanding is that the Scottish Government have said it needs to be on a commercial basis, but there is no objection from the UK Government to that sort of route being reinstated. I am more than happy to have discussions with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to see what the way forward is. The specifics that we are responsible for, such as Border Force, are not necessarily an impediment. Clearly, there are lead times for recruitment and the other requirements for installing that service, but that is not a block on the project being taken forward.

I wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues well in pursuing that ambition, which would be to the benefit of Scotland and the whole of the UK. I am very happy to meet him offline to discuss it further.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour

[Mr Laurence Robertson *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before we begin, I have a few notices. I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I remind hon. Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the estate, and to give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the Chamber.

In this debate, hon. Members should not mention any active legal cases. There will be an advisory six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank all hon. Members for attending the debate. It is encouraging to see such wide interest in this issue. Clearly it resonates deeply not just with me and the people of Stockton South, but with MPs and constituents up and down the country.

I chose the wording of the motion carefully and deliberately. This is not just a debate on antisocial behaviour, because often what starts as mindless antisocial behaviour goes on to become crime. In areas of my constituency, that is exactly what is happening. Many of my constituents are rightly angry when abuse, broken windows, missiles and assault are badged as antisocial behaviour. They identify the perpetrators and report them to the police, only to be left feeling that nothing is being done about it.

Often when we talk of youth crime and antisocial behaviour, it can be trivialised, downplayed and dismissed. We tend to assume that it is simply a few young people drinking a couple of cans in the park. That is not to say that that does not happen, but the other side of youth crime is more vile and sinister. In my constituency, there continues to be repeated, sustained and violent abuse of persons and communities, which go on not just for hours, but for days, weeks and months at a time.

Youth crime appears in many guises. In Stockton South we have seen car windows smashed, arson, verbal abuse, emergency workers spat at and pelted with missiles, teenagers beaten and robbed, vandalism and destruction of property. Across the UK there are people afraid to leave their homes after dark, scared to go to the shops, terrified to live their lives. That cannot go on.

It would be wrong to say that we have not made any progress on the issue. Locally, I invited residents to meet me, alongside local police and the council. Together, we have managed to identify individuals who were responsible, put additional CCTV in place and increase police presence in hotspots at peak times. The council's youth and antisocial behaviour teams have undertaken work with the youngsters in an effort to teach them the error of their ways and redirect their energies.

The number of first-time entrants into the youth justice system is down significantly since 2010, but that is little comfort to those whose lives continue to be made a misery by the actions of this rogue minority of young people. All too often, it feels that the system is stacked in favour of the perpetrators rather than the victims. Today, with her permission, I will share the plight of one of my constituents, though for her own safety she will remain nameless.

This constituent is a mother and a pillar of her community. For about two years, she has suffered abuse and intimidation from a group of youths. Throughout, she has shown both bravery and incredible determination to improve her community. The catalyst for this episode was when she initially reported an example of antisocial behaviour to the police. The youths in question found out she had reported them and labelled her a grass, and went out of their way to ensure she was punished for fulfilling her role as a good citizen.

The abuse has involved her children being attacked and assaulted, stones being put through her windows, and adolescents showing up at her house to intimidate her, filming the abuse, uploading it to TikTok and broadcasting live videos on social media as they try to damage her property. It is abhorrent, disgusting and an utter disgrace. The police have tried to help. They put a van outside her home for a time. Although that temporarily stopped the issue, the second the van left, the abuse started again. The police quite simply do not have the powers or resources to deal with this. It is clear that the system does not work.

I am sure that all Members here today would agree, in the strongest possible terms, that that example and stories like it are far too commonplace. In Ingleby Barwick and Thornaby in my constituency, separate groups of young children have been causing havoc. People have been abused and intimidated in the street, and there are concerns over the prevalence of drug use. When one veteran tried to confront youngsters over their behaviour, he was assaulted and hospitalised—an incident that has rightly disgusted the community in what is considered an affluent area.

I do not believe these children have been born inherently bad. They are not evil or demonic. I also do not believe that because a child is born in one estate or another, they will inherently be drawn to such behaviours. I believe this is an issue that affects children of every class, creed and colour.

Youth crime is a complex matter that requires a multifaceted, co-ordinated and often localised response. The causes of youth crime are diverse: education, family breakdown, poor parenting, a lack of creative output, and poor outlooks and opportunities. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this problem. However, I believe it is the Government's moral obligation to take serious steps towards fixing this issue; for it is their duty to ensure that children have the opportunity and ability to get the best from life. It is only through adequately resourcing and empowering all the agencies in this arena that we can make a real difference.

If nothing else, we can easily advocate action on the basis that to combat such behaviour early is to improve the quality of life for many, save police time and money, and free up our courts and prisons. Prevention is better than rehabilitation. It is better that we stop children getting into violent, antisocial behaviour in the first place, than to rely on excessive punishments in an attempt to deter those who will not be deterred.

Often, those who engage in antisocial behaviour do not fear punishment and, worst of all, do not have hope for their own futures. We need all local partners to start collaborating and getting youngsters engaged in youth activities, sports and initiatives to prevent them from turning to antisocial behaviour and crime. We must give youngsters something to do, with a meaningful outlet for their energies.

It shocks me that records on the use of antisocial behaviour powers and orders are not collated nationally, limiting any meaningful assessment or discussion about their use or effectiveness. By collating data nationally, we can ensure that successes and failures in relation to antisocial behaviour can be studied by policy makers, which, importantly, will enable informed improvements to make sure that the orders are fit for purpose and meet the challenges of evolving antisocial behaviour.

Of course, there are differences in how neighbourhood policing works in Thornaby, Twickenham and Tower Hamlets, but good policy lessons can still inspire and enable conversations that lead to material and substantial improvement in the lives of people across the United Kingdom. Creating a national framework would help not only those communities plagued by youth crime, but those children who have been sucked into a cruel cycle of perpetual reoffending.

I also believe that we need to look again at the burden of proof that is needed before civil authorities can intervene to compel educational courses and proactive measures. When sitting around the table with frustrated residents who feel nothing is being done and authorities who tell us that they need a greater catalogue of evidence to take something forward to court, there appears to be an impasse that leaves communities to suffer for longer than need be. Nobody wants to see youngsters criminalised unnecessarily, but neither should residents be left to suffer for months, waiting for enough offences to take place to build a case.

Not only is the burden of proof creating a challenge for authorities, but the speed at which youth crime and antisocial behaviour cases are progressed and resolved is just too slow. The process by which justice and corrective action are administered is in desperate need of acceleration. I believe that this should be central to any plan on youth crime. For the communities affected, the long delays feed into the narrative that nothing is being done and that the system is not on their side.

For youngsters, this can leave them with months of anxiety and an inability to focus on self-improvement. I spoke to someone from the youth offending team, who said that often by the time a young offender reaches them, the youngster has forgotten the details and the context of their offence and what they have done, and is likely to have gone on to commit further offences.

We need those in affected communities to see that action is taken quickly and that those who fall foul of their communities are brought to account. Waiting a year or more for action to be taken is unacceptable. We need to end the perception that youth crime and antisocial behaviour will be met with non-action and that perpetrators have impunity to act at whim.

It is important that we actively take steps to educate parents, who play such a crucial role in shaping their children. The number of parenting orders being issued is thought to be falling. If that is the case, I would like the Government to examine why that is and consider whether there is room for improvement in the relevant legislation.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. One of the main problems that we have in Blackpool is that, when parenting orders are issued, often the police are exasperated that the council cannot hold those families and young people to account and make them abide by the conditions of those orders. Does he agree that that is a problem and that we need to see how youth offending teams and local authorities can work with the police to ensure that the orders are adhered to?

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more. Actually, it is about sharing best practice. All these problems require every agency to work in collaboration, which is probably what makes this issue such a difficult one—it is about education, schools, local authorities and policing. The sharing of best practice and the collation of data nationally would help to inform the decisions that are made.

Some families need support in managing their children, but all too often I hear concerns expressed at my surgeries about parents who just do not care what their children get up to. In such cases, there needs to be tough action. I firmly believe that parents should be held accountable if they fail to engage with the authorities in efforts to control and help their children.

To conclude, enough is enough. I ask the Government to consider how we collate records on the use of ASB powers and orders, so that we can make a real and meaningful assessment of their use and effectiveness, and empower our police and local authorities. I think we should look again at the burden of evidence and the speed of our justice system, so that our communities see prompt action and offenders are held to account more quickly. Yes, some families need support in dealing with troubled youngsters, but those families who fail to engage with the authorities to help and control their children should be held responsible, either legally or financially.

It is imperative that we, as a country, start taking this issue seriously. We are talking about our children and our communities—the very fabric of our nation. The Government must act. They must show that they care and have the courage to tackle this problem head-on, whether for the young family who worked hard, saved up and bought a dream home, only for it to become a nightmare, or for the elderly lady who dare not leave her house after dark. Will the Government look again to see what more we can do to prevent a minority of youngsters from making people's lives a misery?

2.42 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and to be called so early.

Antisocial behaviour is one of the issues that I am contacted about most by constituents—not just the antisocial behaviour in Downing Street, but the antisocial behaviour affecting all our communities. In communities in my constituency such as Beddau, Tonyrefail, Church Village, Rhydyfelin and Ponty town, instances of graffiti, damage to football pitches, joyriding, drinking, drug taking and threatening behaviour are causing huge

[Alex Davies-Jones]

problems. For people living under the shadow of such antisocial behaviour, the situation seems to be getting worse rather than better.

Labour's analysis of official statistics found that 13 million adults across the UK had witnessed antisocial behaviour in the past year, which is about one in five of us. Meanwhile, the number of people who say they never see police out on the streets has doubled. Put simply, people in my community do not feel safe on the streets, which absolutely should not be the case. Although I know that South Wales police, my own local force, is working incredibly hard to respond to the rise in antisocial behaviour, it is massively overstretched and the pressures of the pandemic are only making that situation worse.

When we talk about antisocial behaviour and youth crime, the focus is often, importantly, on the victims. However, we also need to consider what is driving antisocial behaviour and what support is on offer to young people. It is wrong to try to have a meaningful conversation and debate about antisocial behaviour and youth crime without considering the impact of the pandemic on young people.

All of us across the House know that the pandemic and the measures that were necessary to control the spread of the virus, including social distancing and school closures, have had an enormous impact on young people. I have visited schools in my constituency and heard young people of all ages talk about their feelings of loneliness and isolation. More and more of them are struggling with mental health problems.

Criminalising young people is not the solution to this issue. A multi-agency response is vital in supporting young people, and particularly important before a young person even has contact with the police. I would very much like to hear more from the Minister today about what her Government are doing to foster a multi-agency approach to tackling youth antisocial behaviour.

Everyone deserves to feel safe in their community, and when we talk about antisocial behaviour, I think that a lot of the time safety is actually what people are concerned about. In debates such as this, it is possible to be over-zealous in talking about more criminalisation; what people in my community actually want is to feel safe and to feel that they are being listened to.

I have to say that South Wales police really is doing its best in very difficult circumstances. Over the last year, my constituents and I have raised serious concerns about incidents of drag racing, and specifically the use of modified cars. That has been happening across the countryside in my area. I recognise the efforts of South Wales police, which recently launched Operation Buena in an attempt to tackle this problem. I have raised this matter with the Government on multiple occasions. Cars that are modified to backfire loudly are causing huge worry. Constituents of mine have compared it to the sound of a shotgun going off; it really can be terrifying, especially for elderly people. It is vital that steps are taken to bring an end to these modifications that cause huge anxiety to people living in the community. People often feel unable to report such matters to the police, and it is hardly possible to rush out and take down a number plate when someone is speeding past. What does the Minister suggest my constituents do?

Often, the young people who are involved in such behaviour do not understand the impact it has on the community. A constituent wrote to me recently to describe how the problem has become worse because of the pandemic. At a packed meeting in Talbot Green, a young man who had been involved in some of the racing was in attendance. He explained that he was just driving for fun, and that he and his friends really did not have anything else to do—as hobbies go, this one was at least cheap. When he realised the impact on the local people, he apologised and explained he really had not understood the impact of his actions and the anxiety that they caused. That highlights the importance of engaging holistically with young people to ensure that they have meaningful alternative ways to spend their time. We also need to ensure that the police have the right levels of support available to help with the problem in the meantime.

With the UK Government yet to make good on their promise of 20,000 new police officers on our streets, I am worried that it will be some time before we see any progress. If the Government are serious about keeping our streets safe, I urge them to work closely with the devolved nations, local authorities and police forces to tackle these problems head-on.

2.46 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this important debate. I, like many other Members in the House, like to be able to sing from the rooftops all of the good things that are going on in our constituencies, but it would be completely wrong of us to dodge the criminal activities and antisocial behaviour that continue to haunt our constituencies. I am afraid that Keighley and Ilkley is no different. It is only right that we are able to raise these concerns in this place, so that we can lobby hard and make sure that these issues are dealt with.

I am sad to say that Keighley experiences its fair share of antisocial behaviour. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South said, this is not just antisocial behaviour—it goes on further into organised crime and the like. The types of experiences that we are having include recreational drug use, which is a huge problem in my constituency, particularly with young people in parks and public places. I am sad to say that in Keighley, Ilkley and Silsden, young people are taking drugs and leaving used needles and empty canisters behind. These people are treating my constituency—my town of Keighley—like a playground, with no respect whatever for the wider community.

I could go on. Some of the other issues that we are experiencing include: fireworks being let off late at night and at all hours; people using our roads like a racetrack or a game, with modified cars and loud exhausts, and really annoying many of my constituents; and worst of all, such behaviour can turn violent and directly involve innocent members of the public who just want to go about their lives. Too often I receive heartbreaking pieces of correspondence from constituents, telling gut-wrenching stories about going about their own business only to be assaulted and mugged in Keighley by mobs of thugs wearing balaclavas. That happened only this month, and in the last two weeks several constituents have raised these concerns.

What is worrying is that although I have many fantastic independent local businesses right in the centre of Keighley, wanting to encourage people into the town to drive economic prosperity, people are being put off from coming in because of these issues. One constituent, Laura Kelly, who owns a fantastic business in the centre of Keighley, is doing a great job standing up for local businesses and making the case that more should be done about antisocial behaviour.

I am aware that there are many reasons—often complex—why young people could be drawn into committing crimes such as the ones that I have mentioned. They might have had a troubled upbringing, with little family care or support, or have had negative influences around them from an early age. Solving such issues is not easy, but the key thing that we must do is offer young people different pathways to a life out of crime, so that they are not dragged into those circumstances. We must provide a way out for them and their friends, so that they do not get drawn into drug dealing, which is a huge challenge.

Youth services and youth workers play a vital role in helping those in disadvantaged positions. They help provide great services to many of the young people in my constituency. Those services allow people to access a network of new environments, to gain new hobbies, to get involved with sports and to learn more skills, all of which can help them get out of crime.

At this point, I must mention Keighley Albion and the Keighley Cougars, local sports groups—rugby groups—that have tried to get young people out of their day-to-day habits of driving using Keighley as a racetrack, and get them more involved in other activities. I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announce an extra £560 million for youth services in last year's spending review, but I must make it clear that that money must go directly to those areas and to provision such as youth services, to get it to those who need it most.

As I said, my constituency unfortunately has an undeniable problem with youth crime. It is my sincere hope that if we continue to open up, to talk about such issues, we can show young people a different option out of crime, to move our community forward. I finish by asking the Minister, can we ensure that for those who are convicted of crimes, justice is served quickly, so that my local businesses and residents feel that justice has been served in a timely manner?

2.52 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for giving me the opportunity to talk again about the county lines difficulties that we have in my constituency and elsewhere in the country. Much of the really violent crime and antisocial behaviour committed by young people in my patch is linked to the lines drug gangs. Just before Christmas, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill, in which I had a number of asks, including a national strategy to end county lines criminal exploitation for good.

I became aware of county lines back in about 2015 or 2016. I was introduced to some mums of children who were being exploited. Have no doubt: those mums were amazing—they are courageous, strong and brave—and they showed me so much to enable me to understand what is happening in my constituency.

One of those women—I will call her Ashley—told me about her son, Kofi. When Kofi was 15, his neighbour started to build a relationship with him, and at first it all seemed okay. The neighbour was often to be found at Ashley's house, watching TV and playing PlayStation. Slowly, however, Ashley realised that this man was turning her son away from school and away from her. Then, three days before Christmas, Kofi did not come home.

The next night Kofi called her, whispering. Some men had him—he did not know where he was and he was absolutely terrified. When Kofi finally returned, Ashley again called the police, and made him go to the police station, despite threats of violence against both of them. It was an extremely brave thing to do.

What Ashley told them, however, was ignored, and Kofi was treated as a criminal, not a victim. He was 15 years of age. The men who had groomed, exploited, traumatised and threatened him were, as far as Ashley knows, left alone, and no one came to check on Kofi afterwards to ensure that he was okay. Ashley told me that Kofi was never the same after that experience—his trust and hopes had been absolutely crushed. He had no support for his trauma, and the pattern continued.

A year later, Kofi was about to be accepted into the Army, to change his life for the better. But in that moment of hope, historical robberies were laid at Kofi's door. Ashley believes it was because he was of an age to be sentenced as an adult. Ashley tells me she has seen Kofi's groomers walking the streets, flashing the cash they made destroying children's lives.

Five years ago, there was a bit of an excuse for not understanding what the lines were doing to our children; but there is no excuse now. The police, teachers and others have become more knowledgeable but, sadly, our response to the lines is still not based on evidence. The Government do not know how many children supervised by youth offending teams have gang memberships or criminal exploitation noted as an issue. The Government do not know how many of those known to children's services have criminal exploitation as a risk factor, or how many slavery and trafficking prevention orders have been made to stop the exploitation of children. They do not know how many local safeguarding partnerships even have a child criminal exploitation strategy, let alone the effectiveness of those strategies.

It is only by having a real understanding of the complexity of the lines that we will make progress. We need our social workers and our police to be empowered to work with the people best able to reach the children in trouble. That means trusted community groups and charities who know their patch, but it means parents, too. The mums I have worked with over the years have been so very impressive in their dedication and perceptiveness about what has gone wrong. Social workers, police officers and even teachers sometimes have a bit of suspicious attitude towards the mums, and that has to change.

The Commission on Young Lives is working on this issue and will publish a report in the coming weeks. I want the Government to actively engage with it. If the Minister is able, I would like her to commit to meet me,

[Ms Lyn Brown]

Barnardo's and the Children's Society to talk about a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation ahead of the victims Bill. The role of a parent in a young person's life is limited, especially once a groomer has got their hooks in them; but they are so often the best ally that we have, and they must be listened to and respected. Family has to be treated as part of the solution for preventing youth crime.

2.47 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. It is surprising to be called so early in the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for sponsoring this debate, which is of relevance to many right hon. and hon. Members in this place.

Sadly, Ipswich has been at the heart of much crime and antisocial behaviour, some incredibly serious, and some seemingly less serious but perhaps connected to the most serious crime. We have had some tragic incidents in Ipswich over the last few years. Tavis Spencer-Aitkens was brutally murdered three years ago outside his father's home, as a result of county lines and gang violence in Ipswich. Richard Day, an Ipswich man, was killed in the town centre in tragic circumstances.

There are some things we can do that some may say involve us getting tougher with crime, particularly when it comes to sentencing, to make sure that those who commit the most serious crimes are appropriately punished. From time to time Members will see me speaking to that. But it is not just about having a tough approach to sentencing. We also need to spend some time thinking about the lives that a lot of these individuals lead, to put ourselves in their shoes and to imagine that we are them, and that we are in a school where we are not successful, perhaps because we have learning disabilities—we know that the proportion of those in prison with learning disabilities is incredibly high.

If an individual does not feel like a success at school because they are not getting the success that they need, their needs are not being met, and they go back home and potentially there are problems with their home life, and there is nothing to do in their local area—no club for them to join, and they cannot get a sense of belonging from anywhere—the brutal reality is that, for some, joining a gang does give them that sense of belonging. The way to tackle that is to give them a positive sense of belonging. If we put ourselves in their shoes, we want to have the positive pulls and less of the negative pulls.

What I actually want to talk about today is the seemingly less serious antisocial behaviour. We say "less serious", but in the minds of many of my constituents it is very serious. I lose count of the number of times that I talk to constituents—long-term Ipswich residents who have lived in Ipswich their whole life—who are critical of the town centre. Often I think they can be unfairly critical of the town centre, because we have some fantastic businesses in the town centre that work incredibly hard to make it an attractive destination. Most of the residents' concerns are to do with antisocial behaviour and not feeling safe in the town centre.

If we are to have a conversation about regenerating our town centre, by all means let us engage in a debate about business rates reform, town deals and levelling-up funds, but we also need to have a conversation about crime and the fear of crime, because if that is deterring people—my constituents—from going into the town centre to spend money, we need to deal with that as well.

I want to touch now on an issue on which not everyone will agree, which is to do with large groups of individuals—more often than not young men—who congregate in and around the town centre, more often than not drinking alcohol, often leaving litter afterwards, and acting in an incredibly antisocial way. Constituents get in contact because they, or often their daughters, have been on the receiving end of inappropriate comments and have been made to feel intimidated while going about their business. That is simply unacceptable.

I often talk to the police and ask, "What opportunity is there to disperse these groups?", because I think that should be part of the police's remit, and they often say, "Unless they are clearly breaking the law and it is really obvious, there is nothing we can do." I would personally like to see the police empowered to play their role in making our public spaces safe, secure environments in which the law-abiding majority feel safe, and that they want to go to.

There is an element here of tolerance, which is important, but I think we should be intolerant of antisocial behaviour. I do not care who it is who is forming in large groups, acting in an antisocial way, making people feel uncomfortable; I do not care where they are from. If their behaviour is not acceptable, it needs to be communicated to them.

There is a number of things that we can do, and I have touched on one of them, which is the police having more of a remit to disperse groups of young men who are having a detrimental impact on the town centre in Ipswich. We also need fair police funding in Ipswich. We know that Suffolk is one of the most unfairly funded police authorities in the country, so we need a commitment to review the national police funding formula as soon as possible. I must stop going on and draw my comments to a close. Thank you for indulging me, Mr Robertson, and allowing me to go over the time limit.

3.3 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) on securing this debate. I know that hon. Members across the House will agree that it is the sense of community—that coming together of people, and the genuine care and compassion that we show each other—that makes our communities great. One benefit of having such an amazing community in Newcastle upon Tyne North is that we have some fantastic community groups, such as the D2 youth project in Newbiggin Hall, the Denton Youth and Community Project in West Denton, and Inspire Youth. Those and many more organisations work incredibly hard to keep young people off the streets and prevent them from falling into crime—something that I know is a major focus for our police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, in Northumbria, who helps to fund many of these projects.

Yet we have to accept that there is a limit to what local agencies can do and what the police can do, despite the bravery and hard work of officers, when we have seen 10 years of devastating cuts to our policing and criminal justice system under Conservative Governments.

Significant pockets of antisocial behaviour simply blight parts of my constituency, in areas where decent people are just trying to get on with their lives. We continue to see significant issues in Newbiggin Hall, with persistent crime and vandalism affecting the day-to-day lives of many people. There are also general concerns about antisocial behaviour across Newbiggin Hall, including motorcycle disorder and drug dealing. West Denton has also seen a significant increase in antisocial behaviour in recent years. In just one week last year, the fire brigade was called out on six out of seven days for fires in the same street. While constituents most frequently raise problems with Newbiggin Hall and West Denton, I know that other neighbourhoods struggle with antisocial behaviour issues. It is unacceptable that any of our constituents should feel unsafe in their own homes, or feel they have to watch their backs when they walk to the shops or worry that their children are sliding into a life of crime, but unfortunately that is the reality for many of my constituents.

The Government have no shortage of rhetoric on crime. Ministers like to tell us how tough they will be and how harshly they will punish the criminals that we manage to catch, but for all the tough talk, the truth is that Conservative cuts to frontline policing and the criminal justice system have caused the proportion of reported crimes ending in prosecution to plummet over the last 10 years. For example, in 2013-14, more than a quarter of violence against the person offences recorded by police in England and Wales ended in prosecution; in 2016, it was around 17%. By 2019-20 and 2020-21, it had fallen to just 6% and 9% respectively.

Tough talk and harsh punishments will not stop these people making our constituents' lives a nightmare while the Government refuse to give the police the resources to catch them in the first place, and the justice system the ability to see it through. I am afraid to say that this has created an environment where antisocial behaviour can be seen to take place with relative impunity. That is incredibly frustrating for those on the receiving end of it. We know that the police are recruiting 20,000 new officers to partially compensate for past cuts, but Ministers have shown far less interest in replacing the backroom staff essential to supporting their colleagues out on the beat. That means that police officers will still be pulled into administrative duties that do not require a trained police officer.

The first duty of any state is to ensure the safety of its people. After 10 years of various Conservative Governments hollowing out the police and criminal justice system, the British state, for many of my constituents, is simply failing in that duty. We need a Labour Government that will put community safety first. That means more police out there tackling crime, antisocial behaviour and dangerous driving—the things they came into the force to do. It means funding and restoring youth projects and treatment services that prevent crime. It means providing real support and justice for victims.

3.8 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I thank my fellow Teessider, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), for introducing this debate on this vital issue. It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, I believe, Mr Robertson.

Antisocial behaviour is a significant issue in Redcar and Cleveland, endangering lives, perpetuating crime, damaging protected habitat and ruining the life chances of young people. A particular element of antisocial behaviour in Redcar and Cleveland is a result of the illegal use of off-road motorbikes, unlicensed and uninsured, incidents of which have been making people's lives miserable, particularly in areas such as Eston, Normanby, Teesville, Grangetown and South Bank. There have been widespread reports from local people of these off-road bikes being used to ferry drugs between dealers, sometimes sadly exploiting young children in the process, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) outlined in Kofi's awful story. This exploitation is abuse, tragically ruining the lives of young people, greatly endangering public health and damaging the living environment of the people I represent.

Despite attempts by Redcar and Cleveland Council to block off the unofficial routes that these criminals use, including more than £15,000 spent trying to protect Eston Hills alone, the problem persists. Additionally, efforts by Cleveland police to tackle the problem have been largely fruitless, often hampered by the sheer scale of the task, with police resources spread thin over such a wide area.

Many people feel powerless, to the point where some of my constituents have ceased even reporting incidents of this criminality. There is the feeling that nothing will be done. This must change. I want to make a plea to my constituents who experience or witness this type of antisocial behaviour. It is imperative that they report it. Each phone call helps the police colour their picture and enables them to better pursue the individuals responsible.

Beyond the menace of off-road bikes, another antisocial behaviour problem in Redcar and Cleveland is kerbside gangs. Gangs of youths are causing minor criminal damage, while terrorising estates, and there are vulnerable people, such as the elderly or disabled, living on these estates. I support Cleveland police in wanting to see the courts become more stringent in pushing parental orders, whereby parents can be held responsible for their child's behaviour, and that goes to the heart of the problem.

Although we have a Home Office Minister responding to today's debate, and although antisocial behaviour often involves criminal behaviour, this is not a problem that the police or Government alone can resolve. I believe that it is for us as a society to create spaces where young people, especially young boys, are able to find purpose and self-worth. Frankie Wales's boxing club in Redcar is a perfect example. He helps young boys in Redcar and Cleveland not only to learn to box, but to achieve their potential and value their community, belonging to a positive gang. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) touched on that in his comments.

Alongside his boxing club at Coatham Memorial Hall, Frankie hosts inter-generational events, where the young people he engages with on a day-to-day basis serve local care home residents and elderly people. In so doing, they learn the value of supporting their wider community. This surely is a shining example of the third sector helping to tackle issues of antisocial behaviour in a way that national and local authorities and the police never could. It may be charities, churches or community groups, such as Frankie's boxing club, the Chris Cave Foundation or the Ladies of Steel youth

[Jacob Young]

club in Dormanstown. They demonstrate that it is only by coming together as a society that we can tackle antisocial behaviour. I believe we should do all we can to support them.

3.12 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this important debate.

I have listened to hon. Members talking about issues that affect a number of our constituents. Left unresolved and untreated, these issues can get out of hand and can, unfortunately, result in dangerous events, including murder. We have to be honest: for a number of our young people up and down the country, the opportunities available to them are disappearing fast. The opportunities that existed in our youth clubs and after-school centres have been cut due to the successive underfunding of our local government. We need to address that if we are going to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Last July, I attended the memorial event for Jahreau Shepherd, a champion mixed martial arts fighter, who was tragically stabbed near Sancroft Street in my constituency. There were a number of his family members there that day. I will not forget speaking to his mother; I heard her pain, loss and suffering from losing a loving son. He had got his life back on track and was an inspirational figure in the community. Tragically, Jahreau was stabbed by his own half-brother, who he had acted like a father figure to, encouraging him to sort out his life and fix up. However, his half-brother suffered from major mood swings and was sentenced for manslaughter with diminished responsibility at the Old Bailey.

As the MP for Vauxhall, which is just across the river from here, I am never heartbroken or struck by those tragic cases that I unfortunately have to hear, because sadly, in my short two years of being an MP, I have had too many of those conversations. I have had to comfort mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, and grandparents. Too many have seen the shocking impact of youth crime and antisocial behaviour when it spirals out of control. I have talked to them when they are saying goodbye to their loved ones, thinking about the future that some of those young people could have had, sitting in front rooms and looking at pictures on the wall of those innocent young children—because they are children.

We have to be honest and identify the causes of youth crime among our young people, which are complex and varied. It is not just a matter of victims versus criminals; a case of just lock them up, go hard on them and throw away the key. Many of our young people who tragically fall into this are actually victims of crime themselves, and have gone through such difficult childhoods. Some hon. Members state that we just need parents to be tougher, but those parents are struggling as well. Those parents had complex childhoods and need help. That is the pattern. If we do not fund properly, we will keep seeing this repeated over and over again for generations.

We have to address the issue of childhood trauma, because many of those children, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) highlighted, are being exploited. They are victims of older people exploiting them, in some cases children as young as 10. We have to look at how we address that. We cannot keep treating the issue as them versus us. We need to look at how we support some of our young people, instead of trying to push them into a punitive justice system. We need to stop pigeonholing these young people, some of whom are barely out of school.

I am grateful to the many youth workers and youth clubs across my constituency who do fantastic work with our young people and their families, including the Black Prince Trust, Bright Centres and Young People Matter. They are working day in, day out to ensure that those young people do not get caught up in youth crime or antisocial behaviour, but the reality is that they groups cannot do it on their own. They have suffered massive cuts over the past few years. Just last Friday I was with Young People Matter, trying to save the community group it has been operating in for a number of years. The housing association is trying to force it out and the alternative provided is not suitable. Will the Minister recognise the vital work that such groups do? How will the Government support them in delivering the funding so that they can continue working in this area?

Shortly after I was elected in 2019, I was one of the first people on site when a stabbing took place outside Kennington station, just over the border of my constituency, on 7 January 2020. I was one of the first people to help that young boy, who was just 15, by putting pressure on the wound. I said in my maiden speech that we cannot allow ourselves to become desensitised to the issue of violent youth crime.

We have to look at how to get adequate funding for mental health services for our young people. We have seen the devastating impact of covid-19 on mental health services for our young people. Will the Minister please ensure that there is vital support for young people? This is now a priority to help all of us—families, young people, practitioners, the police and the wider community—effectively address youth violence and antisocial behaviour.

3.18 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this debate, although, as a father of two young children, I find it slightly unnerving to be reminded of my parental responsibilities for their future behaviour.

I have been fortunate to listen to some great speeches and, as a result, intend to be entirely parochial in my comments about the needs of my constituency. My constituents, who are worried about antisocial behaviour and youth crime, want to see five things. First, they want more police and, crucially, more sympathetic policing. We are fortunate in having strong local leadership across the three boroughs of which Harrow is part, but we certainly do not have the level of local policing that we had under the previous Labour Government, when each ward and community had a sergeant, three police constables and three or four police community support officers, able to take real local intelligence and use it in a sensitive way to get better police outcomes.

I would like to see stronger action by the British Transport police around the many transport hubs in my constituency. We need to see enforcement activity that people know about, and that helps to offer comfort to

people who are worried that they might be victims of antisocial behaviour around those transport hubs. I think particularly about some of the comments that young women have made to me about the sexual harassment that they have faced in one or two of those transport hubs in particular.

A national point that I would make, which is reflected in Harrow, and echoes a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), is about the justice system. Quicker action by the courts to process the cases of young people accused of wrongdoing is essential. I was struck by the report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation, which found that at the end of 2020 the backlog of children awaiting court appearances in England and Wales had increased by more than 50% compared with the same period the previous year. One can understand that in the context of covid a little, but it is striking that the pattern of such backlogs has been increasing since 2010.

The chair of the Criminal Bar Association has made a similar point—that there were cases of 17-year-olds awaiting trial who were not likely to have their cases come to court until next year at the earliest. Those delays can only mean anguish and fear for victims, more uncertainty for those accused children, and the sense that there is somehow impunity for the worst cases of antisocial behaviour.

As other Members on both the Government and Opposition Benches have alluded to, we need more support for schools to support young people who are at risk of being bullied and who are at risk of getting in with gangs, and more support for activities that they can join in the holidays or after school. Too many of those activities, because of austerity over the last 10 years, are no longer available.

On a more general point, we need action on the poverty that too many young people in my community in Harrow are experiencing, which prevents them being able to do their homework when they want to or being able to take part in other activities that my children will take for granted, because their parents simply cannot afford them.

Action is essential going forward. What specific action does that mean? Harrow missed out in the announcement by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in October last year on getting a dedicated police team for the centre of our area. I hope that will be rectified as a matter of urgency. Harrow town centre has many redeeming features, with many great businesses, but it is still scarred on occasion by antisocial behaviour. Having a dedicated police team for that town centre to mirror the one in the Prime Minister's constituency in Uxbridge would be extremely welcome.

As I already alluded to, the British Transport police have to take stronger action and be a stronger presence around Harrow-on-the-Hill station and Harrow and Wealdstone station, which young people and older people consistently report as places where they are worried about being attacked or do not feel safe.

Lastly, I want to praise the work of the Young Harrow Foundation and its excellent chief executive, Dan Burke. Working with Harrow Council, Harrow schools, the police and the NHS, he has set out in some detail the concerns of young people in Harrow aged between nine and 18. Some 6,000 of them were interviewed about the challenges they face, and issues around support for their mental health and for more activities that they can take part in during holidays and after school are urgent. More support for those types of organisations, which want to bring funding into my constituency, would be extremely welcome.

3.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Robertson, for enabling me to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing and leading the debate, and for his comments. I have three things to say. First, I support what he is putting forward and his contribution—and the contribution of others as well. Secondly, I want to offer a Northern Ireland perspective, as I always do. The Minister does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland, so she will not have to answer the points of view that I will put forward, but they are to add relevance to this debate and to put forward some ideas for how we can improve. Thirdly, I will refer to one very active organisation in my constituency of Strangford, and suggest to the Minister and others here that that organisation could work alongside the police, community groups and community leaders to address the issues. It has done that in my constituency, which is why I want to talk about it.

To say that I am somewhat concerned about the rates of antisocial behaviour and youth crime is an understatement. The rates have increased significantly because of the covid-19 pandemic, and some of the figures that I will give are quite significant and worrying. Powers must be given to local authorities to help address that. I have heard the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) speak a number of times about antisocial behaviour, and not just in Westminster Hall but in the main Chamber. He referred to those who race about in cars, and others have referred to that issue as well. Sometimes they use their Twitter or Facebook accounts to tell people where to be. Back home, the police monitor those sites and are able to be there when the young people arrive. I am sure that has been done. If it has not, it should be, because it is another method of addressing the issue.

Antisocial behaviour encompasses the criminal and nuisance behaviour of all kinds, most notably noisy neighbours, public drunkenness, street drug dealing, littering and loitering, which other hon. Members have referred to. Pre-pandemic, in 2019, the United Kingdom's antisocial behaviour crime rate was 22 per 1,000 people. For 2020, the first full year of living with covid, that figure increased to 29 per 1,000, so it is quite clear that the pandemic has, as with nearly everything in life, changed things dramatically—and not for the better.

For Northern Ireland, instances of antisocial behaviour and youth crime have also been increasing, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The rise has been described as "substantial". In the 12 months from March 2020 to February 2021, there were almost 74,000 antisocial behaviour incidents in Northern Ireland, which is an increase of almost 19,000, or 34.1%, on the previous 12 months. On the mainland, incidents are up 24%. That is quite worrying. Northern Ireland's figure is the highest rolling 12-month figure since the period of June 2010 to May 2011—some 11 years ago. In addition to this, all 11 policing districts showed high levels of antisocial behaviour. We cannot

[Jim Shannon]

simply blame the pandemic for the increase in antisocial behaviour and youth crime in society; I believe that it goes deeper. The Minister will obviously respond to the comments that others have made.

Antisocial behaviour has been an issue in my constituency for as long as I have been an elected representative, which is not since yesterday—I first started as a councillor in 1985. I served on the police partnership board at that time. I believe that we made some significant steps in trying to address antisocial behaviour. Not only did we employ officers in the council to liaise and work alongside the police service in Northern Ireland; we also engaged with other community groups to try to address those issues—such factors as family environment, domestic violence and struggles in young people's education. Others, including the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), referred to those. Studies found that children who struggle in domestic settings or in school are more likely to be involved in crime and partake in antisocial behaviour. I thank my neighbourhood policing teams and council officers for what they do. Ards and North Down Borough Council policing teams do brilliant work in reducing the rates of antisocial behaviour in Strangford.

I am conscious of time, Mr Robertson, which is going by quicker than I had realised. Street pastors have been significant in my constituency, and have worked alongside the police and the council antisocial officers. They ensure that people who are intoxicated, or whatever it may be, get home. They are there to provide help to ladies who lose their shoes—it happens—or those who need a drink of water, or those who just need somebody to talk to. I am sure the Minister and other hon. Members already know this, but Street Pastors is one of the organisations that can help. It wants to help and, in my constituency, it has.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to undertake discussions with the devolved Administrations to see what we are doing, in order to share and learn, which is what we want to do as well, and to put in place more police to deal with the rise in antisocial behaviour in our constituencies. I encourage the Minister to look at the prison system, to see if improvements could be made to make prison a beneficial time for young people, to educate them and make reoffending an unlikely route for them to go down.

3.31 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this incredibly important debate.

I start by paying tribute to constituents, families and young people in Liverpool, West Derby who are living through the real-life consequences of austerity. It has decimated the provision of youth clubs, youth workers and the services that helped to shape my life experiences, and those of so many others like me, growing up in Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s. I owe such a debt of gratitude to the youth workers who guided me and so many others through such a difficult period in our city's history. The relationships we formed with those youth workers, and their guidance and wise counsel, are the reason I can stand here today participating in this debate. It was interesting to listen to Ian Wright say something extremely similar on TV on Saturday.

That crucial safety net has now been removed, and our communities are living through the consequences. Youth provision is almost non-existent, with vulnerable children roaming the streets, getting into gangs and trouble. We have recently seen fatalities in Liverpool due to knife crime, with children killing children, devasting whole communities and families. Youth centres are shut, and sometimes the only sporting facilities available in my constituency are privatised facilities that charge £70 an hour to families struggling through austerity and now a cost-of-living crisis. Many of our children have not got a chance if opportunities and facilities are not available to all.

I place on the record my thanks to all the service staff, teachers, parents, community groups and police across West Derby, especially Anfield Sports and Community Centre, Action for Children, the Young Person's Advisory Service and Alder Hey staff, and I acknowledge the work being done by the No More Knives and Real Men Don't Carry Knives campaigns. These people are doing so much across our city to support young people through such difficult times.

There is a massive effort being made across Liverpool to support and nurture our young children, but we desperately need funding and policy changes from central Government. Since austerity began in 2010 under the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, Liverpool City Council has seen its funding reduced by 65%. Despite the Government declaring that the age of austerity is over, the cuts to our funding continue, and the consequences for our young people, and the youth services and facilities they need, continue to be felt.

According to research by the trade union Unison, between 2010 and 2019, youth services in the UK suffered cuts of £400 million. That will have meant the loss of 4,500 youth work jobs and the closure of more than 760 youth centres since 2012. It is shameful. According to a February 2021 survey by UK Youth on the impact of covid-19 on youth services, 66% of the 1,759 organisations surveyed said there had been an increase in demand. Despite the greater need for their services, 83% reported that their funding had decreased, while 64% said they were at risk of closure in the next 12 months. Research by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy found that 80% of young people say that their mental health has worsened during the covid-19 outbreak.

As I have said, we desperately need the funding and policies from the Government to support, nurture and invest in our young people. In her response, will the Minister commit to providing the vital funding that councils need to invest in youth services and facilities for our young people? As I have mentioned, so many facilities have been lost in the last decade, and I do not doubt the positive outcomes they would have had for so many young people had they remained open.

Will the Minister explain the Government's strategy to support pupils and schools so that young people do not face exclusion and the lifelong damage that can cause? Will she also commit to funding young people's mental health services, as well as early intervention mentoring programmes and specialist children's services?

This should not be a postcode lottery. We need provisions for our youth and preventive measures put in place as an investment to ensure that all our children have a level playing field and a bright future.

I hear the words "levelling up" a lot from Government Members. Let us put it into practice and restore the youth provision we have lost to all, so that the phrase actually means something to our children.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We need to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to respond. I call Sarah Jones.

3.36 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Robertson; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) on securing the debate, which has been interesting; I agreed with virtually everything he said. Antisocial behaviour has been trivialised, downplayed and dismissed in recent times. He said that we have a moral obligation to ensure that every child gets the opportunities they need to make the best of their life, that this is about more than just policing—it is about schools, local authorities and youth work—and that enough is enough. I think he will get a shock when he realises that his party has been in government for the last 11 years and has caused significant cuts that have driven a lot of the problems we face today.

I congratulate all hon. Members on their speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) talked about the impact of covid, which is really important in how we look at this issue. The hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) talked about youth workers and how important they are, and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) just now about the impact of cuts to youth work across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) is such a fantastic campaigner on county lines and has been for a long time, and I add to her plea for the Government to look at the issue of defining child criminal exploitation. As it happens, an amendment calling for a definition is going through the House of Lords as we speak, so there is an opportunity in the Lords for the Government to support my hon. Friend's cause, and we would welcome that.

The hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) represents an interesting area; some good progress has been made on county lines in East Anglia. It is one of the only areas in the country where there has been some progress, but there is still a lot to be done. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) spoke about the wonderful police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, and the work she is doing. I was up there just before Christmas and worked with her; I went to St James's Park and saw the wonderful youth work the football club is doing to try to ensure that people have opportunities. The hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) represents an important part of the country; a lot of the problems that are being debated now existed 20 years ago when I was working for Mo Mowlam.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) spoke movingly, as always, about the really big challenges we face with youth violence, which I have in my constituency as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) talked about those massively long waiting times. We cannot expect our young people to understand justice when the justice system does not work; it makes no sense and it cannot be done. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about council workers and the importance of tackling antisocial behaviour through local councils. Of course, our local councils have been absolutely decimated, so that is very difficult. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby told a personal story about how important youth work is. I think we all collectively agree with all of that.

I am pleased to follow so many good speeches. Since becoming an MP, I have spent five years campaigning against knife crime, and in my role as shadow Policing Minister I have been around the country in the past few months, looking at antisocial behaviour and seeing a lot of the issues. We can see how antisocial behaviour, which is defined as low-level but which I do not think is low-level at all, can spread and become more serious crime over time, exactly as hon. Members have said.

Everyone has a basic right to be safe in their community. Sadly, after the past 11 years our streets have become less safe. We have talked about prosecution rates; criminals are literally getting away with it under this Government. Only 6.5% of all crimes—a little over one in 20—lead to a prosecution, and the charge rate has halved over the past five years. Those figures are extraordinary. Criminals can pretty much get away with it.

Ms Lyn Brown: They have never had it so good.

Sarah Jones: Exactly. Whether people live in the city or in the country, they worry about their kids going out on the streets and getting into drugs. People can go online and buy any drug they want; on the "Today" programme only this morning, Claire Campbell spoke about her son, who died of an overdose after buying drugs online. There is a whole world of problems. Police struggle because they have to become social workers due to the impact of mental health cuts and the like. Serious organised criminals have got a real grip, and the UK is Europe's largest heroin market—I think that statistic is extraordinary and shows how much work we have to do.

Antisocial behaviour is up 7% in the past year, with 1.8 million incidents recorded. To say that it is ignored by this Government is an understatement. There is no way of measuring the problem because it does not form part of the statistics under the Home Office's counting rules. The way local authorities treat antisocial behaviour varies: some areas are good, while some are hopeless. I have made a series of freedom of information requests; I will not go into them all now, because they will come out shortly, but one council had 248 recorded incidents of antisocial behaviour and did 150 investigations, which resulted in no enforcement action whatever. Some boroughs really are struggling to do anything, and some are doing good things.

When I was going around the country, I saw a lot of good activity on antisocial behaviour. Rhyl was a particular favourite: for a start, there are more police community support officers on the street there, because the Welsh Government have funded more PCSOs over and above Government funding and they are crucial to preventing antisocial behaviour. There was a wonderful project

[Sarah Jones]

with people you would describe as hoodlums out on the street, doing whatever they were doing. Youth workers went out to where they were, got involved with them and got them involved in sport. They took them up Snowdon, which was completely out of their comfort zone—they had not done anything like that before—and now they are doing their Duke of Edinburgh's award. It was a complete transformation—how wonderful.

I went to see the Peel project in Hull. A park had become a horrible place for antisocial behaviour, with drug taking and kids hanging around, but the police gave a local organisation some shipping containers. It put a load of sports stuff in and based a little office in the park, and now the park is now a lovely place where people do sport and come together because there are adults, some structure and some things to do. It is not rocket science, but in so many places it is simply not done because the funding is not there.

Let me move on to youth crime. A 15-year-old boy, Zaian, was murdered in my constituency just before new year's eve in the park I used to play in. On the same day, another boy became the 30th teenager to be murdered in London last year. Research from the organisation Crest shows that between 2014 and 2019 there was a 56% rise in knife possession offences for 10 to 17-year-olds, which is extraordinary. The organisation says that those who commit robbery and use weapons before the age of 18 are much more likely to have long criminal careers than young people who commit less serious crimes. Arrests of 10 to 17-year-olds make up a growing proportion of arrests for robbery—the statistics go on.

Anne Longfield, who was such a brilliant Children's Commissioner, brought out a report this week that shows that spending on early intervention has reduced by almost two thirds over the past 10 years. What can we do with a third of what we had before? We know that these problems start young, and the Sutton Trust tells us that 1,000 family centres closed over the same period. Youth services were cut by about 40%—and by much more in some parts of the country—and the number of children given treatment by child and adolescent mental health services was massively reduced and they had to wait for long periods. We know what the problems are.

On top of that we can add the fact that we have so few police officers compared with what we need. Some 50% of PCSOs have been cut, and the Government have no plans to bring any of them back. We are still 10,000 short of the number of officers we used to have and, as was pointed out, a lot of officers are spending time doing other roles because of the cuts to police staff.

Labour says that there is nothing more important than keeping people safe, and we have a plan to provide new police hubs that will be visible in every community as a place where the public can go and talk to the police and other agencies in person. We will have new neighbourhood prevention teams to bring together the police, community support officers, youth workers and local authority staff to tackle crime. These teams would prioritise being visible and would pursue serial perpetrators of antisocial behaviour.

I appreciate that I need to end my speech, but I will just ask the Minister a series of questions. Will she consider bringing back the 50% of PCSOs we have lost? Will she speak to the request from the hon. Member for Stockton South for antisocial behaviour to be measured nationally in a better way? Will she address the request from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham for child criminal exploitation to become a priority, and will she look at tackling crime and antisocial behaviour with real force from the Home Office? The Home Office too often blames local police forces and does not provide leadership, and often it is not one step ahead of the criminals but one step behind. We need real leadership from the Home Office and cross-Government working to tackle these very significant and increasing problems.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your exemplary chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this important debate. It has been a wide-ranging debate touching on vital issues that affect all our constituents and all our communities. I thank him very much for bringing to my attention and to that of Home Office officials the courage of the individuals in the cases he mentioned. All the Members in this debate have brought personal stories to the fore, and I commend them for doing so and their constituents for coming forward.

We would think from listening to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones)—it is a pleasure to follow her, and we do have a good debating relationship—that the Government are doing nothing on this, so let me start by saying that this Government have put beating crime front and centre. It is a key part of the levelling-up agenda to tackle antisocial behaviour, youth crime and wider crimes. At no stage do we believe or think that this is low-level behaviour; we never underestimate the impact that it has on communities, public spaces and the law-abiding majority who want to go about their business. We have seen so much in the pandemic that the enjoyment of public spaces is vital for mental and physical health, and we are firmly and fully committed to tackling and preventing crime, youth crime and antisocial behaviour.

In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South alone, Cleveland police has recruited 194 additional police officers and will be receiving £157 million in funding, which is an increase of up to £7.7 million on previous years. That is replicated around England and Wales. Across the country, we have recruited 11,053 officers towards the 20,000 target, which was set out at the last general election, for England and Wales. Some Members from Wales are here, and I am sure they will welcome that funding from Conservative central Government. The police across the country will receive £15.9 billion for this financial year. I am sure we can all agree that these are significant amounts of public money being dedicated by this Conservative Government to this vital priority.

If we are to successfully address antisocial behaviour and youth crime, it is vital that Government, local authorities, frontline professionals and voluntary sector partners work together. That is at the heart of our plan. I commend all the Members who mentioned the community groups and various charities that are working so hard in this area. I have the same experience in my Redditch constituency. Those groups can do some things that the state cannot, no matter how well-funded and well-meaning

it is. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) eloquently said, they can reach people who are out of reach, and it is vital that they continue to do so.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I referred to Street Pastors as one such organisation. I am aware that it works in the constituency of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), as it does in others. What discussions has the Minister had with Street Pastors about using that voluntary service for the betterment of all the community?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman so much for raising that. I strongly support that service with all my heart. I have seen how Street Pastors works effectively, especially in the night-time economy. We have debated violence against women and girls, and the Home Office has funded a number of such schemes and enabled local authorities to roll them out in their local areas.

Antisocial behaviour comes in various forms and guises. It differs from community to community, which is why it is important that there are flexible local powers that can be used, along with local knowledge of an area from local communities and the other agencies in it.

Members will be familiar with the changes that were made following the introduction of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. A number of tools and powers were introduced at that time. Some of those powers can be issued by a court, and they impose positive restrictions or requirements on an individual convicted of a criminal offence who has engaged in behaviour that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm and distress. One of those powers is a community trigger, which is a vital safety net. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South made a point about the burden of evidence on communities. I encourage him to come back to me to have a detailed discussion with my officials. We are very keen to hear how we can improve that so that these powers work effectively for his community and others.

I do not have a huge amount of time left. I want to focus my remarks on parenting orders, which Members have raised.

Ms Lyn Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am really sorry, but I—

Ms Brown: I just want to get a commitment to a meeting.

Rachel Maclean: I will save the hon. Member the trouble; I will happily meet her. However, I want her to know that the Home Office is working with and funding the Children's Society on many of the issues that she rightly touched on. Modern slavery is a vital part of the Government's plan.

A parenting order is not the only way in which we can require families to engage with the authorities and tackle this behaviour at the source. Very often, youth offending teams work with parents on a voluntary basis. The experience is that parents often engage readily and take part in specific programmes, including parenting programmes, and that can have a very helpful, positive outcome. However, when parents do not engage with parenting orders, youth offending teams can ensure compliance and encourage engagement by issuing warning letters and using compliance panels. Consistent non-compliance without a good reason can lead to a police investigation and proceedings in court. Non-compliance may lead the court to issue a fine of up to £1,000, a probation order, a curfew order or an absolute or conditional discharge.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) raised county lines. I have a huge amount of respect for her, but unfortunately, she did not credit the work that has been going on nationally on county lines. I want to update her: since 2019, the police have closed more than 1,500 county lines, made over 7,400 arrests, seized £4.3 million in cash and drugs and safeguarded more than 4,000 people. Whatever party Members are from, I am sure that they can welcome that achievement.

Ms Lyn Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am afraid I will not. I have such a lot to say and I have had less time than the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Croydon Central, and other Members.

We are investing £560 million in youth services in England over the next three years, including the youth investment fund, to transform the Government's offer to young people and to level up opportunities right across the country. To kick-start the youth investment programme, an additional £10 million will be spent this year in key levelling-up areas to enable local youth providers, such as the ones that many Members have mentioned, to invest in projects and expand the reach, number and range of services that they currently offer. I think that we all agree that these types of crimes have complex roots, and they often go back generations. We must tackle the causes of crime as well as having the appropriate powers, enforcement and sentences.

I will touch briefly on the safer streets fund, as it is extremely relevant to many of the issues raised by Members. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South knows this, but may I remind him that Cleveland police have £366,289 from the safer streets fund, and that that project will carry out a variety of crime prevention measures, including 30 new or upgraded CCTV cameras, refurbishment of four alley gates and bespoke target-hardening measures for residents' homes. It is these basic safety measures that can give confidence to communities that the presence and the security are there.

Overall, across the country, the Government have invested £70 million in the first three rounds of the safer streets fund. This financial year alone, the fund is supporting 107 local crime prevention projects to implement interventions such as improved street lighting, increased CCTV, increased presence of "guardians" to deter crime, and, pivotally, training to change attitudes and behaviours.

Most of these measures are set out in the Government's beating crime plan. I encourage all Members to read the plan. It is a key manifesto commitment of this Government to get crime down and to set out how we will tackle crime and the causes of crime. It is a targeted approach to places, people and the business of crime underpinned by getting those basics right. The whole plan is supported by an unwavering commitment to the police that we will do everything in our power to combat crime and work out what actually works in keeping our country safe.

[Rachel Maclean]

We are working with practitioners and experts who deal with this issue day in, day out. In a further strand, which is vital, we are working across the country with partners to establish principles for a strong and effective partnership response to antisocial behaviour. That is why we have undertaken the police and crime commissioner review to equip PCCs with the tools and levers that they need to drive down crime and antisocial behaviour in their areas. As I said at the start, we recognise the damage and distress caused by antisocial behaviour. We recognise the devastation to lives caused by youth crime, both to the perpetrators and the victims, and I am absolutely committed, as are my Home Office colleagues, to tackling this issue head-on.

3.57 pm

Matt Vickers: I thank Members for their wide-ranging and insightful contributions. It is clear that youth crime and antisocial behaviour has a huge impact on the lives of people across the country, and it should probably feature in discussions in this place more often. We have heard examples of and gratitude for the amazing police officers, the people who work in our local authorities, the people who work in the voluntary sector, and the people who work in our schools and youth services who do so much to make our communities safer.

We have heard all the manifestations of youth crime and antisocial behaviour whether it is the modified cars, the off-road bikes, or the issue of county lines. We have also heard that it affects businesses as well as the lives of people, and we have heard about the exploitation of young people and the horrific and tragic outcomes that this can have for them and their families. I think that we all agree that we need to open up opportunities for young people who are often the victims as well as the perpetrators.

I thank the Minister for taking the time to hear the many challenges that this issue creates across the country. I welcome the Government's focus on tackling crime and antisocial behaviour; I welcome the thousands more police officers that we have across the country, including 194 in Cleveland; I welcome the huge uplift in police funding, including £157 million more for Cleveland; I welcome the opportunity to discuss the specifics around some of those antisocial behaviour powers; and I welcome the huge increase in youth services and the safer streets funding, which we are delighted to welcome in Cleveland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

Access to GP Appointments

[Relevant document: e-petition 587701, Create a legal right for patients to receive timely face-to-face GP appointments.]

4 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to GP appointments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

GPs are at the heart of our health service and our communities, and I thank them all for their dedicated work. They have been at the frontline of one of the most successful vaccination programmes in the world, thanks to which we have some of the lightest covid restrictions and one of the most open economies. Family doctors have also delivered an incredibly rapid adoption of new digital means to interact with patients when lockdown meant that it was vital to be able to give health advice without vulnerable patients having to visit a surgery. This is quite a switch for a health service that just a few years ago was still using about 9,000 fax machines.

Phone or digital consultations are here to stay, and for many they are a great way to get help from their GP, but not for everyone. In particular, many elderly people, people with learning disabilities or other cognitive impairments and those with language barriers may not be able to cope easily with digital communication. They may find anything other than a face-to-face meeting difficult. It is vital that these vulnerable people can still see their doctor, and there has been some real progress in recent months. There are now more appointments in general practice than there were before the pandemic, and, judging by the latest figures, about 65% of those were face to face.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was interested when I saw this issue on the agenda for Westminster Hall. I am interested in lots of things that are debated in Westminster Hall, but this is one in which I have a particular interest. Does the right hon. Lady agree that for many people who are not comfortable about describing their symptoms over the phone, or eloquent enough to do so, it is essential that they can request to see their GP without having to prove to the receptionist the reason why they need to?

Theresa Villiers: That is of course correct. Phone calls are important in triaging and assessing the extent to which a face-to-face meeting with a doctor is appropriate, but it is essential that those who need face-to-face appointments are given them.

We are seeing some progress, and this has been delivered at the same time as millions of booster jabs. I give credit to GPs, NHS England and Ministers for that recovery in general practice, but it remains the case that many of us will have heard from constituents about problems in getting in to see their GP. I thank the 19,302 people who signed the online petition on Parliament's website expressing concern about this.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): The right hon. Lady makes a really important point about constituents trying to get in contact with GP surgeries. I have the same issue with one of my constituents who

tried to get in contact with her surgery and had to call every day for three weeks in order to get an appointment. By the time she did get an appointment, she experienced delays in accessing the treatment she needed. Does the right hon. Lady agree that further action is desperately needed to ensure that we have a plan in place to address staff shortages and resource shortages across our NHS and across our GP surgeries so that our GPs can continue to provide the healthcare that is needed?

Theresa Villiers: I agree that we need more general practice capacity and I will come on to explain how we could do that.

There can be no doubt that GP surgeries are under immense pressure. The Royal College of General Practitioners says that the workload has never been greater. A GP in my constituency told me that as well as colleagues leaving the profession, it has become increasingly difficult to recruit new doctors. He said:

"Those of us left behind feel that we are holding up a broken system."

In GP surgeries, as is the case across the NHS, demand has spiralled partly because, as we grow older as a population, we have greater healthcare need, partly because of pent-up demand from people who felt reluctant to seek help during the pandemic, but also partly because the decision by NHS leaders to push a range of treatments out from secondary to primary care has left GPs dealing with more serious and complex cases than in the past. As a result, one High Barnet GP told me that primary care was in a precarious position even before the pandemic. Of course, delays in accessing GP appointments have been an issue for some years in many areas, including my Chipping Barnet constituency. My concern has been intensified by the predatory demands of developers seeking to build blocks of flats in multiple locations in my constituency. The Mayor of London wants to see over 23,500 new homes built in Barnet over 10 years. That is a massive increase in population, yet GPs are struggling to serve the population we already have.

We have seen the number of doctors in hospitals increase to record levels—and that is a great achievement—but the same cannot yet be said of GPs. I have been campaigning to expand GP capacity in Barnet as part of the Government's wider commitment to boost primary care. I very much welcome the £250 million announced in October to tackle immediate pressures on the system. This promised new cloud-based phone systems, a reduction in routine paperwork such as sick notes and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency checks, and additional staff to support GPs. Well, I think we probably all know that better phone systems are urgently needed in many practices, but the need to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy is also pretty obvious.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On patients phoning up trying to get an appointment, does she agree that there needs to be more capacity in phone systems so that people are not waiting on the phone for hours on end to get an appointment with a GP?

Theresa Villiers: I think that is right, which is why it was a good decision in the Government's October announcement to focus on an upgrade to phone systems. I really hope that the Minister will update us on how that is going and when it will be delivered, so that our constituents can experience it directly.

Returning to the issue of GP paperwork, a Barnet GP told me that

"the amount of bureaucracy and red tape has increased exponentially despite various assurances that this would be cut. Increased regulation and monitoring, whilst important from a governance point of view, seems to have generated endless form filling, policy updating, mandatory training, appraisals and paper chasing."

When this issue was debated in this Chamber last October, the Minister repeated promises that paperwork and form filling would be reduced. Has that happened? If not, why not? It is far better for a GP to spend time with patients, rather than writing sick notes or ticking boxes.

The third element of the Government's plan seeks to strengthen the multi-disciplinary teams in general practice, so that, where appropriate, patients can seek other professionals such as nurses, pharmacists or physiotherapists. This is intended to free up GP time for them to see sicker patients. I welcome the fact that 10,000 new staff have been recruited of the 26,000 promised in the Conservative manifesto, and I commend the work of North Central London clinical commissioning group, which is due to recruit 177 more primary care staff under the programme. However, more could be done, for example, to enable pharmacists to take a bigger role, including in prescribing. We must also ensure that GPs have a strong voice in the new integrated care boards, so that primary care is at the heart of NHS decision making. It is vital that part of the massive capital investment that the Government have promised for the NHS goes into improving GP surgery premises, which in some instances are just not fit for purpose or not physically large enough to cope with increased healthcare demand.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Many of my constituents, and constituents across the country, are concerned about how quickly they can get face-to-face appointments, especially those mentioned earlier: the vulnerable, the elderly, and those who cannot do online or telephone appointments. The investment in surgeries is most welcome, but we need immediate action to address the shortfall in patients being seen by doctors where they need to attend a face-to-face surgery.

During covid-19, elected Members received an uplift to our budgets to help us to deal with our constituents. The same needs to be done for GPs, who are under huge pressure to deliver services, and that needs to happen now rather than later, because such investment can take time to come through and we do not have time.

Theresa Villiers: I agree that we need action now to make it easier to get GP appointments, and we also need action for the longer term. Even if everything that I have spoken about is delivered, and the October package is delivered in its entirety, we still need more GPs—it is as simple as that.

It is really welcome that this year more people have entered training to become GPs than ever before, because the Health Committee identified workforce shortages as the "key limiting factor" in tackling the covid backlog successfully. In its annual report on the state of health and social care in England, the Care Quality Commission concluded that by mid-2021 there were likely to be fewer full-time equivalent GPs in total per 100,000 patients than there were in 2017.

[Theresa Villiers]

In July 2021, the then Care Minister commissioned Health Education England to review long-term strategic trends for the health and social care workforce. That review is very welcome, but we need to see it deliver results. As the Health Committee has called for, we need an objective, transparent and independently audited annual report on workforce projections that cover the next five, 10 and 20 years, including an assessment of whether sufficient numbers of staff are being trained.

Damien Moore: My right hon. Friend is being very kind in sharing her time. Does she agree that universities that have medical placements and more capacity should be allowed to extend that capacity, so that we can train more people and have more people entering the profession?

Theresa Villiers: It is essential that we expand the capacity of training places for GPs, and I welcome the new medical schools and the progress that has been made. However, because it takes years to train up a professional, the effect of those developments is not yet being felt in local surgeries.

We need to ensure that the NHS visa scheme is used effectively to recruit skilled GPs from around the world in order to meet immediate pressures, and we have to get better at retaining the GPs that we have. A vital first step in doing that is to implement measures to relieve the stresses on GPs that I have spoken about and to address spiralling workloads.

An effective workforce strategy also needs a better plan to encourage women to stay in the profession. We need to give more thought to how we persuade women who might have chosen to work part-time while caring for children to consider coming back to work full-time.

Also, what about all those retired or non-practising GPs out there? At the start of the pandemic, the Government rushed through legislation to enable retired professionals to return to the workforce to help battle that first covid wave. Clearing the covid backlog and expanding GP services is another great national challenge and we really should try to do more to enlist the talent of doctors who have retired or moved on to other careers.

Damien Moore: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Theresa Villiers: I will just make a little progress now, because I want to give the Minister time to respond.

That means fixing the problem with doctors' pensions. I know that efforts have been made in that regard. However, it is still worrying that it seems that once a doctor has been in practice for many years, they can face a big tax bill for their pensions. Of course, the last thing we should do is push GPs into early retirement because of punitive pension taxes. We want them to stay in practice and not retire.

In conclusion, pressure on GP surgeries is leading to appointment delays, which will only generate yet higher numbers of people showing up at accident and emergency departments that are already busier than at any time in the history of our national health service, as graphically shown on Sky News in relation to Barnet Hospital just a week or so ago.

GP services are a crucial gateway to treatment by other parts of the health service. If this gateway gets blocked up, the consequence will be that lives are lost, for example to cancer, because symptoms were not picked up early enough. So this matter is not just one of convenience; it is a matter of ensuring that we are doing everything we can to deliver the best healthcare.

The Government rightly promised 50 million more appointments in GP surgeries every year. It is essential that we deliver on that promise, so that my constituents can get the care they need within a reasonable timeframe. We must see the NHS long-term plan and the Government's record £33 billion investment in the NHS deliver more GPs in local surgeries in places such as Barnet. It is as simple as that. We cannot carry on as we are. When he recently gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee, the Health Secretary said that plans to recruit 6,000 additional GPs by 2024 are not on track. I appeal to the Government to get them on track and to do all they can to expand capacity in GP practices in my constituency and across the country.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for bringing the debate to the Chamber. I echo much of what she says, and the Government are delivering on much of it, so perhaps this is an opportune moment to update Members on the progress we are making.

We owe a huge amount of gratitude to general practice staff for their efforts throughout the pandemic, stepping up to run vaccination programmes, continuing with flu vaccinations, looking after house-bound patients and continuing their day-to-day work. They have been absolutely outstanding. Since 30 November last year, more than 52 million covid vaccinations have been delivered by general practice, which is an amazing achievement. They are incredibly busy and have been throughout the pandemic, as reflected in appointment data. In November, general practice delivered an average of 1.39 million appointments nationally per working day, an increase of 6% compared with November 2019. Once covid vaccination appointments are factored in, the increase is greater than 20%. GPs and their teams have been working incredibly hard.

The focus on the booster programme has meant some patients experiencing delays in getting an appointment, but that does not mean that general practice has been closed. GPs and their teams will always be there for patients, alongside NHS 111 and community pharmacy teams. It is important that people do not delay coming forward. We saw patients stay away during the first lockdown, and so unfortunately there was a delay in starting some of their treatment, so it is important that we all get out the message that GP practices are open for business. In my right hon. Friend's constituency, under North Central London CCG, excluding covid-19 vaccinations, approximately 16% more appointments took place in November last year compared with November 2019, of which 57% were face to face. The crux of the matter that we hear from many constituents is around face-to-face appointments. That is why, in October, the Secretary of State launched the winter support package to tackle many issues my right hon. Friend mentioned. I will just touch on several.

First, we are improving telephone access, because sometimes the problem is that patients cannot get through by phone, rather than their not being able to see a GP. My hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) touched on that. Part of the package is a cloud-based telephony system to help increase that capacity for GPs, who may only have one or two receptionists and a couple of phone lines that get busy pretty quickly as soon as 8 o'clock hits. The improved functionality has the potential to free up existing telephone lines for incoming calls and will be available at no additional cost to practices. We will require GP practices to sign up to this cloud-based telephony system, which will be up and running pretty soon. All those that expressed an interest have been contacted, and we expect many to go live fairly soon. Some practices are already tied into existing contracts, so there may be a slightly delay in roll-out there, but where we can get them up and running, we absolutely will.

Secondly, we are encouraging GPs to offer face-to-face appointments. However, it will not always be a GP that a patient sees. There are a range of healthcare professionals in primary care, from nurses—they do an amazing job, if I say so myself—to paramedics, pharmacists and physios, and the GP is not always the best person for a patient to see. Face-to-face appointments are available, and our message to patients is that they will not always see the GP face to face, but that does not take away from the care that they receive.

On finance, £250 million was announced in the winter support package, which can be used by GPs in a range of ways—whatever suits their local area. For some, it will be a physical expansion of their practice so that they can see more patients. For others, it may be to take on locums, where they are available—that is also a pressure point—or other healthcare professionals or an extra receptionist, or to extend opening times. The money can be used on whatever will help GPs to expand their ability to see patients.

My right hon. Friend touched on bureaucracy and red tape, which is a massive ask for GPs. We have made some temporary changes during the omicron vaccine roll-out period to free up capacity, including extending the sickness self-certification period for people accessing statutory sick pay and suspending requests for medical information from bodies such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. We are bringing forth secondary legislation to allow other healthcare professionals to do some of those checks—statutory instruments are going through the system as we speak—and having discussions with other Departments about moving away from always expecting GPs to do medical reports, whether for the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Transport or for schools. Patients can do a lot for themselves and a medical report from a GP will not always be required. We are also improving digital technology so that handwritten letters and reports, which take so much time for GPs, can be digitised and made much easier.

One of the most exciting innovations in the package is the promotion of pharmacists, which my right hon. Friend touched on. We have a community pharmacist consultation service whereby patients who phone 111 or contact their GP can be referred direct to pharmacists, who are taking on prescribing skills so that they can prescribe as well as dispense. We are looking towards a more pharmacy-first model as in Scotland and Wales, where patients can go direct to pharmacists without necessarily going first to the GP, opening up primary care and making it much more accessible. I hope that, through a number of the points that I have addressed, it can be seen that we are moving at pace.

Workforce was touched on, and I am pleased that we are making progress on that. We have already recruited 10,000 of an additional 26,000 staff who will be working in general practice by the end of 2023-24. In the North Central London CCG area, 327 additional staff have been recruited to date, with a further 114 anticipated.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on bringing the debate to the Chamber and draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising NHS doctor. In 2015, the then Secretary of State said that we would recruit an extra 5,000 GPs to the workforce. Can the Minister update us on how many extra full-time equivalent GPs are working in the NHS?

Pensions is also a real issue that is stopping the current workforce extending their careers as they face punitive tax penalties. Will she please commit to addressing that and raising it with the Treasury?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. I was going to come to the number of GPs. I am pleased, as is my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, that we have 4,000 doctors in GP training places this year, which is an increase from 2,671 back in 2014. We are getting more GPs through the training process. However, in terms of GPs in place, there were 1,841 more full-time equivalents in September 2021 compared with September 2019, so we are seeing increases coming through.

However, there are issues with retention as well as recruitment. I think my right hon. Friend touched on issues with the Home Office and GP trainees once their visas expire. We met Home Office officials just before Christmas and there is better working now between the NHS and the Home Office to help facilitate those who come on a visa and need help to get into the workforce, get their visas extended or their training finished before their visa expires.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made a very valid point about GP pensions. We have discussed that, and we are setting up a meeting with Treasury teams to look at that in more depth. There is no doubt that that is a disincentive to stay in practice, and we will certainly be looking at that further.

I will finish by asking all colleagues to support local GPs. They have had a very tough time. We are taking a zero-tolerance approach to any abuse they receive. That also applies to pharmacists. They have had a difficult time and continued to stay open during the pandemic. Face-to-face appointments were a challenge. We are doing everything we can to support them with the asks to break down some of those barriers. I am optimistic that we will see progress and that patients, who are the most important people in this debate, will see improved access to services in primary care.

Question put and agreed to.

Transport Connectivity: Merseyside

4.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before I call the mover of the motion, I ask Back Benchers to limit their speeches to between four and five minutes in order to get everybody in.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport connectivity in Merseyside.

It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I warmly thank my hon. Friends for attending a debate that has such enormous implications for our region. I also thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for joining us. I have no doubt that today's proceedings will benefit immensely from their expertise.

Draughty trains that creep at a snail's pace towards Warrington and Manchester, private bus operators that leave those communities most in need cut off and isolated because they cannot turn a profit, and fares that rise year on year—that is the bleak reality that confronts the people of Merseyside every single day. More than eight years since George Osborne revealed his vision of a northern powerhouse, little has changed for the people I represent. Indeed, some things are far worse.

Today, it is quicker to get the train from London to Paris than it is to travel half that distance, from Liverpool to Hull. For all the talk of levelling up and building back better, spending per head on transport in London continues to be double what it is in the north, as it has been for 30 long years. Even as the scale of the climate crisis underscores the importance of getting cars off the road, the parlous state of public transport means that it is simply not an option for people who have to get to work on time, or to hospital, when there are no buses to take them there.

That has been the scandalous situation on Merseyside and across the north for so long that some of my constituents could be forgiven for thinking that things were always like this, and improvements are impossible. Others, however, have written to me, asking why a viable bus route from their home has been axed or why trains to their workplace are better suited for cattle than for people.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really good speech. I am pleased he has raised the issue of buses being axed without notice. I had that issue in my constituency some time ago in relation to buses from Irby, which is essentially a small village. That impacted a huge number of people, particularly elderly people, people with children and people without cars. Does he agree that bus services need to be reliable and people need to know that they are going to be there? There is no point calling it a service when it is an intermittent arrangement that private providers can cut or deliver as they choose, according to the profit motive.

Mick Whitley: I agree with my hon. Friend and will try to cover that point a bit later in my speech.

I secured the debate today because I believe that our constituents deserve better, and to talk about some of the steps that we should be taking to change transport in Merseyside for the better. From investing in Northern Rail to improving bus services and empowering local leaders to make a real and lasting change, last year's integrated rail plan provided the Government with a historic opportunity to make good on the promise of a rail revolution in the north of England.

Transport for the North's recommendation for a new line connecting Liverpool and Manchester had the potential to transform Merseyside. It would have dramatically cut journey times to our largest neighbour, brought 100,000 jobs to urban areas across the north and contributed a gross value added uplift of £3.4 billion by 2040.

It would not just have been the two big cities that reaped the benefits. Research by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership has clearly illustrated that towns like Birkenhead stand to make enormous gains from improved connectivity between major urban areas. My constituents would have counted among the nearly 4 million people to be brought within 90 minutes' reach of at least four major northern cities, opening them up to exciting new possibilities.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this debate. In view of what he has just said about the opportunities of the programme proposed by Transport for the North, does he agree that it is deeply disappointing that the actual outcome is a watered-down version of the absolute worst option, which means that the city region itself is going to have to find £1.5 billion to build a new mainline rail hub, which is just not realistic?

Mick Whitley: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I will try to cover that issue a little later on.

That was why local leaders were so emphatic in urging Ministers to commit to the development of a brand new line: it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for the Government to show that they were serious about honouring the commitments they made to the electorate in 2019. Those broken pledges have been shunted into the sidings. Instead of pushing ahead with the transformational changes that communities across Merseyside and the north urgently need and deserve, the Department for Transport has pushed ahead with an option that has rightly been rubbished by the metro Mayor, Steve Rotheram.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech thus far. Does he agree that after 11 years in government, this plan demonstrates the hollowness of the Government's so-called levelling-up agenda? In the words of the metro Mayor, Steve Rotheram, this is a "cheap and nasty solution". It is no solution at all.

Mick Whitley: I totally agree with my hon. Friend: my next sentence was going to include the words "cheap and nasty". This is levelling down, rather than levelling up.

The electrification of the Fiddlers Ferry route and its incorporation into the national rail network was included in the plan. That option on its own will do nothing at all to improve journey times. Instead of improving economic connectivity, this development threatens to cost our city region an estimated £280 million in disruption over the course of six years. At a time when we badly need to cut emissions and take action on air pollution, it will force an additional half a million cars on to the roads each year and critically undermine freight capacity.

We have been told that the costs of any new station in Liverpool will have to be met locally. A new station would serve as an essential cornerstone of any further expansion of the rail network, and would be indispensable in improving travel times on the upgraded line. However, with an estimated cost of £1.5 billion, it is an expense that our region—one of the most deprived in the country—can ill afford.

The Government's inability to live up to their lofty rhetoric and deliver the rail revolution that the north was promised exposes monumental failings at the heart of their levelling-up strategy. Whether on transport, education or energy, the Government are simply not willing to put their money where their mouth is. The task before us is enormous: we are attempting to address decades of under-investment, managed decline, and neglect of our transport network.

I eagerly anticipate the Minister's contribution today, and while I have no intention of prejudging his remarks, I am sure that he will point to recent spending announcements from which our city region has benefited. Of course I welcome that additional funding, but the Government still do not seem to grasp the scale of the challenge ahead, as the scrapping of the Liverpool to Manchester line clearly demonstrates. Individual spending announcements and piecemeal policies are not enough; there needs to be a transformational, long-term project with real buy-in from Westminster.

That is all the more important given the devastating impact that local government funding cuts have had on local transport networks. Wirral Council alone has seen its central Government grant fall from £260 million in 2010 to a measly £37 million this financial year, and now—like many local authorities on Merseyside—it finds itself in the midst of a deepening financial crisis. When we look to the future of transport, we must never forget the 10 years lost to Conservative austerity. For transport, as for so many services, this was a decade of destruction that will take a lot more than piecemeal handouts to rebuild.

Moreover, the levelling-up agenda has no chance of success if local voices remain stifled and local leaders remain powerless to take a lead in effecting change. Mayor Rotheram, the combined authority's transport lead, and the leaders of Warrington Borough Council and Cheshire West and Chester Councils were unequivocal in their repeated warnings that option 5.1 was not right for our region. We must ask why they were not listened to, and why it is that policy makers in Whitehall continue to ride roughshod over local leaders who know the needs of their communities best.

In Merseyside, ambitious plans for a London-style transport network hint at what is possible when local leaders get the financial support and political freedom they need. As Mayor Rotheram has said, we cannot wait for national Government to act, because it will never happen. Instead, the Liverpool city region is forging ahead with plans to fundamentally reform our region's transport network so that everyone on Merseyside has access to the affordable, accessible and green transport they deserve. The city region has already invested over half a billion pounds in a new fleet of state-of-the-art trains that will begin service later this year. Ambitious plans are also under way for the development of new stations and improvements across the region that will radically expand access to the network. The steps being taken to improve accessibility across the network will be particularly welcomed by my constituents in Rock Ferry, whose local station has for too long been inaccessible to wheelchair users and people with limited mobility.

However, rail is not the only sector in dire need of reform. Trains may connect our towns and cities, but buses bring communities together. Bus services are a vital lifeline for millions of people across the north, especially in areas like Merseyside that have such high levels of deprivation and low rates of car ownership. In the city region, 80% of all journeys taken on public transport are by bus, but since the deregulation of bus services in the 1980s, my constituents have been dependent on a fragmented and privatised system in which bus operators compete against each other while ignoring the needs of the local community.

A recent investigation into the provision of bus services on the Wirral exposed the scale of the problem that my constituents face. Residents reported having to catch two or three buses to travel even relatively short distances, and many expressed frustration at the difficulties they encounter in trying to reach Arrowe Park Hospital, which serves the entirety of our peninsula. Some of the most impoverished communities in my constituency, such as the Noctorum estate, feel all but cut off from the rest of Wirral, while other areas have no bus services at all, as operators deem those routes to be unprofitable.

Covid continues to have a negative effect on provision, with some services having not resumed since the darkest days of the pandemic. Here, again, the combined authority is taking decisive action. Using powers afforded to him by the Bus Services Act 2017, Mayor Rotheram is working to re-regulate the bus network across the city region to guarantee that commuters get the quality of service they deserve. The metro Mayor has also submitted a £667-million bid to central Government to increase services across the network, begin the roll-out of new zero-emission hydrogen vehicles and slash fares.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In my own constituency of Stockport and across Greater Manchester, Mayor Andy Burnham has pioneered the bus franchising model, which will deliver lower fares and improved connectivity, and prioritise passengers over private profit. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Mayor Burnham and encourage people to use this model across the nation?

Mick Whitley: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the important work that Mayor Burnham is doing to reform services in Greater Manchester.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing the debate but on the excellent way that he is presenting our case. Would he acknowledge that city region Mayor Steve Rotheram, to whom he has referred a few times, has made it clear that he would be willing, along with Andy Burnham and other local government leaders, to sit down with the Government and try to work out a compromise deal that would be better than what is on offer at the moment? Does he agree that the Minister should be encouraged to take up that offer? The future of our city region hinges on it, in the way that he has described.

Mick Whitley: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend, and I obviously hope that the Minister takes cognisance of the points he made.

Whether in Greater Manchester or Merseyside, local leaders should be commended for working hard to turn the tide and undo the ruinous legacy of 40 years of privatisation. However, I am very concerned that the Government have tied the hands of local government and are still preventing it from taking the bold and decisive action that is needed. In Merseyside and across the north, there is widespread recognition that our transport network should serve public need, not private greed.

However, in England, the Railways Act 1993 continues to prohibit the public operation of train services. With the devolved Governments in Wales and Scotland working to bring rail back into public ownership, surely it is time for combined authorities in England to be given equivalent powers, so that essential services such as Merseyrail can be brought into public hands and run on a not-for-dividend basis.

Given the widespread issues with bus services in Merseyside that I have mentioned, I would welcome an update from the Minister on any steps the Government might be taking to review the Bus Services Act 2017 to allow for the establishment of municipal bus companies. I am conscious that we are pressed for time, and I am looking forward to hearing the contributions of other hon. Members, so I will conclude my remarks.

4.45 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I know that you are a frequent visitor to the city region, and I was delighted that you were in my constituency at Haydock Park just before Christmas. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), who secured this debate, and to be part of this formidable red wall from Merseyside, with even a usurper from across the DMZ in Greater Manchester.

St Helens is often seen as being on the periphery of one city region, but we see ourselves as sitting at the heart of two—Liverpool city region and Greater Manchester—and acting as a key bridge between them. Therefore, harnessing every chance for growth and for local opportunities obviously requires transport connectivity.

We have already made important improvements to our road infrastructure along the A580, known locally as the East Lancs road, at Windle Island and Haydock. Newton-le-Willows station is now the second busiest on the Manchester-to-Liverpool line. It is being transformed into a leading regional transport hub. Six hundred kilometres of new cycling and walking networks are planned for the next decade, with a new 7 km route linking St Helens to Burtonwood and additional capacity on the Sankey Valley cycle route, which I and my family use on an almost weekly basis.

Cross-boundary bus services and links to Liverpool, Manchester, Warrington, Wigan and beyond are a particular issue for us. These are all progressing. We want our services to be enhanced and to see an end to the extortionate prices that are driven by profits for private companies. Wider innovations, particularly in green transport, are helping in our fight against climate change. Having Liverpool city region's publicly owned hydrogen buses on the route between the city and St Helens will mean the first green bus route in our region.

It is important to say that all this is being done by Labour councils, supported by Labour MPs, and the Liverpool city region Labour Mayor, Steve Rotheram, because we are ambitious for our city region and for our constituents. That stands in stark contrast to the Government. The integrated rail plan published in November was, we were told, a once-in-a-generation opportunity to push this agenda forward and transform transport for us in the north. But what did we get? We got a plan that is not even fit for the present, never mind the future.

The plan betrayed us and our communities again. It will sacrifice direct connections from Newton-le-Willows station in my constituency for the sake of a two-minute improvement on journeys from Manchester to Liverpool. There are no plans to improve local services from Garswood, for example by improving disabled access, or Rainford, and there is nothing about the future of the proposed new station at Carr Mill. The plan says nothing about developing the link between St Helens junction and central stations, which would open whole new possibilities for the town and our whole borough. This all comes as revised rail timetables for December 2022 propose reduced services from all those stations, meaning that we will have more overcrowding and constraints on passenger numbers.

In recent months, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and the Mayor of the Liverpool city region, Steve Rotheram, came to St Helens for a transport seminar with our local council and colleagues from Wigan and Warrington. We will continue to press for a better deal—the best deal for our region and constituents—because I and my colleagues are focused on transforming transport for our people. We know that that is critical for our economy and our climate, but also for our connections to each other and our places. I urge the Government to catch up and support us in the work we are doing.

4.49 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this hugely important and topical debate.

I will avoid wasting any time mincing my words and get straight to the point: the Minister's Department, the Secretary of State and the Government are badly letting down the people of Liverpool city region. For all the talk of levelling up, excluding our city region from the Northern Powerhouse Rail network and introducing the integrated rail plan is an abject failure to support economic growth in one of the great cities of the north. Our metro Mayor Steve Rotheram called the new plan "cheap and nasty", and those are words I echo without equivocation.

Alongside Members from the city region, the metro Mayor and the portfolio holder on the combined authority, I wrote to the Secretary of State in December to make our position clear. For the purpose of today's debate, I will reiterate that the IRP will be remembered for what it does not deliver for Merseyside.

There will be no new line connection to Liverpool. That fails to integrate us into the High Speed 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail networks. Upgrades to existing

lines in and out of Liverpool will cause up to six years of disruption, which will be significant for the Liverpool city region, causing an economic hit of at least £280 million each year. The plan will fail to deliver transformational extra capacity, as it includes using the already congested west coast mainline into Liverpool. That means little ability to grow local services. In fact, some services will be lost.

There will be a detrimental impact to freight, as 88 freight trains will be unable to operate each week during the upgrade phase. That freight traffic may never return to Liverpool. The plan will constrain the port of Liverpool's growth as the main deep-water port on the west of the British mainland. There will be no new station for Liverpool, which is vital to ensure the capacity for more long distance and local services. As the plan does not intend to commence work until the 2040s, there will be a slower delivery time. There are multiple caveats regarding the approvals and further progress. Do the Government have any intention of delivering anything beyond phase 2b to the west, and the west to east midlands link? Everything I just mentioned will prohibit the city region's ability to achieve net-zero emissions.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The original Transport for the North NPR plans proposed a real levelling up of the north of England, meaning that people in Liverpool city region and Merseyside could have economic opportunities in Manchester, Leeds and Bradford. It would have taken millions of cars off the M62, but these new plans bring us right back. The whole of the north will suffer, as will the whole of our economy, once again at the expense of London and the capital. Does my hon. Friend agree that these plans are letting down the whole of the north?

Paula Barker: My hon. Friend makes incredibly salient points, all of which I agree with. It is the whole of the north that will suffer under these detrimental plans.

As I was saying, support for HS2 in the north is largely predicated on delivering NPR in full, as promised, so that LCR and our regions can realise its full benefits. It is clear from the reply I received from the Department that cost is the driving factor in this deal, not the transformational change that Northern Powerhouse Rail would have brought. The IRP represents another broken promise from a Government who are intent on talking the good game of levelling up while delivering nothing of the sort. The consequences for the Liverpool city region and beyond in the north will be grave.

4.53 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this important debate. Although my constituency is in Cheshire, we are very much in the hinterland of Merseyside. We are less than 10 miles away from Liverpool city centre, and our economic, educational, cultural and family connections mean that there are many people travelling across Merseyside on a daily basis. Sadly, it seems that we are an afterthought, suffering poorer services and higher costs.

I will not repeat the legitimate arguments made by my constituents about the two-tier charging system they face when they cross the River Mersey in their car through the tunnel or the over the bridge. What I will say is that we are now coming up to seven years since the then Chancellor George Osborne promised my constituents that they would not have to pay a fee to cross the bridge at Runcorn. Will the Minister tell us when that promise will be kept?

Constituents of mine travelling by train have a similar experience at the moment, as the Wrexham to Bidston line is operating a reduced service due to short staffing, which is understandable. For my constituents in Neston, that is the only route by public transport into Liverpool. We were expecting a half-hourly service by now, but the pandemic seems to have delayed that. The current service runs once every two hours, which hopefully will be put right shortly, but it seems extraordinary to me that the 7.10 am and the 9.10 am train have survived, but the 8.10 am train has been cancelled. Surely, as the peak morning service, this is the last journey that should be cut.

We are waiting for answers about this from the current operator, but when the Minister responds I hope he can say when we can get the half-hourly service that was specifically promised in the franchise agreement. Ultimately, passengers on this line need an end to the need to change at Bidston, and to get the direct line to Liverpool installed. That would deliver the true connectivity that we need in Neston.

My constituents in Ellesmere Port, on the other side of the constituency, already have a half-hourly service to Liverpool, although the price of tickets is an issue. We all know the cost of rail travel is going up, and indeed the cost of everything else is going up, but we seem to be paying more than others.

The cost of a ticket into Liverpool from Little Sutton is 30% more expensive than from a station just two stops further down the line, and three times as much as it would cost for a similar journey in London. I do not understand why those price differentials exist, and I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an answer as to why prices are so much more expensive for my constituents, or at least commit to looking into that.

There has been a 20-year campaign for a station at Ledsham, in Little Sutton, which was submitted to the railway renewal fund, but sadly rejected. The overall comment that the Department made was that it was

"a strong proposal with a well-articulated narrative on how the project could unlock growth opportunities in the area."

It puzzles me somewhat that the application was rejected. Can the Minister enlighten me as to the reasons why it was turned down? The suspicion that we have seen in other areas is that decisions are being made on a party political basis, and not on the merits of the application. Will the Minister advise when there will be an opportunity to submit a further application? The problems that that station would solve are only going to increase.

Finally, I want to mention the crisis in school transport, which particularly affects my constituents travelling to schools on the Wirral. Driver shortages and increased fuel costs mean that some services are being pulled all together, or only offered on a termly basis, at a price that few can afford. As the schools are outside the catchment area, there is no financial support available.

I acknowledge that this will not be a priority for local authorities, with their stretched funds, but I know that this is not an isolated example and the pattern is being

[Justin Madders]

repeated across the country. Pupils have had enough disruption to their education during the last couple of years, so I would not want them to have to change schools because travel to the school of their choice has become unaffordable. Can the Minister comment on any assessment he has made on the cost and availability of home-to-school transport? That chimes with what my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead said earlier about the paucity of bus services in the area, and the need for places like Merseyside and Cheshire to be given the powers, rules and resources to take back control of their bus networks. That is something I think we would all want to see.

4.57 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to work under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this important debate.

For too long, the Government have been looking for transport companies to turn profit. The main purpose of transport is to get people around more easily. The knock-on effect of this is a boost to the local economy. That is how transport should be looked at and judged.

I will start by talking about buses. Buses provide over 80% of public transport journeys across the Liverpool city region. Across the region, a third of residents do not have access to a car. For many, a bus route is a lifeline to work, for food shopping, to see friends and family, and to the night-time economy.

Liverpool city region Mayor, Steve Rotheram, has submitted ambitious plans to the Government to improve our bus services, which are desperately needed. The plans would create a cheaper, more frequent and overall better bus service. The plans even look to introduce hydrogen buses, which aligns with the Government's own promises to reduce emissions following COP26.

A reasonably-priced, reliable bus service across the Liverpool city region would make access to jobs and opportunities so much easier for many local residents. For too long, poor transport links have held people back from employment, social activities and culture. In St Helens, there are so many apprenticeship opportunities for young people. Often, the biggest difficulty is getting to them. This bus plan would improve the way that young people and people of all ages go about their lives. That is what a good transport network is all about.

I hope that my Merseyside colleagues will forgive me for using the other M-word—Manchester. St Helens is located between two great cities: Liverpool and Manchester. As many colleagues know, I am a rugby league fan, so I am not involved in any football arguments and drama. For St Helens, connections to both cities are crucial to us—for jobs, socialising, education, shopping and culture. For example, the Christmas markets have recently been enjoyed by so many of my constituencies, but the irregularity of off-peak trains is an issue. Lea Green station has a big free car park, which makes it very popular with my constituents. The trains to Manchester come at nine minutes to and six minutes past the hour. That is two trains within 15 minutes of each other, and nothing for the rest of the hour. They also arrive within three minutes of each other in Manchester. It makes many local residents think, "What is the point?". Surely there is a better way to spread out the service, especially when there are only two trains an hour.

In Liverpool, the story is the same for trains. From Lea Green and St Helens Central to Liverpool Lime Street, there are two trains an hour within 15 minutes of each other. In fact, sometimes at St Helens Central, the two trains an hour are as close as eight minutes apart and nothing for the rest of the hour. Again, if this service is limited to a certain number of trains per hour, it is important that they are spread out as much as possible.

Public transport should not be about whether transport companies are making big profits for their shareholders. It should be about people getting around more easily and more cheaply to give a boost to local businesses, local high streets and local attractions.

The Government need to stop seeing transport in isolation, and see it as a way to support local economies and communities. We have all seen the impact that Transport for London has had on making London the economic hub that it has become. For decades, millions of pounds of Government support have helped London to become the powerhouse that it is, but here, unless people are in the golden triangle, there seems to be nothing going for them. Each announcement seems to give us a kick rather than a lift. To help other cities across the country, the Government need to start funding us in the way that they have funded the golden triangle.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Please could we drop the length of speeches to three to four minutes?

5.2 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I join my comrades in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing today's important debate.

This Government have attempted to make levelling up their watchword of the day, but instead of tackling regional inequalities, they are rolling back on their promises, abandoning northern towns and cities to cope with failing transport infrastructure.

The integrated rail plan was seen as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle fragmentation, deregulation and underfunding in our railways. It recommended a new line between Liverpool and Manchester, which would have transformed Merseyside, promising to bring 100,000 jobs to urban areas across the north and contributing £3.4 billion to the economy by 2040. Instead, the north has once again been failed, with no significant improvements to journey times, compromised capacity for local and freight services, and the promise of severe disruption and delays.

The bleak reality is that, with spending per head in the north half of that spent in London, transport across Merseyside and in the broader region is woefully lacking. People needing to get to work on time or get to hospital appointments are left wanting, forced to travel for hours. In failing to integrate Liverpool into High Speed 2 and the Northern Powerhouse Rail network, this Government have undermined economic growth in the city region. It has condemned us to up to six years of disruption to existing lines coming in and out of Liverpool, costing at

least £280 million in every year of that disruption. If this Government are truly serious about levelling up for so-called left behind areas such as my own city of Liverpool, they need to put their money where their mouth is. Instead, they have shown once again that their promises ring hollow.

Labour leaders in the north-west and elsewhere are leading the way in investing in integrated sustainable transport systems. Liverpool's metro Mayor Steve Rotheram has done some incredible work to roll out state-of-the-art, fully accessible and publicly-owned trains for the Merseyrail network later this year. He has already begun to deliver on a 600 km network of cycling and walking routes for the city region. He has secured £710 million to invest in further infrastructure improvement, including new green bus routes, and he submitted a welcome bid of £667 million to re-regulate and increase bus services across the network, to begin the roll-out of zero-emission hydrogen vehicles and to slash bus fares.

The task before us is enormous. We need radical change to undo the decades of decline of our transport network. The piecemeal policies and additional funding allocated so far do not face up to the scale of the challenge ahead. Instead, we need additional powers for combined authorities to bring services such as Merseyrail into public hands. We need the Government to engage with, support and finance the radical and ambitious transport plans that the metro Mayor is implementing.

5.5 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship again today, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this important debate and for all the campaigning he has done on the issue. I also thank all the other MPs from Merseyside and beyond for their powerful contributions.

My hon. Friend outlined in detail the connectivity issues that we face across our transport networks in Merseyside. The environmental impact that this is having cannot be understated. The issues are intertwined. We need a change to the infrastructure if we are looking to reduce emissions, and have an impact on people's health and wellbeing as well as to their ability to access work and services, and if we are looking to improve the digital economy experience that is vital in Liverpool.

We need long-term solutions—not pop-up cycle lanes or short-term schemes, but thought-out long-term investment infrastructure. We need real action, not soundbites about levelling up from the Government. If they are serious about the levelling-up agenda, the Government must listen, be led by what Merseyside Members, local leaders and our constituents are saying, and provide the resources and policy for the vital transport connectivity needed across our city region.

The integrated rail plan was a wonderful opportunity to revolutionise our country's rail network, but the north has been offered a "cheap and nasty" deal, as has been much quoted today. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) made our collective thoughts clear in a letter to the Secretary of State, and there have been the comments made by Members today.

Since the reforms of the 1980s, areas such as Merseyside have been forced to contend with fragmentation, deregulation and underfunding. I thank metro Mayor Steve Rotheram and Liam Robinson for their work to reverse that awful legacy. I look forward to working with them to reintroduce the Bootle branch line. If the Bootle branch line—officially titled the Canada Dock branch—could be opened as a passenger route, it could save a host of Liverpool communities.

That line could run from Lime Street to Edge Lane, Prescot Road, West Derby Road, Townsend Lane, Walton Lane and County Road before going to Bootle. It would be a game changer for connectivity in West Derby and in the north of the city, and it is one that I know my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) wholeheartedly supports.

In my constituency, the transport connectivity was arguably better a century ago than it is now. The former station buildings remind us of the Cheshire lines that served our community from 1884 to 1960, when passenger services ceased. My constituent Stephen Guy recalled:

> "I was 12 when the passenger trains stopped and I recall the ticket office with its little window to pay fares. It was a picturesque line along the West Derby section and many people were saddened by the closure. People filmed and photographed the last trains. West Derby Station was the finest on the line. The station had popular staff who tended beautiful flower beds and hanging baskets—they won awards."

That is a wonderful memory of civic pride in a publicly-owned railway network. I ask the Minister to look at what we had in the past and to see what can be reinstated; we could connect our city using existing train lines, by bringing stations back into public use and linking them to bus routes. That would offer real solutions, and result in cleaner air and better connectivity.

I am proud to have stood in 2019 on a manifesto that would have ensured that councils could improve bus services by regulating bus networks and taking them into public ownership and have given them the resources and full legal powers to achieve that cost-effectively, thereby ending the race to the bottom in working conditions for bus workers. It would also have delivered improvements for rail passengers by bringing our railways back into public ownership, allowing us to make fares simpler and more affordable and rebuild the fragmented railways as a nationally integrated public service, cut the wastage of private profit and improve accessibility for disabled people.

It is a false economy to waste funds, time and resources on quick wins that do not last. Will the Minister commit to investing in our infrastructure and look at long-term solutions?

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Please keep to three minutes.

5.10 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this debate, which is much needed and very timely, as the number of speakers shows.

I agree with all that has been said about the IRP and the comments of Mayor Steve Rotheram. This issue gets to the heart of the problem with the Government's transport policy, because we have been promised for more than a decade that the transport issues in the north will be dealt with. I am old enough to remember

[Alison McGovern]

when the northern powerhouse was championed by the Conservative party; not any more, it seems. We were promised even by the current resident of No. 10 that we would see levelling up, but those promises ring absolutely hollow every time a constituent of mine tries to get a bus.

I will make just a few brief points. In Merseyside and right across the north of England, public transport is straightforwardly an equality issue, because it is people without cars, parents and older people who really struggle. If we are to improve productivity in this country and see a growing economy, dealing with the challenges of our public transport will be at the heart of the solution.

First, buses are massively important. We talk a lot about trains in this country, but the vast majority of people who are at the bottom end of things when it comes to wages get on buses; they have less access to cars, and in Merseyside they live further from train stations. I sound like an old woman today, but I remember when this Tory Government took away the bus support grant; it had a massive impact on the availability of buses in Merseyside and we are still feeling it today. Other hon. Members have talked about what a big deal it is when a bus gets taken away from a community. We have the possibility of some reform now in Merseyside, but what conversations has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Work and Pensions and other Departments about the impact of poor bus services on the employment prospects for people in Merseyside and other parts of the north?

Secondly, our social housing areas in Merseyside are often very poorly served by public transport because of how the rail network was historically built to support a growing economy during the Victorian era. That means that, as many hon. Members have said, we need to go much further to address the imbalance. We need to look at the interconnections between areas of housing that need to grow, particularly for people who are struggling, and put the transport links in. My neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the Wrexham-Bidston line; I feel like when the world ends I will still be saying we need better services on the Wrexham-Bidston line, so I implore the Minister to look at it.

Thirdly, people without cars need better transport because they need to be able to get to work and have better chances. We all need people to get out of their cars, because we all need to do something about climate change and we know that it will most affect those who have least. It is a matter of our environmental future and a matter of equality. I ask the Minister what conversations he has had with the Liverpool city region about its plans, because we need to supercharge them.

Finally, when devolution came about for Merseyside, we wanted it because we wanted to demonstrate that we could run ourselves—that we could improve life prospects for people in Merseyside right where we are, instead of having to come begging all the time to people in Whitehall, asking them to help us. So far, it is working. I simply ask the Minister to get behind us and let us show what we can do.

5.14 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. My congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this important debate on transport connectivity in Merseyside. I express my gratitude, too, to my hon. Friends from Merseyside and nearby for the eloquence of their speeches, which amply illustrated their passion for their region. My Slough constituency is a long way from Merseyside—while they have the River Mersey, we have the Jubilee line, and while they have "Brookside", we have "The Office"—but what I do share with the good people of Merseyside is their desire for better transport, and equality when it comes to transport funding.

For far too long the region has suffered, despite excellent local leaders pushing for better. Merseyside faces unique issues when it comes to transport connectivity. The majority of short trips—under 5 km—are made by car, and as a result the region has a significant air pollution issue. In the Liverpool city region alone, over 1,000 deaths a year are linked to this silent killer. On public transport, 80% of journeys are taken by bus, yet bus fares have risen by 40% and routes have been mercilessly cut nationally. Rates of active travel, such as walking and cycling, are relatively low, making up just 4.5% and 1% of journeys respectively. Given the population and the scale of the region, rail connectivity across the region and further afield is poor.

However, while the landscape of transport might be varied, the solution is simple: providing genuinely affordable, convenient, accessible and good-quality public transport. Indeed, despite this difficult landscape and northern funding facing a shortfall of £86 billion in comparison with London, it is a Labour-led locality that has driven through successes for the region, proving that when we listen to local people and commit to devolution, transport can be transformative.

Serving 1.6 million people, Mayor Steve Rotheram, with whom I had a good chat this week, has been fighting hard to bring about serious transformation of the Liverpool city region's transport system. Under his leadership, Merseyside's record on improving transport has been impressive. There is the roll-out of publicly owned trains for the Merseyrail network, and investment in new rolling stock, designed with local passengers' needs in mind. That has used a direct public ownership and procurement model, which reduces costs and pioneers a new approach. There are the plans to completely overhaul and re-regulate the bus network as part of the bus service improvement plan. There is improved accessibility across the network, including level access from train to platform. Work is beginning on the first phase of a 600 km network of cycling and walking routes for the city region, and in the city region sustainable transport settlement, funding has been secured for new green bus routes and enhanced walking and cycling infrastructure.

Mayor Rotheram and hon. Members here are passionate about their region. A London-style integrated transport system is what they want. True devolution is required from Government, not mere soundbites. Significant funding is needed to meet the challenge ahead. How have Merseyside's ambitions for transformational change been supported? I am afraid that it is the same old story from this Tory Government. Rather than levelling up, they neglect, betray and short-change the north from

their Westminster bubble, ignoring local voices. and marginalising their well-informed views when it comes to decision making.

Nothing epitomises this more than the disintegrated rail plan; "cheap and nasty" is how Mayor Rotheram described the IRP's weak offering for Liverpool, which will have all the disruption and none of the benefits. Instead of the full Northern Powerhouse Rail plans, as agreed by the cross-party, respected Transport for the North, Merseyside was offered a deal that provides no real or effective improvement to journey times, capacity or connectivity. Despite Liverpool Central station being declared at capacity by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, there are no plans for a new station for Liverpool unless it is locally funded.

The port of Liverpool is one of the busiest; it transported 31 million metric tonnes of freight in 2020 alone. Anyone would think that the Government would want to ensure that the port was served properly by the IRP, so that we could move more freight off our roads and on to rail, and reduce inner-city traffic and emissions. I welcome the recent upgrades to the Bootle branch line, but concerns about the disruption that will be caused by up to 88 freight trains a week during construction relating to the IRP have yet to be addressed. I therefore ask the Minister, quite simply: why is Merseyside being short-changed once again as a result of the Government's rail plan for the north? This matters because the potential of our northern regions is being wasted. I appreciate, acknowledge and understand the huge potential of Merseyside, and it is disappointing that the Government clearly do not feel the same. I urge the Minister to engage with local leaders, hon. Members and the people of Merseyside to ensure that the plans deliver for them, because they will have direct consequences for millions of people for decades to come.

5.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to respond to the numerous speeches made by right hon. and hon. Members.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing the debate on this incredibly important topic. Transport connectivity in Merseyside is important for not just the city region, but the north of England and the whole United Kingdom. Responsibility for much of transport connectivity in Merseyside rests with the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and the city region's metro Mayor, Steve Rotheram, who has been referred to by many speakers, and whom I meet regularly, given that my portfolio includes high-speed rail and Northern Powerhouse Rail, as well as the trans-Pennine route upgrade.

Mayoral combined authorities—Liverpool city region was at the forefront of the drive to create metro Mayors—were created in recognition of the strategic importance of joining transport connectivity with activity on economic development, housing and planning, so that we can ensure sustainable economic growth in our great cities and opportunities for the communities in them. Through a series of devolution deals, we have provided mayoral combined authorities with more transport powers and more funding. I assure all Members who have spoken that the Department for Transport and its Ministers, including me, work constructively with the Mayor and all our partners in the Liverpool city region to ensure that its transport connectivity maximises economic growth and supports thriving communities.

Sir George Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. What does he think about Steve Rotheram's suggestion, which I repeated today, that the Minister sits down with local government leaders to see if a compromise can be reached that does not have all the downsides we know about, and that would improve the service in the way that many of us would like?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. I have spoken to Steve Rotheram since the integrated rail plan was published and I am aware of the call from northern leaders for more discussions. I am happy to have those discussions, both with the Mayor and with other northern leaders, to see how we can progress a variety of schemes. It is fair to say that I spoke to all the northern leaders regularly when considering the integrated rail plan and drawing it up. The Secretary of State met northern leaders through the Northern Transport Acceleration Council, which he founded. He also worked with Transport for the North to bring together a wealth of evidence and come up with the plan, but I am more than happy to continue to speak to the Mayor and others to ensure that we take local communities with us as we progress the plans. As we said in the plan, we take an adaptive approach towards investment. We are keen to continue to work with the Liverpool city region and others on delivery of the plans.

Improved transport connectivity within and between our great cities is fundamental to our levelling-up vision, in which we unlock the economic potential of the northern powerhouse, build back better from this awful pandemic, and ensure that the Liverpool city region and the north of England play a key role in a resurgent UK economy. That is why my Department, led by the Secretary of State for Transport, who is also the Cabinet Minister with responsibility for the northern powerhouse, is at the forefront of making that vision a reality.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this important debate. For many, Liverpool is the capital of north Wales, yet direct rail services from the north Wales coast ceased in the 1970s. Thanks to the reopening of the Halton curve, hourly services are promised from Llandudno to Liverpool, although not, I think, until December 2023. Will the Minister join me in calling on Transport for Wales to bring that forward if it can?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which I will relay to the Minister with responsibility for rail, who I know speaks regularly to colleagues in Transport for Wales. He makes a very powerful point on behalf of his constituents.

Since 2010, over £29 billion has been invested in transport infrastructure in the north, but the Government want to go further, faster. Levelling up all parts of the UK is at the centre of the Government's agenda as we build back better from the pandemic, and we will shortly publish a levelling-up White Paper that sets out bold

[Andrew Stephenson]

new policy interventions giving local control to drive economic recovery. Transport connectivity is fundamental to that.

Maria Eagle: The Minister has said that he recognises the importance of transport connectivity and improving the economy of the Liverpool city region. Then why have his Government decided to deliver the worst option—a watered-down version of it described as "cheap and nasty" by the Mayor of the region? It is just not good enough.

Andrew Stephenson: It was described by Mayor Rotheram in those terms. However, our analysis has shown that the proposals from Transport for the North and others for brand new lines would have very significant additional costs and environmental impacts, and would deliver minimal additional benefits to passengers. They would also take longer to deliver than upgrades to existing lines.

Many right hon. and hon. Members referred to climate change. I speak as the Minister responsible for high-speed rail, and having spent a lot of time mitigating some of the environmental impacts of the construction of HS2. The embedded carbon in steel and concrete, and building brand new infrastructure through pristine countryside, has a huge environmental impact both on biodiversity and carbon emissions. We have to get the balance right. If in parts of the north of England we can deliver similar passenger benefits with less environmental impact, we have to consider those options realistically. These were the kind of issues we had to balance when we were drawing together the integrated rail plan.

The levelling-up White Paper is being finalised, but we are already making great strides towards strengthening the voice of the north. Mayor Rotheram represents a region that is part of the 60% of the north that is now covered by metro Mayors. We have announced the first allocations from the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, which will regenerate towns and high streets and allow investment in the infrastructure that people need. This includes £37.5 million for Liverpool city region's "levelling-up for recovery" proposals, which will deliver a range of transport interventions to support connectivity and economic growth in Liverpool city centre, the Maritime Gateway in Sefton and Birkenhead. Those include the transformation of Argyle Street with a new active travel corridor that will link regeneration at Woodside with a new Dock Branch Park and the enterprise zone at Wirral Waters; and reconfiguring the Kingsway tunnel toll plaza to address congestion and delay on the strategic bus and car route into Liverpool. In addition to this, we have committed £2.35 billion to 101 towns deals, which will invest in local economies; that will affect the constituency of the hon. Member for Birkenhead, but also Runcorn, St Helens and Southport—all in the Liverpool city region. All the towns fund proposals for those areas include measures to improve local transport connectivity.

England's eight large metropolitan areas, including the Liverpool city region, are the mainstays of our work to level up the UK. We will invest £5.7 billion in the transport networks of those city regions through the city region sustainable transport settlements programme, including £710 million in the Liverpool city region. That funding will provide the Mayor with the flexibility to invest in local priorities, many of which have been applauded by hon. Members today. In Birkenhead, that funding will support further investment in the town centre, including, at Hind Street, the removal of the flyover that links the local highway network to the Queensway tunnel toll plaza and severs the town.

Mick Whitley: While I welcome any town or regeneration funds, the funding the Minister mentions is specifically for the regeneration of Birkenhead. What we are talking about is transformational change in transport. I have not heard in the Minister's response about any changes that are coming any time soon. That is what we are talking about: transformational change to buses and transport on Merseyside and in the Liverpool city region.

Andrew Stephenson: In the 26 seconds left, I will say that the national bus strategy, which is part of a £3 billion spend on buses over this Parliament, should address many of the issues about buses raised by hon. Members. Obviously, during the pandemic, we provided £1.5 billion in emergency funding to keep the buses in the region going. We have supplied the region with £710 million in dedicated funding for active travel, and more has been announced by the Chancellor as part of a £2 billion package.[1]

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

1. *[Official Report, 17 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 2MC.]*

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 January 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19: PANORAMIC National Study

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): On 20 October 2021, the Government announced the procurement of two ground-breaking novel oral antivirals to treat UK covid-19 patients, supplemented by the announcement of additional volumes of these drugs on 22 December. I am writing to inform the House of the progress made on the platform adaptive trial of novel antivirals for early treatment of covid-19 in the community (PANORAMIC) national study and issue a call to action.

On 8 December, the PANORAMIC national study was launched by the University of Oxford. This study was set up so that comprehensive data can be collected on how well these antiviral treatments work in a highly vaccinated population before making these treatments more widely available in the NHS to patients in the most effective way possible.

This will ensure that both patients and clinicians have clear evidence and full confidence in taking and prescribing these treatments respectively across the UK. This has become even more important since the emergence of the omicron variant, as all research previously has been completed with non-omicron variants.

The first antiviral being studied is molnupiravir, which was granted conditional marketing authorisation by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency on 4 November 2021. The study has recruited 3,176 participants as of noon on 12 January 2022. This is excellent progress for a community-based trial in its first month, but it is crucial that recruitment ramps up significantly to generate results as quickly as possible.

We are encouraging people who receive a positive test for covid-19, are experiencing covid-19 symptoms beginning in the last five days, and are aged over 50, or are over 18 with certain underlying health conditions, to sign up to the study straight away.

The study is available to people in this cohort across the UK and it is possible to sign up from anywhere, with the treatment delivered to a participant's house directly. To ensure eligibility for the study, those who wish to participate must sign up as soon as possible after getting a positive covid-19 test result as antivirals are expected to be most effective when taken at the earliest stages of disease.

Members of both Houses are requested to encourage constituents and others who may contact them to consider enrolling in the study online at www.panoramictrial.org or by calling the freephone number 0808 156 0017.

The Antivirals Taskforce is working across the health and care system in the UK, including NHS England and NHS Improvement, the UK Health Security Agency and our partners in the devolved Administrations to plan the wider deployment of antiviral treatments as data from the national study becomes available.

The Department of Health and Social Care will publish a further update in due course.

[HCWS532]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Prime Minister's Trade Envoy Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): The Prime Minister has made two new appointments to his trade envoy programme.

The new appointments will extend the total number of trade envoys to 34 parliamentarians, covering 72 markets. The Prime Minister's trade envoy programme is an unpaid and voluntary role with cross-party membership from both Houses. The role supports the UK's ambitious trade and investment agenda by championing Global Britain and promoting the UK as a destination of choice for inward investment. Trade envoys will help to make the most of our new trade deals and support the UK's economic recovery through the levelling-up agenda, by helping business take advantage of the opportunities arising in export markets.

The new appointments are:

> The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness, Graham Stuart MP, has been appointed as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
>
> Lord Sarfraz of Kensington has been appointed as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy to Singapore.

[HCWS529]

TRANSPORT

Smart Motorways

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Since becoming Transport Secretary, I have worked consistently to raise the bar on motorway safety and I am determined to make sure people using our motorways continue to benefit from one of the safest and best performing road networks in the world.

To this end, one of my first actions as Transport Secretary was to order a stocktake of smart motorways. I also welcome the Transport Committee's report published on 2 November 2021, following their inquiry into the roll-out and safety of smart motorways.

The stocktake and action plan, which I published in March 2020, focused efforts on further upgrading the safety of smart motorways. I am pleased that these efforts have been recognised by the Committee, which agreed that the Government were right to focus on upgrading the safety of all lane running (ALR) smart motorways, rather than reinstating the hard shoulder—which the Committee recognised could cause more deaths or serious injuries on our roads.

Having carefully considered the Committee's report, I will be taking forward all of its recommendations. This includes the recommendation to pause the roll-out of future ALR smart motorway schemes until a full five years' worth of safety data is available.

During the pause, we will continue to make sure all existing ALR smart motorways are equipped with best-in-class technology and resources and are as safe as they can possibly be.

I will also follow the recommendations to pause the conversion of dynamic hard shoulder smart motorways to ALR until the next road investment strategy; retrofit more emergency areas across existing ALR schemes;

conduct an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of stopped vehicle detection technology; explore the introduction of the emergency corridor manoeuvre into the highway code; and investigate the benefits of health and safety assessments being undertaken by the Office of Rail and Road.

Taken together and building on my initial stocktake these measures will ensure that our roads continue to be among the safest in the world—helping drivers not just to be safe, but crucially, to feel safe and confident when driving.

I am grateful for the Transport Committee's scrutiny and to all those that provided evidence for their work. I will be instructing National Highways to take immediate steps to implement the actions as set out in the response and will update the Committee on progress over the coming year.

[HCWS528]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) has been appointed as a full member in place of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

The right hon. Lord Keen of Elie QC has been appointed as a full member in place of Baroness Eccles of Moulton.

The hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) has been appointed as a substitute member of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan).

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Richard Holden) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of the hon. Member for St. Austell and Newquay (Steve Double).

Baroness Foster of Oxton has been appointed as a substitute member in place of Lord Balfe.

[HCWS530]

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) has been appointed as a full representative of the United Kingdom delegation to the parliamentary assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson).

My right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) has been appointed as a full representative in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood).

Lord Smith of Hindhead has been appointed as a full representative in place of Lord Bowness.

John Whittingdale has been appointed as leader of the delegation.

[HCWS531]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 12 January 2022

	Col. No.
PRIME MINISTER	562
Engagements	562
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	553
Conversion Therapy	559
Covid-19 Vaccinations	557
Hate Crimes	554
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—*continued*	
Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths	553
Spiking in Nightclubs	559
Support for Disabled People	556
Topical Questions	560
Transgender Prisoners	555
Women in Enterprise	558

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 12 January 2022

	Col. No.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	21WS
Covid-19: PANORAMIC National Study	21WS
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	22WS
Prime Minister's Trade Envoy Programme	22WS
PRIME MINISTER	23WS
Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe	24WS
PRIME MINISTER—*continued*	
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation	23WS
TRANSPORT	22WS
Smart Motorways	22WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Wednesday 19 January 2022

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

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.

Volume 706
No. 98

Wednesday
12 January 2022

CONTENTS

Wednesday 12 January 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 553] [see index inside back page]
Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Vaccination Strategy [Col. 575]
Answer to urgent question—(Maggie Throup)

Afghanistan: Humanitarian Crisis [Col. 590]
Answer to urgent question—(Vicky Ford)

Digitally Altered Body Images [Col. 606]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Dr Luke Evans)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill [Col. 609]
Programme motion (No. 2)—(Gareth Johnson)—agreed to
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

Glue Traps (Offences) Bill: Money [Col. 623]
Motion—(Jo Churchill)—agreed to

Glue Traps (Offences) Bill: Ways and Means [Col. 623]
Motion—(Jo Churchill)—agreed to

Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority [Col. 624]
Motion—(Mr Rees-Mogg)—agreed to

Westminster Hall
Access to Radiotherapy [Col. 227WH]
Direct Ferry Links: Scotland and Mainland Europe [Col. 249WH]
Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour [Col. 257WH]
Access to GP Appointments [Col. 282WH]
Transport Connectivity: Merseyside [Col. 289WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 21WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers]