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18 January 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 18 January 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Jessica Morden be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Lilian Greenwood be added.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Discharge from Hospital: Covid-19 Outbreak

1. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the effective discharge of patients from hospital during the covid-19 outbreak.
[905075]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): We are working closely with the NHS, social care and local authorities to significantly reduce delayed discharge and free up beds for those who need them most. We are making full use of non-acute beds, including those in hospices, other community beds and beds in the independent sector. To drive further progress and support regional and local systems, I also established a new national taskforce last month to help deliver best practice.

Rob Butler: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Many people would like to leave hospital when their treatment is completed, but they are not quite well enough to cope alone at home. That is obviously frustrating for them, because they want their independence, it creates problems for hospitals, which need the beds, and it costs the taxpayer unnecessary money. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the development of a strategy to provide intermediate care to support discharge would help alleviate pressure on both the NHS and the social care sector?

Sajid Javid: I do agree with my hon. Friend. That is why, as part of our continued response to the covid-19 pandemic, on 2 December last year NHS England asked local systems to consider ways to increase patient flow out of acute hospital settings. That includes surge capacity in care homes, identifying unused hospice capacity and, in some cases, repurposing hotel accommodation

where appropriate. NHS England is reporting to me on this regularly, and it is something that we will closely monitor progress on.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Government's own impact assessment of discharge to assess in the Health and Care Bill, which was published almost two months after the Bill was voted on, expects unpaid carers to have to give up working hours and bear the financial burdens of the discharge to assess policy. In the light of that assessment will the Government provide greater support to unpaid carers, or will they actually reconsider this policy?

Sajid Javid: Throughout the pandemic especially we have been providing more and more support, quite rightly, across the care sector, including for domiciliary care in care homes and unpaid carers. We have made £3.3 billion of extra funding and support available since March 2020.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering General Hospital is a 500-bed medium general hospital, and I am afraid that too many, mainly elderly, people who have completed their medical treatment still await discharge back into the community in a safe way. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the national taskforce is sent to Northamptonshire to help us deal with this issue?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. It is of increasing concern, especially as we have seen hospitalisations rise because of the omicron wave. I believe that the national taskforce is already looking at Northamptonshire. If it is not, I will certainly make sure it does.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the shadow Minister, Karin Smyth.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Around 10,000 medically fit people are currently in hospital when they should be at home with their families or in a supported setting. That is a tragedy for them and a mark of shame on this Government. Short-term cash, taskforces or threatening legal action are not solutions. Social care support is a lifeline not a luxury, so will the Government now work with us cross-party in line with the joint Select Committee report of 2018 to bring forward immediate change and offer hope and respite to those receiving and giving social care?

Sajid Javid: First, may I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position and wish her all the very best? She will have heard in a previous answer that social care and those who provide social care, which is such a vital act and such a vital service throughout our country, are receiving record amounts of support—£3.3 billion of extra financing since March 2020. Of course I would be more than happy to work with her and her colleagues to see whether there is more that we can do together.

Covid-19: Hospital Admissions

2. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of covid-19 hospital admissions.
[905076]

15. **Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of covid-19 hospital admissions. [905090]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): We have developed a globally recognised programme that combines boosters, testing and antivirals to protect the vulnerable and to reduce hospital admissions. Our “Get Boosted Now” campaign led to a huge increase in vaccination rates and we have successfully procured the highest number of antivirals per head in Europe. We are also employing the use of remote monitoring technology to enable more patients to get the care that they need at home rather than having to be admitted into hospital.

Harriett Baldwin: Before omicron arrived there had been over 10 million positive cases in this country of covid-19, of which 14 in every 1,000 appeared to have been fatal. Since omicron arrived there have been a further 5 million cases, and it looks as though the fatality rate is about 10 times lower. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how important the “Get Boosted Now” programme has been in reducing hospitalisations and fatalities?

Sajid Javid: Yes, of course. The officials within my Department have carried out a wealth of analysis on case fatality rates in the vaccinated and unvaccinated populations. Recent data has shown that covid-19 case fatality rates for the over-80s are likely to be more than five times greater in the unvaccinated versus those who have had at least two doses.

My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, when I recently visited the intensive care unit dealing with covid patients in King’s College, the consultant in charge told me that he estimated that about 70% of his patients on that day were completely unvaccinated. It is clear, as we have seen especially in the past few weeks, that vaccinations save lives.

Lia Nici: I have a 90-year-old constituent who has been prevented from going to see his 89-year-old wife of 65 years. It took my intervention after 20 days of his being prevented from seeing her for him to be able to get into the hospital. Neither of them have covid. Will my right hon. Friend please instruct health trusts that, as we reduce the incidence of covid in hospitals, family members must be allowed to go and see their family in hospital?

Sajid Javid: I am very sorry to hear about what happened to my hon. Friend’s constituent. It cannot be right that people are unable to visit their loved ones while they are in hospital. It should not require the intervention of a Member of Parliament to do so. Allowing such visits should be an absolute priority in every trust, and I have recently raised this issue with the chief executive of the NHS. She has assured me that this message will be sent loud and clear to all NHS trusts.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Too many women with endometriosis are being forced to go to A&E or seek hospital admissions for their treatment. This is partly because they wait on average seven and a half years for a diagnosis. What can

the Secretary of State do to improve the knowledge and awareness of endometriosis right across all aspects of the NHS?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the importance of endometriosis. She will know, I hope, that in the women’s health strategy there will be an important focus on it. Within that strategy, we have set out how we can work together to do much more.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): We know that the number of covid admissions has led to a number of people having their routine hospital treatment cancelled. Last week it was announced that that had reached a record-breaking 6 million people. When might the Government make a statement about hitting this figure and set out a plan to tackle it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that, sadly because of covid and the need for the NHS to prioritise it—rightly—we have sadly seen an increase in people waiting for elective procedures and scans. She will also know that the Government have already set out a plan to deal with that in terms of funding—the biggest catch-up fund in history, with an extra £8 billion of funding over the next three years. After tackling the most immediate need to deal with omicron, we will shortly set out in much more detail how we intend to tackle the elective backlog.

Covid-19 Vaccination Sites

3. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to provide additional covid-19 vaccination sites. [905077]

12. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to provide additional covid-19 vaccination sites. [905086]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): To maximise uptake there are now more than 3,000 sites—more than ever—delivering covid-19 vaccines and boosters, including hundreds of walk-in sites. Opening times have been extended to seven days a week. GPs and community pharmacies have been asked to do more vaccinations, and 750 armed forces personnel and 41 military planners have been brought in to every region to help co-ordinate the national effort. The offer of a covid vaccine—a first or second dose, and a booster for those eligible—remains open to everyone.

Mrs Murray: In rural areas such as mine in South East Cornwall, it can mean travelling miles to get to the nearest available centre. What ambitions do the Government have to get vaccinations out to the smaller communities to assist those who have yet to be vaccinated to get their jab?

Maggie Throup: Well, 99% of the population in England live within 10 miles of a covid-19 vaccination site, and robust plans are in place to ensure that everyone has convenient access to a vaccine. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, 85% of those eligible have received their

booster or third dose. There are targeted vaccination programmes in Cornwall to support the homeless, Traveller and migrant workers communities and fishermen—a community that has a great champion in my hon. Friend.

For those in more rural Cornwall communities, a further 16 pop-up sessions are organised throughout January, and more are planned to ensure that everyone can get boosted more easily.

Mark Fletcher: A number of residents in Bolsover have written to me to ask why there is not a specific vaccination centre in the town. Given that the booster roll-out has slowed locally and given our poor bus connections, could the Minister—as my former Whip, I know that she is incredibly persuasive—look into having a specific site in Bolsover?

Maggie Throup: There are now six vaccination sites in the Bolsover district. A regular pop-up clinic was also set up in Shirebrook to address and identify the shortfall in uptake, but that has been phased out as new community pharmacy and primary care network clinics came on board to support the local vaccination programme and increase the number of Bolsover sites at the end of 2021. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that a new roving vaccination van is being deployed across Derbyshire. It will visit Bolsover and surrounding villages to provide extra capacity and ensure that everyone has another way to get their booster jab. It will also allow those not yet vaccinated to come forward for this life-saving protection.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Undoubtedly, additional vaccine sites in rural communities will increase vaccine uptake, which is vital. However, does the Minister agree that, for NHS staff, counselling and one-to-one conversations are right and far more effective than the Government's current plan potentially to sack the 5% of hospital staff in the Morecambe Bay region and indeed across the country who have not been vaccinated? That would cause a serious capacity problem in the NHS.

Maggie Throup: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are talking about patient safety. He is quite right that it is important to have that dialogue, and I know that colleagues across the board in the NHS are having that. It is interesting to note that more than 94% of NHS staff have already had their vaccine, and I commend them for that. As the chief medical officer Chris Whitty rightly said, those looking after other people who are very vulnerable have a “professional responsibility” to get vaccinated.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Access to vaccinations in remote areas is incredibly important, but so is a general health strategy for clinically very vulnerable people. Young Lara in my constituency had the organ that she desperately needed for a double organ transplant, but unfortunately there was no bed in intensive care for her to have the operation. What strategy is the Department taking in general for our clinically vulnerable to provide access to operating theatres so that there is a focus not just on vaccination but on the multiple health conditions that so many of them suffer across the board?

Maggie Throup: The hon. Lady makes a really good point. I reassure her that procedures for urgent cases have not been cancelled. As the House knows, we are looking at the private sector to help deliver vital support for those patients.

Covid-19 Testing Infrastructure

4. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the capacity of the UK's covid-19 testing infrastructure in comparison to other countries. [905078]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The UK continues to provide one of the highest testing rates globally. We have increased capacity for PCR testing by over 200,000 tests per day since December. Home delivery capacity is now at 7 million lateral flow tests every day, with community pharmacies supplying an additional 9.5 million tests last week. In comparison to England, countries that have put in place more restrictions might have chosen a different balance between lateral flow devices and PCR tests to meet their individual testing demands. Therefore, we cannot meaningfully compare our testing infrastructure to that of other countries.

Mike Wood: I thank the Minister for that answer. Health and social care workers who care for some of the most clinically vulnerable members of our society were rightly prioritised for early vaccination. Does she agree that, similarly, they must be prioritised for testing? What is she doing to ensure that?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The most vulnerable people are being prioritised. The UK Health Security Agency and NHS Test and Trace currently deliver an average of more than 70,000 PCR kits and 970,000 LFD kits a week to adult social care settings. In recent weeks, as demand has increased due to the omicron wave, Dudley, like other local authorities, has provided tests to key workers to enable them to keep working.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response. The Government have recently announced that self-isolation will be cut to five days, given a negative lateral flow test. Has the Minister come to an assessment on the impact that will have on demand for lateral flow tests, given the struggle many have faced trying to obtain a box of them in recent weeks?

Maggie Throup: As we look at policy and amend it like we did last week, it is right that we make sure that we can fill those requirements. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we can, and we have increased the procurement of lateral flow devices. This month, we will get another 750 million lateral flow devices into the UK for January and February.¹

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): I am sure the whole House will welcome the early signs of falling numbers of people in hospital with covid. Does the Minister have any comments on the news yesterday from the World Health Organisation that it thinks that the UK looks set to be one of the first countries out of

1. [Official Report, 20 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 6MC.]

the pandemic, and how much weight does she put on the vaccination and booster programme, and the colossal scale of our testing availability, in that achievement?

Maggie Throup: My right hon. Friend makes a really good point. We know that omicron numbers are still really high, and we still have more than 2,000 people hospitalised every day, so we do need to be cautious. But my hon. Friend is right, in that our vaccine and testing programmes have been vital in being able to tackle this deadly virus. I encourage everybody to get their booster and, if they have not come forward for their first or second jab, to get those too.

Covid-19 Tests: Supply

5. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What plans his Department has to ensure that there is an adequate supply of covid-19 tests during the covid-19 outbreak. [905079]

19. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the supply of lateral flow and PCR covid-19 tests. [905094]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): We have significantly increased our testing and supply capacity since December, procuring over 700 million more lateral flow tests, ramping up our delivery capacity and expanding the UK's daily PCR capacity. Around 1.7 billion lateral flow tests have been distributed across the UK since the start of the pandemic. Home delivery capacity is now at over 7 million lateral flow tests every day, and we have also recently increased capacity for PCR testing by more than 200,000 tests per day.

Bill Esterson: I asked the Prime Minister, but he did not know. I asked the Business Secretary and he did not seem to care. So today is third time lucky. Why were 30 million British-made lateral flow tests sitting in a warehouse waiting for approval while Chinese tests were given temporary approval, all while people could not get test kits from pharmacies or from Test and Trace? It took six months to give approval to SureScreen diagnostics: when will the Government support British test manufacturers and end the preference for imports from China?

Sajid Javid: I can give the hon. Gentleman an answer, and I am very happy to do so. He will know that whenever we try to procure tests, in this case lateral flow tests, we should always try to buy British first, and we do buy from SureScreen—it is a fantastic supplier. But he will also know that we can only, rightly, buy lateral flow tests once they have been approved by our independent medical regulator.

David Duguid: Does my right hon. Friend agree that access to the largest testing programme in Europe is just one example of the advantages to the people of Scotland when we adopt a UK-wide approach to shared challenges?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about a unified approach to shared challenges such as covid-19, and that unified approach being the best way forward. Across the UK, we have built the largest

diagnostic network in British history and our testing programme has been one of the most important lines of defence, alongside our UK-wide vaccination programme. Our procurement of tests, antivirals and vaccines has been another fantastic example of the strength of the Union.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): “Always try and buy British first” was what the Secretary of State said a few moments ago, but a few weeks ago it was reported that plans to manufacture lateral flow tests here in the UK were shelved because the Government were scared that they might be accused of handing out dodgy deals to their mates. I know the Minister has form on this, but on this point they were misguided. Can he now say to the House that that was not the case and that he was not running scared of a transparent procurement policy, and that he will now do all he can to turbocharge British manufacturing and get British lateral flow tests in the system, so that we do not ever suffer again from those avoidable shortages we saw over Christmas?

Sajid Javid: First, I think the hon. Gentleman accused me of doing something inappropriate, and I think that that is not appropriate, unless he has something else to say or some evidence, but it is true to form for the Labour Front Bench, which just constantly makes things up to make false points. When it comes to testing, as he has just heard me say, we have purchased 1.7 billion lateral flow tests since the start of the pandemic. Wherever possible, whether it is PCR testing or lateral flow testing, whenever tests are approved by our independent regulator, we buy British.

Free Prescriptions: People aged 60 and Over

6. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): If he will make it his policy that prescriptions will remain free for people aged 60 and over. [905080]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): At the present time, no decision has been made to increase the upper age exemption for free prescriptions.

Sarah Green: Such a policy change would hit a vulnerable age bracket who are more likely to have one or more long-term illnesses requiring medication. A constituent of mine has told me of his concern at the cost of paying for his wife's Parkinson's medication, should such a change be introduced. Given that the millions facing a new charge will also be hit by a rise in living costs, will the Secretary of State shelve such proposals and review the list of conditions that qualify for a medical exemption certificate?

Maria Caulfield: Can I just reinforce the answer I have just given? There is no decision to increase the upper age exemption for free prescriptions, and the rumour circulating that the Government are removing free prescriptions for pensioners is completely false. The Government are absolutely committed to maintaining free prescriptions for pensioners.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am very pleased to hear that no decision has been made on this important topic, and I hope the situation remains as it is. Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to remind those who are paying for their prescriptions that a pre-payment certificate is available that can save a significant amount of money for those who regularly use their pharmacy?

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he does well to highlight the pre-payment certificate. If people go for a 12-month certificate, which is about £2 a week, for two items they can save £116.30 and for three items, £228.50, so it is well worth the investment.

Folic Acid in Flour

8. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to progress the introduction of mandatory folic acid supplementation in flour to prevent spinal conditions in babies. [905082]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Following consultation last September, we announced that we would legislate to fortify non-wholemeal wheat flour with folic acid. We are working at pace to move this policy forward, and we have already engaged with industry as part of a cross-Government review of bread and flour regulations. All four nations are now working closely together to develop the draft legislation and impact assessment for future consultation.

John Mc Nally: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she knows, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition has recommended mandatory folic acid fortification of flour. The UK Government launched a public consultation that closed in 2019. In September last year, the UK Government announced that folic acid will be added to non-wholemeal wheat flour across the UK to help to prevent life-threatening spinal conditions in babies. Therefore, can the Minister update the House on the UK Government's timeline to implement the decision in a wee bit more detail, please?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue, because fortifying non-wholemeal wheat flour with folic acid will help to prevent hundreds of neural tube defects in fetuses every year. I regret that I cannot commit to a specific timetable, but we need to consult on the draft legislation and will look to give industry appropriate notice. All four nations are working together on the timetable and hope to deliver this important policy as soon as possible.

NHS Capacity and Resilience: Covid-19

9. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help (a) maximise NHS capacity and (b) increase the NHS's resilience during the covid-19 outbreak. [905083]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Alongside measures to reduce demand and admissions, such as the vaccine roll-out and new therapeutics for covid, the NHS is creating the maximum possible capacity and investing in improved discharge arrangements, the use

of independent sector beds, virtual wards and Nightingales to provide surge capacity, alongside our investment in delivering more than 20,000 more clinical staff this year compared with August 2020.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister for that answer. As he knows, one of the main challenges facing hospitals is delays in the transfer of patients back to care homes due to historic restrictions, particularly where there has been an outbreak, although there may have been only one case. As we move to treating covid as more of an endemic condition, what steps can be taken to stop restricting admissions to these care homes, which would undoubtedly relieve pressure on hospitals?

Edward Argar: There is local flexibility to allow residents to be safely admitted to a care home during outbreak restrictions, following a risk-based approach that takes into account the size of outbreaks, who is affected, care home size and layout, rates of booster vaccination and current Care Quality Commission rating. The CQC supports risk-based decisions made on admissions to support the discharge of people with a negative covid test result, but, of course, we must continue to ensure the safety of those in care homes.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The workforce are absolutely central to growing NHS capacity. The advice in a Migration Advisory Committee report was to amend migration policies, make

"Care Workers and Home Carers...immediately eligible for the Health and Care Worker Visa and place the occupation on the Shortage Occupation List."

When will the UK Government start listening to their advisers and change migration policies to alleviate the pressures facing our NHS?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and for the tone of his question. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the workforce. The workforce are the golden thread that runs through the heart of everything we do in our NHS, which is why we have already taken a number of steps to increase our workforce. We are well on target to meet our target of 50,000 more nurses. As I mentioned in my initial answer, in August last year we had over 20,000 more clinically qualified staff compared with August 2020, so we continue to grow the workforce.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Delivering new community hospitals is a key part of upgrading and expanding NHS capacity. The Department is currently examining a bid to rebuild and expand services at Thornbury Hospital, which is desperately needed due to the expansion of the town. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the next steps in delivering this vital infrastructure improvement in south Gloucestershire?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that, in looking to meet the demand challenges imposed on our NHS, it is not just about district, general or acute hospitals, but about all our hospital facilities, including community hospitals. He has raised this subject with me on a number of occasions. He is a doughty champion for Thornbury and, of course, I am always happy to meet him.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): On the issue of capacity, the argument has always been floating around that bed numbers can be cut on the basis of medical and technological advances. That was always deeply suspect, but in the context of covid-19 and its aftermath, can the Minister assure the House that there will be no cuts in bed numbers in any future hospital reconfiguration?

Edward Argar: Decisions on hospital reconfigurations and changes to local hospital systems are a matter for the local NHS, following full consultation and consideration of the needs of local communities. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of bed capacity in the NHS. The NHS as a whole will continue to look at what bed capacity is needed to meet future need.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): My constituent David Hulbert contacted me to ask that I pay tribute in the Chamber to the phenomenal NHS teams from both Mount Vernon Hospital and Watford General Hospital for the care he has received, following his admission for cancer. Will the Minister join me in thanking the NHS for its tireless, backlog-clearing work, and for continuing with lifesaving non-covid operations, alongside its ongoing heroic actions leading our covid fight and vaccine roll-out?

Edward Argar: I am always happy to take the opportunity, as I know the Opposition Front-Bench team and my colleagues are, to thank the amazing NHS workforce for the work they have done. I pay tribute to the work of the teams at Mount Vernon and Watford General and, in the context of the pandemic, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who volunteered to help out at the hospital.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister highlighted the use of independent care providers. Last week, the Department announced that 150 hospitals would be on standby for three months to provide additional resource. Can the Minister tell the House when he or his Secretary of State asked NHS England to investigate standing up the 150 hospitals, which will receive a minimum income guarantee of £75 million to £90 million a month?

Edward Argar: I think I heard the hon. Lady correctly and she asked when those discussions began. That was last year, prior to the peak of this wave. We believe that the use of the independent sector to assist our NHS and provide additional capacity is absolutely the right thing to do. Thus far, during the course of the pandemic, it has provided, I believe, over 5 million procedures to patients. Therefore, we think this is a valuable and important addition to our capacity, and it is right that we have this surge capacity insurance policy in place to help to meet further demand.

Covid-19 Hospitalisations: Vaccination Programme

10. **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the covid-19 vaccination programme in reducing hospitalisations. [905084]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Vaccination continues to offer our best line of defence against hospitalisation due to covid-19. The latest data shows vaccine effectiveness against hospitalisation with the omicron variant was 58% after one dose and 64% up to 24 weeks after two doses. Vaccine effectiveness against hospitalisation was 92% in the first two to four weeks after a third dose or booster and 83% after 10 or more weeks. Those who are unvaccinated are eight times more likely to be hospitalised. That is why it is so important that everybody takes up the offer to get boosted.

Dr Murrison: I thank the Minister for that reply. The facts are that the vaccination programme has been massively successful in reducing hospitalisation, particularly admission to intensive therapy units. So will the Minister confirm that, on 26 January, particularly given what we now know about the nature of the covid variant that we are currently struggling with, those regulations will lapse? Will she further confirm that she will amend advice on working from home? Most importantly, will she ensure that we reverse the counterproductive compulsory vaccination of NHS staff that the Government's own figures suggest—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on, we cannot have questions that are so long.

Maggie Throup: Although evidence shows that the omicron variant causes less severe disease than previous variants, yesterday in England we still had over 16,000 covid patients in hospital and over 84,000 reported cases. Plan B measures are currently in place in England, and will be reviewed before the regulations expire on 26 January. The best thing everyone can do to help to keep the virus under control is to keep coming forward for booster jabs to help to stop the spread of infection and manage the immediate pressures on the NHS.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am seriously concerned about the rapidly depleting efficacy of the vaccine—at 10 weeks, between 40% and 50% protection—and therefore my question to the Minister is: what happens next? Already we are talking about a mandatory programme of vaccine for NHS staff which will see depletion after 10 weeks, but also public health measures may be removed: what next after the booster?

Maggie Throup: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is monitoring this all the time, and we take advice from the JCVI.

Face-to-face GP Appointments

11. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce waiting times for face-to-face GP appointments. [905085]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): In October last year, the Government announced a plan to improve general practice capacity, backed up by £250 million of winter access funds to help GPs and their practices. That can be used to fund more sessions from existing staff, or indeed increase the physical premises at a practice. For

my hon. Friend's area, the Black Country and West Birmingham clinical commissioning group expects an award of £6.5 million from the winter access fund.

Nicola Richards: My constituents in West Bromwich East have been raising concerns with me about their ability to access face-to-face GP appointments at local surgeries. Given the significant £250 million winter funding package for general practice announced towards the end of last year, what assessment has the Minister made of whether that support is making a real difference on the ground?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend, who is pushing me constantly to improve access for her constituents, but can I reassure her that the announcement, the funds and the support are making a difference? In November last year, there were on average 1.39 million general practice appointments per working day, compared with 1.31 million in November 2019, but crucially, 62.7% of those appointments were face to face, so this is really making a difference for patients.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): A nurse wrote this week about working on covid wards during the height of the pandemic:

"There were no vaccines or treatments then and we worked for hours in full PPE to protect ourselves and try not to bring the virus home to our families. There were no after work drinks for us...It is clear that there was a culture inside Number 10 where even if rules were not technically broken, the spirit of the rules were, and this is completely unacceptable."

The nurse is the Minister. Surely she must agree that the Prime Minister should now resign.

Maria Caulfield: I am very disappointed by the hon. Lady's question. Serious issues are facing the NHS and patients, and instead of playing party politics at the Dispatch Box, perhaps she needs to ask her own leader what he was doing in May last year.

Discharge from Hospital: Care Packages

13. **Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** What steps he is taking to help expedite the process of arranging care packages for people waiting to be discharged from hospital; and if he will make a statement. [905088]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): People should be discharged from hospital safely and with the appropriate care and support they need. As the Secretary of State outlined, we have provided £3.3 billion via the NHS to facilitate timely hospital discharges over the pandemic, including £478 million just for this winter. We recognise that providers and local authorities have experienced significant challenges in recruiting and retaining social care workers. That is why we have provided £462.5 million over winter, for this period, to support care providers to improve existing care support.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response, but even given all that help, almost 30% of available acute beds in Gloucestershire are occupied by patients who are medically fit for discharge. About half of those are awaiting care packages and the other half are looking

for beds in community hospitals or care homes, or awaiting home discharge. What more can the Government do to relieve the pressure on the acute hospitals in Gloucestershire and on all the medical staff?

Gillian Keegan: I assure my hon. Friend that this is something we take very seriously and we meet every day to discuss this issue. We are conscious of the pressures caused by omicron, and of the herculean challenges faced by health and social care providers to discharge people in a safe and timely way, particularly with outbreaks and having to manage infection prevention and control. That includes the Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which declared a national incident on 28 December at its Gloucestershire site. But it responded brilliantly and stood down the incident nine days later. As the Secretary of State said, we have also established a national discharge taskforce, which is driving progress to bring a renewed focus on reducing discharge delays, including in Gloucestershire, and working with local government and the NHS.

Cancer Outcomes

14. **Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op):** What recent assessment he has made of cancer outcomes. [905089]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Based on the latest available data—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome this—one-year survival rates for all cancers combined are at a record high, with an increase from 63.6% to 73.9%, and the five-year survival rate for all cancers combined has increased from 45.7% to 54.6%.

Alex Norris: To ensure the best cancer outcomes, patients need to start treatment as soon as they can. But in the latest data the Minister addresses, the number of those who waited for more than two weeks to see a specialist set a new record high for the third month running, soaring to more than 55,000 people in November, prior to the peak of this wave. Macmillan Cancer Supports states that more than 31,000 people in England are still waiting for their first cancer treatment, which will not do. When will the Government publish a properly resourced, properly staffed national recovery plan for cancer care?

Maria Caulfield: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that cancer has been an absolute priority throughout this pandemic, and treatment and services have continued. I thank all those working in cancer care for making sure that has happened. Ninety-five per cent. of people started treatment within a month of diagnosis throughout the pandemic, and there have been more than 4 million urgent referrals and 960,000 people receiving cancer treatment during that time.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Geoff Cosgrave was admitted to hospital in mid-November with kidney cancer that had spread through his lymph nodes and lungs. Last week, his wife Glynis contacted me in desperation because he was unable to access treatment to clear the blockage in his lungs as the thoracic ward at the nearby hospital had closed because of staffing shortages. After frantic and desperate chasing by his family and

NHS staff, he was finally admitted to Bristol Royal Infirmary last week, but unfortunately his condition had deteriorated so he could not receive treatment. Geoff died on Friday and I am sure the whole House will want to send their deepest condolences to Geoff's family. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Glynis wants me to place on record her family's enormous thanks to the NHS staff who cared for Geoff, and to ask the Minister what the Government are doing to address the serious understaffing in the NHS, and the covid pressures that are having an impact on cancer care, so that no family has to suffer what the Cosgrave family are experiencing right now.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I put on record—I am sure this is shared by the whole House—our sympathy for Geoff and his family. There is no doubt that despite cancer being a priority throughout the pandemic, there have been pressures on the system. I again thank the staff, as Geoff's family have, for carrying on throughout. I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the NHS is focusing on recovering cancer services to pre-pandemic levels; an additional £2 billion of funding was made available to the NHS and there were 44,000 more staff from October 2020. We are absolutely committed to getting back on track for pre-pandemic levels. Cancer has always been a priority. That is no comfort to Geoff and his family, but hopefully they can be assured that we are doing all we can.

Topical Questions

T1. [905065] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Eight weeks ago, when this House last met for Health and Social Care questions, the world had not even heard of the omicron variant; but a third of the total number of UK covid-19 cases have been recorded since then. The action the Government have taken in response to omicron, and the collective efforts of the British people, have seen us become the most boosted and tested country in Europe, and the country with the most antivirals per head in Europe. That is why we are the most open country in Europe. I have always said that the restrictions should not stay in place a day longer than is absolutely necessary. Due to those pharmaceutical defences and the likelihood of our having already reached the peak of case numbers and hospitalisations, I am cautiously optimistic that we will be able to substantially reduce measures next week. The best thing we can all do to continue that progress is get boosted now.

Chris Bryant: May I put on record my gratitude to the Secretary of State for all the help he provided to my constituents before Christmas? He went beyond the call of duty, and I am very grateful to him.

The aftershock is often worse than the earthquake. My anxiety about covid is that it was the earthquake, but we still have the aftershock to come—that is, all the problems in cancer care, and the lack of doctors in emergency medicine, as well as in so many other disciplines. How will we make sure that the 6 million people on waiting lists get the care that they really need, and that the number does not grow over the next few months?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue, and I thank him for his comments at the start. We all know, as we have just heard from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), that the NHS in particular and social care have been under huge pressure; I think it has been the most challenging time in their history. Everyone has performed in a way that we can all be proud of. Despite that, we have seen a huge rise in electives, and I think that the number will go higher before it goes lower, because so many people stayed away when they were asked to. I want them to come forward. I want them to know that the NHS is open for them. We will support it with a bigger workforce and more investment, including the £36 billion of extra investment from the new NHS and social care levy.

T4. [905068] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): Delays in cancer diagnosis and treatment have had tragic consequences for some of my constituents. What is my right hon. Friend doing to improve cancer survival rates?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is very close to my heart, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) rightly raised it a moment ago, too. The pandemic has exposed huge health disparities in this country. It is clear to me that we need to go much further on cancer, not only to catch up on cancer referrals, diagnosis and treatment and radical innovation, but to improve the persistently poor outcomes that patients in this country have long experienced compared to those in other countries. It is time we launched a war on cancer. I am working on a new vision to radically improve the outcome for cancer patients across the United Kingdom, and I will have more to say on that in due course.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Keeping the Secretary of State on the subject of cancer, half of all patients with suspected breast cancer are not seen within the recommended two weeks. In two months, the number of patients who were not able to see a specialist in the target period has gone from 5,000 to 23,000—a far steeper increase than for all other forms of cancer—so I ask the Secretary of State: has breast cancer care been deprioritised?

Sajid Javid: Of course it has not been deprioritised. No cancer has been deprioritised. As the House has heard again today, we have seen an impact on healthcare across the country because of this terrible pandemic, including, sadly, on cancer care. Whether we are talking about breast cancer or other forms of cancer, they all remain a priority, including during the omicron wave; the NHS has made it absolutely clear that cancer remains a priority. As I said—I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees—we need to do more on cancer. I know that he cares deeply about this; he is right to have raised it twice in the past hour, and I hope that he will work with the Government on it.

Wes Streeting: I am going to raise it a third time, because it is very clear that breast cancer care is worse than care for other forms of cancer. The Secretary of State needs to account for that and tell us what he will do about it. On cancer more broadly, it is not good

enough to return to the situation pre-pandemic, because as much as he wants to blame covid pressures for delays in cancer treatment, we went into the pandemic with waiting lists at 4.5 million, and with staff shortages of 100,000 in the NHS and of 112,000 in social care, which impacted on broader NHS performance. Where is the plan to fix the workforce challenge in the NHS? That is the biggest single challenge that will impact on his mission—the mission we all share—to improve cancer outcomes for everyone in the country.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that survival rates from cancer were increasing before the pandemic, but as I think the whole House understands, the pandemic has had an impact on all other types of healthcare, including cancer. This is a challenge throughout the United Kingdom. He talks about waits for breast cancer treatment; those are longer in Wales, so this is an issue throughout the UK. It is right that we continue to focus on the workforce. We have 44,000 more health workers than we did in October 2020, and we will continue to build on that.

T5. [905069] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): Vast numbers of children and adults right across Cornwall cannot get access to an NHS dentist. That is not about funding, covid or even a lack of dentists; it is just that the contract under which they work is no longer fit for purpose. Next year, the responsibility for dentistry comes to Cornwall. Could we perhaps have a statement from the Minister about how we can reform that contract, which no longer works and keeps dentistry away from people who need it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): My hon. Friend gets to the nub of the problem. The 2006 contract, which was introduced under the last Labour Government and is dependent on UDAs—units of dental activity—creates perverse disincentives for dentists to take on NHS work. We are already starting work on reforming that.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): We will not globally defeat covid if large proportions of the global population do not have access to vaccinations. The UK is one of a small number of countries blocking the TRIPS—trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights—waiver. Will the UK Government stop blocking the vaccine intellectual property waiver, and allow nations to manufacture the vaccines themselves?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of helping the whole world to acquire these life-saving vaccines. That is why the UK can be proud of the more than 30 million vaccines that it has delivered to developing countries already. We will meet our commitment to increase that to 100 million by June, but we do not agree with the suggestion about the TRIPS waiver, because it will make future access to life-saving vaccines much more difficult.

T6. [905070] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I was delighted by the recent announcement of £50 million for motor neurone disease research, which my constituent Doddie Weir campaigned for tirelessly. Will the Secretary of State

update the House on the steps being taken to allocate those funds, and to ensure that is done as quickly as possible, as time is of the essence for MND sufferers?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point, and I commend him on the fantastic work that he has done in leading this campaign. We were delighted to announce £50 million of funding for MND research. That will support a new MND research unit, which has already started work to co-ordinate research applications, and a new MND partnership, which will be formed to pool expertise across the research community.

T2. [905066] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Last week, the Royal College of Physicians reported that one in five doctors felt “overwhelmed almost every day”. One doctor in my constituency told me that every single member of staff at their surgery was either receiving counselling, on antidepressants or signed off work with stress, compounded by what they perceived as GP-bashing in the media. With that in mind, may I ask the Secretary of State what steps his Department is taking to protect the mental health of GPs and NHS workers?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise that issue. Healthcare workers have been under significant pressure, especially over the past two years, and of course that applies to GPs. The support we have provided through the winter access fund—the £250 million—is there to help GPs’ surgeries across the country, including with their workforce.

T7. [905071] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): My hospital trust is looking to redesign ophthalmology and cardiology services across its two hospitals, Eastbourne District General Hospital and Conquest Hospital in Hastings. The trust puts forward an important clinical case for the change, but given the realities—the road, the distance and the public transport options, which mean that it can be a journey of two hours via two buses for the one in four households in Eastbourne that do not have a car—any change can present a real problem and create issues for local people. Ahead of his visit to Eastbourne, will my hon. Friend the Minister meet me here to discuss this vital question of access to hospital services?

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Public consultation on the reconfiguration in East Sussex was launched on 6 December last year and will close on 11 March. She is right to highlight access and transport links as a key factor in such decisions, and I would of course be delighted to meet her.

T3. [905067] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Only 9% of people in low-income countries have received one vaccine dose. The UK Government have delivered less than one third of their pledged contributions to COVAX. Given that no one is safe until everyone is safe, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the risk to public health from emerging variants from the unvaccinated worldwide, and will he ensure that all doses pledged will be delivered to COVAX by the end of June?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): From the start of the pandemic, the UK has worked to support equitable access to covid-19 vaccines. It helped to establish the international joint procurement initiative COVAX, which supports higher and lower-income countries in securing the vaccines they need. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has indicated, we are committed to delivering 100 million doses by mid-June; we had delivered more than 30 million by the end of 2021. The UK leads the way on variants through the UK Health Security Agency, and we are willing to progress that technology throughout the world.

T8. [905072] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Building the women's and children's hospital at the Royal Cornwall Hospital was a key promise of this Government, and the Secretary of State's predecessor was very supportive of it. Will my hon. Friend reaffirm the Department's commitment to the building and agree to meet me to ensure that everything is done to get this vital project delivered on time?

Edward Argar: We remain fully committed to the delivery of the important new women's and children's hospital in Truro for the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust as part of our new hospital programme. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State remains committed to it, and of course I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

T10. [905074] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I hope you are watching "Geordie Hospital", Mr Speaker—the Channel 4 series that follows the talented, highly skilled, dedicated and wonderfully witty staff of Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. As we enter our third pandemic year, after a decade of under-investment and low pay, and with staff shortages, absences and NHS waiting lists all rising, I hope that the Secretary of State recognises that what NHS staff need, as well as a great sense of humour, is a long-term workforce plan. Will he bring one forward?

Sajid Javid: First, I commend everyone working in the Newcastle hospitals trust and across the NHS for everything they are doing. The hon. Lady is right to talk about the importance of the workforce—that is why we have asked Health Education England to come up with a 15-year workforce framework—but she knows that the resources that the NHS has make a big difference, and it would have helped if she had supported the Government's record investment of £36 billion over the next three years in the NHS and social care.

T9. [905073] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how he is making it easier for transport workers, who are disproportionately under-vaccinated, to get their jabs and get this country moving?

Maggie Throup: We are intent on making vaccines as accessible as possible, so there are now more vaccination sites than at any point in the programme. They operate 12 hours a day, seven days a week where possible, including at hundreds of walk-in and pop-up sites. In every community, there should be slots available at least

16 hours a day; in some places, that is extended to 24 hours a day to support workers such as those in the transport sector, who often work unsociable hours.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Secretary of State has introduced guidance for essential care givers so that family members can visit loved ones in care homes. Is he considering going further to guarantee the right to visit residents in care homes and patients in hospitals?

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): The hon. Member makes a very good point. It is important that people get the right to visit their loved ones in care homes. That is why we have introduced guidance that says that essential care givers should get access to care homes at all points, even during outbreaks. There is a process, which the Care Quality Commission manages, for reporting those that do not comply, but if there are specific examples, I am very happy for him to write to me with details and I will follow it up.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): This morning, the Health Secretary is reported in *The Times* as saying that the NHS can learn from the way in which academy chains are regulated, but he will know that the education system has no national targets, while the NHS uses more national targets than any healthcare system anywhere in the world. Will he look at the role of targets and the risk that they focus managers on bureaucratic numbers, sometimes at the expense of quality of care for patients?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend; as the whole House knows, he speaks with considerable experience. We need to do things differently, especially as a result of the pandemic and the challenges that it has created. That requires reform, and we will set out further reforms in due course. He is absolutely right about targets: they can play an important role, but they can also lead to poor outcomes for patients, and all targets need to be properly reviewed.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Sheffield's Weston Park Cancer Centre is one of just four specialist cancer facilities in the country, but it desperately needs a £50 million upgrade, as the Secretary of State will know because I raised the matter with his predecessor and wrote to the Secretary of State in October and again just last week. Will he urgently respond to the proposal, which is vital for cancer outcomes in South Yorkshire?

Edward Argar: We will endeavour to respond swiftly, but if the hon. Gentleman would like to meet me about capital funding for those sorts of projects, I am always happy to meet him.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then: the Health Secretary will be aware that King's Mill Hospital in Ashfield was built under a disastrous private finance initiative deal under the last Labour Government. It now costs us about £1 million a week to service the debt—money that could be spent on social care in Ashfield. Will he meet me to discuss how we can rid my trust of this crippling debt of £1 million a week and spend it on social care?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the impact of yet another of Labour's disastrous PFIs on the funding available to our NHS, and indeed to social care. We continue to work hard to deliver our manifesto commitment to improve on those disastrous PFI schemes. I am very happy to meet him to discuss the matter.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Just last month, Luton lost an outstanding champion in the other place with the sad passing of Lord Bill McKenzie of Luton. Just 21 months previously, he had been diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis.

Last week I met the chair of the Pulmonary Fibrosis Trust, one of my constituents in Luton South, who told me that there is no current cure for the disease and that for most people there is no known cause. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps his Department is taking to support research into a cure and to improve diagnosis, support and care for people living with pulmonary fibrosis?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the matter in the House. Pulmonary fibrosis is a very serious condition. Far too many people suffer from it, and there

needs to be more research globally—not just here in the UK, but working with our international partners. I will bring the matter to the attention of my officials and see what more we can do.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Sadly, the situation in Scarborough and Whitby for patients seeking a new NHS dentist is no better than that in St Ives, with thousands of UDAs going unused. Dentists tell me that it would help to have a date for the end of the UDA system so that they could start recruiting staff and, in some cases, building new premises to deliver NHS dentistry to local people.

Maria Caulfield: My right hon. Friend is correct. As I said earlier, the disastrous contract of 2006 is causing disincentives for NHS dentists to take on NHS work. I assure my right hon. Friend, however, that dental services in Scarborough are currently being commissioned by NHS England following the handing back of dental regional accountability. Procurement processes are in place, and a new practice is set to be in place by the summer.

Migrant Crossings: Role of the Military

12.35 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Armed Forces to make a statement on the migrant channel issues and the role of the military.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): Unacceptable numbers of people continue to make these dangerous channel crossings, and last November's tragic deaths serve as the strongest reminder of the need to stop them. The Government have been exploring every avenue to prevent further crossings, and have now appointed the Ministry of Defence to take operational primacy for cross-channel counter-migration operations. That will mean a much larger and more visible role for the Royal Navy in operational planning, asset co-ordination and operational delivery.

As the Home Secretary explained during Home Office questions yesterday, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence have worked closely on countering the small boats challenge through the military aid to civilian authorities process. Throughout the last 12 months Defence has provided a range of support, including the provision of surveillance aircraft, additional accommodation and planning expertise, and has assisted in the delivery of trials for novel tactics to help Border Force and the Home Office to better interdict and deter migrant vessels.

Details of how Defence will deliver and maintain the primacy of cross-channel counter-migration operations are currently being worked through. The Government's objective is that no one should arrive illegally in the United Kingdom on their own terms, and all vessels transporting illegal migrants across the channel must therefore be intercepted before, or as, they land. Defence is committed to delivering that step change. Details of how it will be achieved will be made known in due course, but the House can be reassured that the MOD is working hand in hand with the Home Secretary and her Department to achieve this goal while ensuring the safety of all individuals involved and protecting other Defence priority output.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the Minister for that clarification.

We are rightly proud of our armed forces, who watch our backs and defend our interests across the world, and who are equipped and trained to step forward and assist other Government Departments in times of emergency. However, the bigger picture is clear to see. Our world is becoming more dangerous and more complex, and demands on our military—not least the Royal Navy—are increasing. The integrated review maps out the importance to the UK economy of retaining the freedom of the seas, increasingly challenged by China, Russia and, indeed, Iran. The Defence Committee's recent review of the Royal Navy concluded that it is now too small to meet its current commitments in the Atlantic, in the Mediterranean, in the Gulf, off east Africa, in the Caribbean and in the Arctic, and, of course, with the tilt to the Indo-Pacific. Yet here we are introducing another task: co-ordinating the migrant crossing response, which is normally the responsibility of the Home Office.

As the Minister said, the migrant channel issue is complex and is not likely to go away soon. It is not an acute emergency, so why is the Navy being drawn in, even in this limited capacity? I say "limited"; the Minister spoke of "operational primacy", and he is now responsible for it. There is a real danger of mission creep, with further naval assets being sucked into this challenge. Please will the Minister explain who will pay for this mission, what success looks like, and how long the task will last?

This tactic may, on the face of it, look popular, with 28,000 migrants now crossing every year—"send in the Navy to sort it out"—but it is not the strategy that will solve the problem of the movement of migrants. We need first to break up the gangs who encourage migrants in the first place, and secondly to help restore governance and security in the very countries from which these people are fleeing—places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Somalia. Ironically, those are parts of the world where we have used our own hard power to intervene but then departed before there was enduring stability, and now families are fleeing towards Europe.

Unless the fires are put out at source, we will never reduce the numbers. We need a broader strategy than simply tasking the Navy to the channel, which will not be the answer.

James Heappey: I thank my right hon. Friend for elaborating on his urgent question. I take issue with his point that the Navy has to make a binary choice between work at home and work overseas. Ships are deployed all over the world right now, and other ships are making ready to set to sea in response to whatever crises may unfold in the Euro-Atlantic over the coming weeks.

In addition, there is capacity to do as we do year round, which is to deploy naval resources into the channel for purposes such as fishery protection and, indeed, securing our border. That is an important point. The purpose of our nation's armed forces is to secure the UK's national security interests both at home and abroad, and I would argue that deploying our armed forces to ensure that our borders are robust is a perfectly appropriate use of them. Indeed, as I know my right hon. Friend is very aware, there are parts of Europe right now in which state-sponsored illegal migration is being used as a sub-threshold weapon of competition. I am not suggesting for a second that the migration across the channel is that right now but, in the absence of robust defence of our borders, it could be in the future, and the MOD therefore has a perfectly reasonable role to play in ensuring that our borders are robustly protected.

My right hon. Friend specifically asked about pay. Clearly this will be a multi-agency effort under Royal Navy command. Where agencies are already doing things in the channel, they will continue to be funded by the Departments that own them.

Success is that we do not allow anybody to land in the UK on their own terms. For how long? Until the deterrent effect is achieved and the cross-channel route for small boats collapses.

There is a limit to my right hon. Friend's question, which is the role of the Royal Navy and the military within the channel—that is what I am here to answer today—but I completely agree that this is just one part

of a wider system. Indeed, he is right to note that the MOD has plenty of equity in providing stability in countries such as Iraq and in the Sahel, where the majority of migrants are coming from, and we are engaged in that.

Nobody is pretending that the presence of a rear admiral and a few extra Royal Navy ships solves this issue. It is regrettable that only part of the Government's solution should appear in the papers, and I will do my best to answer any questions my right hon. Friend asks.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This Government now really are desperate. They are desperate to distract attention from accusations about the Prime Minister lying and partying in Downing Street, and they are desperate to prop up a Home Secretary who has been utterly failing for two years as the number of cross-channel migrants has tripled. The military are there to protect the nation, not Tory Ministers.

The Minister has confirmed today that the armed forces will be involved in what he calls operational delivery. He says the details are still being worked through, so let me try again. What will the armed forces now do? Will naval vessels be deployed in the channel? Will the Navy be used to push back migrant boats? Will the Navy use sonic weapons, as No. 10 wants? Will it step up the use of drones for surveillance? Will it transport migrants from British beaches? What military accommodation will be used to house and process migrants? We are told by the media that Rear Admiral Utley has been put in charge. To whom will he report, the Home Secretary or the Defence Secretary?

This announcement is official confirmation that the Home Secretary is failing. Our armed forces are always the Government's last resort. The military aid to the civil authorities code means such assistance is granted only when

"the civil authority lacks the necessary capability to fulfil the task".

Who will pay the military's bills for this work? What will be the arrangements for co-operation between the UK and French military? The Minister promised me last month that he would

"publish details of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities...tasks on a fortnightly basis beginning in January 2022. These updates will be placed in the Library of the House."

When will he actually do this, and will he publish the detailed terms of this MACA agreement?

The Navy was used before, in 2019. Two patrol vessels were redeployed from defence tasks to the channel. They intercepted no boats, at a cost of £780,000 to the taxpayer. Will the Minister guarantee that this military deployment in the channel will not compromise our armed forces in any of their fundamental defence tasks? When will the Home Secretary step up to do her job to secure a proper security agreement with the French, break the smuggling gangs, and prevent more tragic deaths of migrants in the channel?

James Heappey: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I do not share his view of the Home Secretary; we have worked closely with her on a number of issues, including Op Pitting over the summer, where she made a number of courageous decisions about how to accelerate border flow at the Baron Hotel, and indeed

throughout the past year when the MOD has been trying to support the Border Force. The fact is that this is not a MACA request; it is something quite different. It is asking the Navy to take primacy, from a command-and-control perspective, to bring to bear all the Government's maritime assets that set sail, across all agencies, in order to try to cohere a more robust response at sea. It is an evolution of what we have been doing rather than a replacement of something that had previously existed.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there may be a requirement for more naval assets—warships—to be in the channel, but they sit too high off the water to be a credible platform from which to cross-deck people from a dinghy, so the presence of naval assets is probably from a command-and-control perspective rather than from an interdiction or interception perspective. There are better platforms within the Government's inventory, and things that we can lease from the open market, that will be much more effective for mid-channel cross-decking under RN command and control.

Neither the Royal Navy nor the Royal Marines will be engaged in pushback, but that tactic has been developed by Border Force, and if it is applicable it will be used. The Royal Navy will not use sonic weapons. The Royal Navy or the wider military may be involved in transportation of people when they reach the shore as they enter the processing system. There may be a use for military accommodation. As I said, this is a UQ responding to a partial revelation of the plan, and I make no apology for the wider plan being still in development.

Rear Admiral Utley continues to report to the fleet commander, who reports to the First Sea Lord, who reports to the Secretary of State. Costs will lie where they fall, other than for novel capabilities, in which case there will be a chat with the Treasury. The MOD and the Navy enjoy excellent relations with the French MOD and the French Navy. We are confident in our ability to manage the cross-channel relationships.

I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman if I promised him an update on MACAs; I forgot that I had done so and I will make sure that that is rectified.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. I do not see any problem with the Royal Navy getting involved with this issue. For weeks—for years—those on the Opposition Benches have been whingeing and whining that we are not doing enough. It is excellent that the military are taking control and that we are co-ordinating all the assets that we have. It makes perfect sense. When a ship intervenes somewhere in the middle of the channel, will it have the power to take the people back to France, where legally they should be, or do we have to take them into our country and then face all the problems of removing them if indeed they should not be here?

James Heappey: No. There is no power to enter another country's sovereign waters to return people. This evolution in the capability of command and control means that there is a more robust response at sea so that nobody lands on their own terms and they enter a process in the United Kingdom that may take them to return or to some other outcome. The evidence in Australia and elsewhere is that that very quickly has a

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deterrent effect. I am answering questions on merely a part of the plan, and the House can sense my discomfort at being unable to illuminate it fully.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Let me start by underlining what a worrying development this is from the Government, both operationally and morally. The motivation to militarise this situation, in which desperate people make perilous crossings to reach safety and security, is immediately apparent, to say the least: this is the use of military camouflage to disguise a political crisis at the heart of the Government. We are talking about the Ministry of Defence, which is charged with the defence of the state and its people against external state or terrorist malign activity, threat or attack; not in any recent cogent assessment has the MOD or our armed forces been reconfigured to protect the state against civilians.

Will the Minister update the House on the admiralty's critical analysis of whether to undertake significant maritime operations in respect of civilian subjects that are fraught with operational and reputational risk to the Royal Navy? Will he confirm that the Home Office request goes way beyond the realms of military aid to the civil authorities and instead represents an alarming politically expedient morphing of a civilian crisis into an entirely inappropriate military operation that is doomed to fail?

James Heappey: I take issue with the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question, which was that people need to get into a small boat to find sanctuary. They are coming from France, which is a safe country. Those who continue their journey do so because they want to be in the United Kingdom, not because they are scared of where they are.

As for the idea that the MOD is not configured to protect against civilian threats, we have just been through two decades of counter-insurgency and reconfiguring to deal with the emergence of sub-threshold threats. Threat no longer wears a uniform or drives around in a painted military vehicle that flies a flag; it is increasingly likely that the threats posed to the United Kingdom come not from military sources. Of course the Ministry of Defence, which is charged with the defence of the homeland, has a role to play in ensuring that our borders are more robustly protected.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the announcement that the military are finally to be brought in to supersede Border Force—or, as some of my constituents refer to it, “taxi force”. We need to add credibility to this announcement, so, first, what operational name is the mission to be given; which armed forces units are likely to be involved; and thirdly, if they are not going to be involved in pushback or to deploy sonic weapons, what are they actually going to do?

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Its name is Operation Red Meat!

James Heappey: My former boss on the Energy and Climate Change Committee, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), is sure that he knows the name of the operation, but I am afraid he is wrong: its name is Operation Isotrope. In all

probability, the units involved initially will be some of the batch 1 offshore patrol vessels that are permanently committed to home waters, probably with some P2000s.

As I said earlier in response to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), when he pointed out that military warships have not previously been applicable in mid-channel cross-deckings, their height off the water makes them an inappropriate platform to be hands-on in the process; their role will be one of command and control, if, indeed, anything at sea. The reality is that, as I think my right hon. Friend appreciates, the Government have a large inventory of maritime assets. We argue that if the full spectrum of those maritime assets were brought to bear on this problem and cohered under a military command structure, that would provide a step change in capability.

My right hon. Friend will be disappointed that the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines will not be using pushback tactics, sonic weapons or whatever else but, as I have said clearly in response to previous questions, Border Force has been trialling those tactics and they may have a purpose. That is all part of the ongoing military estimate. I would argue that the deterrent effect is achieved not just through an ability to push back mid-channel, with all the problems that come with that. If we can guarantee that nobody gets to land in the UK on their own terms and that the system beyond that delivers an effective outcome that acts as a deterrent for those deciding to put themselves in the people traffickers' hands, this approach could and should work.

My right hon. Friend will be frustrated that I am unable to unveil the full scope of the plan. That is partly because I do not know it. I also think that the Prime Minister would like to do that himself later in the month.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that the Royal Navy will not use sonic weapons, but long-range acoustic weapons are already fitted to Border Force vessels. As the Royal Navy has assumed operational control of Border Force, will he state that no Border Force sonic weapons will be used for migrant crossings? Will he also publish a rule of engagement for using sonic weapons against civilians? Even the leaking and spinning of that suggests a really dark force that we do not need in the debate.

James Heappey: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. If Border Force vessels are fitted with a capability that the Royal Navy commander feels is inappropriate for use, he will not direct that it is used. That is his judgment. The hon. Gentleman, as the proud MP of the Royal Navy in Devonport, probably appreciates that in the MOD we deal with operational mission command and the Royal Navy uses its judgment to bring to bear what it thinks is best. I trust Rear Admiral Utley entirely to make the right decisions in that regard.

I will be honest with the hon. Gentleman: I am not entirely clear about the custom for publishing rules of engagement. Perhaps he will let me write to him with that in due course.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Can my hon. Friend guarantee that no resource—be that manpower or asset—will be removed from another theatre to which an already overstretched Royal Navy is

currently deployed, carrying out its primary role of protecting the UK and its interests, and those of our allies around the world?

James Heappey: I can. Commander UK Strike Force is a UK-based two-star commander—I suspect that my hon. Friend, as a former Navy man, knows that—and the ships mentioned as possibly having utility in this context are already committed to home waters.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Well, there we have it. Yesterday, No. 10 was briefing that this is the new tough approach to migrants, and today the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box and says that he has not got a clue what the plan is or what is proposed. He mentioned deployment of assets. We had nine offshore patrol vessels until 2019, when HMS Clyde was decommissioned; others are committed overseas, including in the Pacific, and in home waters for tasks such as fisher protection. So what assets are there? There are not any.

May I check two things? First, will the Navy abide by the UN conventions on people in distress at sea? Secondly, the Minister said that Rear Admiral Utley will answer to the Defence Secretary, so has the MOD taken over control of Border Force and its operation, with the Home Secretary having no role? If so, that is a huge kick in the teeth for the Home Secretary.

James Heappey: First, the OPV fleet is well deployed around the world. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, Trent is in Gibraltar having just got back from autumn in the gulf of Guinea; Medway is in the Caribbean; Forth is in the Falklands; and Tamar and Spey are in the south Pacific and far east. Further, three batch 1 OPVs continue and are routinely deployed in home waters. That is not just for fishery protection, as he sought to characterise; they routinely take on the role of fleet-ready escort and are used for whatever is required to protect the United Kingdom's interests in her home waters, and this task clearly comes within that bracket.

I am disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman felt it necessary to ask whether the men and women of the Royal Navy would still feel bound by their compulsion under the safety of life at sea convention. Of course they would. The Chief of the Defence Staff is a sailor, and Rear Admiral Utley is obviously a sailor, and they have been clear throughout that military involvement is about delivering a robust plan, but they will not endanger life at sea.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about how this is all reflected in Government policy and ownership of policy. I reflect back to him that Rear Admiral Utley is a sailor working within the MOD for a part of our border protection that has been placed into the hands of the Royal Navy. He clearly reports through his chain of command to the Secretary of State for Defence, but that is not the totality of the Government's migration policy nor the totality of the role of protecting our borders. Obviously, the Home Secretary owns the wider system and she is doing a good job in doing that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Did Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean not teach us that increased efficiency of interception leads to an increased number of attempted crossings? This policy will have the reverse effect of that intended, won't it?

James Heappey: No, I do not think that is the case. There was a key difference with Op Sophia, and that is what happened when people landed on the European continent and what EU nations did with them thereafter.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that in 2019 two Navy patrol vessels were deployed in the channel to deal with channel crossings. Yet they intercepted no boats and it cost the taxpayer £780,000. What will be different this time?

James Heappey: It is unclear whether the right hon. Lady is reading from *Hansard* because that is exactly the question asked by the Front-Bench spokesman, which I have answered already.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Behind the criminal gangs often lie the root causes of disease, famine, poverty, poor governance, conflict and war. We have heard reference today to Syria, Iraq and Libya. My hon. Friend mentioned the Sahel. What discussions has he had with his defence counterpart in the French Government about President Macron's decision to withdraw the 5,000 troops based in the Sahel, which of course will stretch UK armed forces further in that important region?

James Heappey: We speak to our French counterparts regularly, and the Sahel is a frequent topic of conversation. The French would argue that they are going through a transition from one operation to another—from Barkhane to Takuba—but that is clearly a decision for France. The UK's commitment in the Sahel through the UN peacekeeping mission operation MINUSMA and our support to the French through Op Newcombe remains in place, but it will not surprise my right hon. Friend to know that the UK is looking for opportunities all the time to do more in western Africa. We recognise that the instability in the Sahel poses a direct threat to the UK's interests. Indeed, were it not for the telegraphing of the intent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) to ask the urgent question, I would have been in Accra today having exactly those conversations. But it is a pleasure to be here answering these questions.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome what the Minister says about not using sonic weapons—an idea that was described by a Home Office source in the press today as “f***ng bonkers”. When the Home Office is saying that your idea can be classified as that, you have to think you have taken a wrong turn in your planning somewhere. May I press the Minister on the relationship between the Royal Navy and the Marines, on the one hand, and UK Border Force? He tells the House—I welcome the assurance—that the Royal Navy will not be engaged in pushing back boats with refugees in them, but that leaves open the door that the UK Border Force might still do that. In that case, how can he possibly say that operational primacy sits with the Royal Navy?

James Heappey: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion that there may be some disagreement between Departments, I can only reflect that my great friends the Under-Secretaries of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Tom Pursglove)

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and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), work with me all the time, not just on this matter but on Op Pitting and all sorts of other issues where Home Office and MOD interests align. The right hon. Gentleman is right to note that I was clear that Border Force is developing a tactic. It may well be that the commander is comfortable with that tactic being employed, and there is a difference between the reason why the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines will not deploy that tactic and the reason why Border Force may. Border Force has the appropriate vessels, potentially, to do so safely; the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines do not.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Minister consider that use of the Royal Navy will reduce the number of migrants who land in the United Kingdom?

James Heappey: I believe that it could, as part of a wider system that is under development.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister calls it Operation Isotrope—not Isotope—which means having properties that apply in all directions. That pretty much sums it up. The honest truth is that it is Operation Red Meat, and it has no beef in it whatever. Nothing has changed. There is no plan—he admits that himself. The Government have completely failed to tackle the real issue, which many of our constituents worry about, and the people who bear the brunt of all this danger are those who are being illegally trafficked, many of them in miserable situations. The Government need to sort out the relationship with France and make sure we have a proper deal with the whole of the European Union so people can go back to the country where they originally landed. The Minister has used one phrase repeatedly today—that they will stop people landing “on their own terms”. What on earth does that mean?

James Heappey: First, there are a lot of questions coming from the Opposition about the incompleteness of a plan. I would just reflect that Labour is routinely and continually silent on what it would do to ensure that our borders are protected and illegal migration is stopped. As for the UK-French relationship, no one has pretended that the part of the plan that I am answering questions on today is, in and of itself, the answer to that challenge. Before it, there is a responsibility to have relationships with France and the EU within which that can be discussed; there is a requirement to attack the criminal networks that do the trafficking; and there is a requirement to deal with migration flows in the first place.

What “land on their own terms” means is that nobody gets to set foot on United Kingdom soil without having been intercepted and brought ashore by the Royal Navy or other agencies. They are then put into a system that I have every confidence will act as a deterrent to make the cross-channel route collapse thereafter.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I declare an interest as a serving naval reservist. I appreciate that the Minister is being bounced into this, but he must have a plan. Can he say when that plan will be available, and on what date command and control of the operation will swap from the Home Office to the Ministry of Defence?

James Heappey: I do not know whether my right hon. Friend is asking me to better articulate the MOD’s plan, which I have been trying to do and am happy to elaborate on further, or to elaborate on the wider plan which, regretfully, I am not able to do. The MOD’s plan is to bring all of the Government’s maritime inventory under the command of Commander UK Strike Force. We believe that if all assets were better cohered, it would be possible to have a more robust interception capability in the channel. That then feeds into a wider requirement that other Departments are engaged in delivering to make sure that what happens next, combined with that certainty about our ability to intercept at sea, provides the deterrent that we have been seeking for the last year. The plan is that that primacy is in place by the end of the month.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister seems to forget the desperation of the people making these crossings. If there were alternative safe and legal routes, does he not think that people would take them rather than risking their lives in such a way? Is he aware that Human Rights Watch has condemned the regular and persistent degrading treatment of adults and children in Calais by the French authorities? It is hardly a safe country for them.

James Heappey: The hon. Lady’s final point, about France being a dangerous place, feels like something that is—

Alison Thewliss: For those people it is.

James Heappey: France is, in my view, an entirely safe country. Migrants do not need to put themselves into the hands of people traffickers to be smuggled across the channel. I hope that they will soon see that there is no point in doing so because they will not get to enter the UK on their own terms if they do.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In the absence of Ministers having the political will to use pushback, what is the point in appointing a royal naval admiral to help Border Force to be a more efficient taxi service so that the migrants will know, “Now we’ve got the Royal Navy to pick us up—we’ll be taken safely to the UK, we’ll be put in a hotel and we’ll never, ever be sent home”? This is just an embarrassment. Will the Minister now co-ordinate with his colleagues to do what we have been suggesting for months and get rid of the pull factors—namely, ensure that we reform any piece of legislation necessary, including the Human Rights Act, and that people who do the illegal crossing are arrested, put in a prison and deported?

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend’s exhortations and those of colleagues have been heard.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): On a point of clarification, the reason why there are lots of questions from the Opposition is that this is an urgent question—that is what we are doing here.

I would like to ask the Minister whether the Government have seriously been considering using sonic boom weaponry against people seeking to come to this country in already hazardous conditions in the channel. Can he please explain to the House what impact that weaponry has

when used on individuals? May I also say that Operation Red Meat or Operation Save Big Dog—whatever you want to call it—is not in my name?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman's last point is self-evident. The use of sonic weapons is something that people have been exploring around Government. The Royal Navy is clear that they will not be used by the Royal Navy. As the operation will be under Royal Navy command, it will be down to the Royal Navy commander whether he wishes other agencies to use them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The people who come here genuinely seeking sanctuary and who fear persecution deserve our compassionate care. The people traffickers and those rights lawyers who encourage, facilitate and give succour to people who know that they are not seeking asylum—who are economic migrants—deserve our condemnation. The Minister has made it clear that this proposal can be only part of the solution. Will he arrange for a Minister—possibly the Home Secretary—to come to the House to reassure us that offshore processing, the deportation of illegal immigrants and secure accommodation for those awaiting deportation form part of the policy? May I say in addition that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has just said, we must bring forward the reform of the Human Rights Act and other legislation as a matter of urgency?

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that he can expect to hear exactly what he hopes for very soon. It is unfortunate that today I have been required to come and expose part of the plan early, but that is my duty to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House. There will be a wider exposition of the plan in due course, I am certain.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The Royal Navy website says:

“Whether disasters are human-made or natural...Responding to these life-threatening scenarios is central to our ethos”.

Given that the Government have decreed that, contrary to what the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) just said, almost two thirds of people crossing the channel in these small boats are so-called genuine asylum seekers, does the Minister agree that any genuinely responsible politician would refuse to be involved in further endangering the lives of these desperately vulnerable people? Before he accuses me of reading from *Hansard*, as he did so rudely with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), he said today that the Navy will not be involved in the pushback of people, but we all know that that could change tomorrow. Will he put on record his agreement that involving our Navy in pushing people back into dangerous waters would directly contradict that noble ethos?

James Heappey: I have somewhat more confidence in the Royal Navy than the hon. Lady does. I am absolutely certain that it can operate in the channel robustly, in the nation's interest, but compassionately. As Royal Navy mariners, with all the fine traditions of that service, they are clear about their job and they will not threaten the life of innocent people.

On her point about vessels operated by the Royal Marines being involved in pushback, I have been very clear from the Dispatch Box that that will not happen. It cannot happen: the vessels are inappropriate for the practice.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We on this side of the House are determined to smash the gangs that charge desperate people thousands of pounds to take a perilous journey. It would be better if they did not undertake that journey in the first place, so what discussions has my hon. Friend had with the French military on intercepting boats before they set off and returning them to France, where they should belong?

James Heappey: Clearly, that is a conversation that we will be having, and would like to have, but all of that is with the Home Secretary, and I know she remains engaged with it.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): This is fast becoming as ludicrous as it is disturbing. Yesterday, the Home Secretary was unable to explain what the military could do that Border Force could not, and the Minister has failed again today. Everybody knows that this announcement coming at this time is part of the campaign to save the Prime Minister's job. How does the Minister think the armed forces feel about being used for that purpose?

James Heappey: The Chief of the Defence Staff has been involved in all the conversations. As I have made clear, we should not be dismissive of the importance of securing our borders, not only from an immigration perspective but from a national security perspective. Migration is being used as a subthreshold weapon of competition elsewhere in Europe, and it cannot endure that our border is not properly secured.

The hon. Gentleman asks what the mindset is of the military. I can tell him that from the nation's most senior serviceperson downwards, they take great pride in making sure that they play their part in the plan to deliver what the democratically elected Government set as priorities.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This is not Operation Red Meat; it is Operation Dog's Dinner. If the mission statement were to reduce illegal people trafficking across the channel, I would support it, but, as far as I understand it, the mission statement is to lower the number of people landing on their own terms on UK beaches.

With the deployment of royal naval vessels, the Minister has effectively announced that asylum seekers need get only halfway across the channel before being intercepted by the Royal Navy, under royal naval command. This will incentivise people traffickers. They will see the Royal Navy ship on the horizon and say, “Point your dinghy in that direction. You only need to get halfway,” and the Royal Navy will pick them up. The only way this will work is if the Royal Navy intercepts asylum seekers and returns them to France. Without the second bit, this simply will not work.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend knows that the last bit would be impossible without French permission, and French permission has not been given. I do not

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accept his characterisation of what is being spoken about today. The Ministry of Defence mission is to make sure that nobody arrives in the UK on their own terms. [Interruption.] That means that nobody arrives in the UK without having been intercepted at sea or as they land. What happens next is that we will just have to wait a short while, and I am sure all will become clear.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am glad to see my old colleague from the Energy and Climate Change Committee doing so well in government. He will be aware of course that there is a vacancy coming up at the top quite soon, and I have high hopes for him that he will indeed go further.

I welcome that this has not been thought through very much—it is just like the rest of Operation Red Meat, to be honest—and I am glad that the Minister has indicated that the Navy will not intercept the small boats, unless, I would hope, there is a risk to life and there are people in distress, because around the world small boats have to be avoided for the terrorist risk. It will not take a terrorist with a PhD to see the opportunity of some of this, and I hope that the Government are thinking seriously about that. What assessment has been made of the terrorist risk both to the Navy and to the poor migrants, who are often escaping terrorists in the first place—as well as the efforts, of course, of international arms sellers—to find themselves in the channel?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman notes that the Royal Navy will not be directly involved in the interception of ships, and as I have explained, that is to do with the suitability of the vessel. However, I would not want him to think that that means we are not intending to intercept all dinghies. We are; it is just that there are better platforms to use for that under Royal Navy command and control.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to identify—this is the point I have been seeking to illustrate—the justification for using the armed forces as part of this mission. Our adversaries, whether they are state or non-state, are very good at spotting where vulnerabilities are in countries. I would argue that the flow of migrants has reached a point where it is a threat to our national security, so it is entirely appropriate that the Royal Navy should play a role in the co-ordination of the response.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Any of my constituents watching these exchanges will note the comments of Opposition Members who are trying to pour cold water on a plan that my constituents actually want. They want to see an end to this cross-channel illegal immigration, and they will also be disappointed to hear from the Minister that plans are not yet finalised, because hints and announcements have been made about the use of the Navy for many months—years, probably—and our military are adept at putting together plans quickly to respond to emergency situations. Can the Minister at least give my constituents some hint of when a robust policy will be in place and the Navy will be involved?

James Heappey: Very imminently indeed, and I would certainly imagine within the next few weeks.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): In all the awful answers the Minister has given, he has not shown one iota of empathy for desperate people putting their own lives at risk to try to get to a place of safety, many of them coming from war zones around the world that Britain has been involved in. Can he not show some humanity and sympathy to these people and come to a European-wide agreement on support for asylum seekers and refugees? Can he not also look at the sources and at why people come, as well as the awful conditions that many face when they arrive in this country? These are human beings trying to survive in a very difficult world, and history will judge very harshly those Governments who use military means to repel refugees at the time of a refugee crisis around the world. Let us have some humanity, not just reach out to the military all the time.

James Heappey: I know that it was very much the right hon. Gentleman's policy as Leader of the Opposition not to use the military at all, and probably to defund it as a consequence. I reject, however, the suggestion that we are not guided by a deep sense of compassion. The right hon. Gentleman is correct in observing that these people are desperate—so desperate, in fact, that they are putting themselves in the hands of exploitative criminal gangs that put them to sea in dinghies, increasingly in sea states that those dinghies are woefully ill-equipped to deal with. The responsible, compassionate response to this threat is to provide a robust deterrent so that people no longer put themselves in the hands of the criminal gangs, and that is exactly what we are doing.

If you will indulge me on a final point, Mr Speaker, the idea that conflicts in which I proudly served, as did hundreds of thousands of other British service personnel, are somehow the cause of why people are coming here now is utterly for the birds. Our nation's armed forces are engaged around the world trying to provide stabilisation and security in some of the countries that need it most precisely so that people do not feel they need to take on the perilous journey across continents to the United Kingdom.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the Chair of the Defence Committee on securing this urgent question. He is absolutely right to say that this plan is not a long-term solution. As deputy Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I have been pushing for the Home Office to consider our recommendation that claims to the UK asylum system should be able to be made from France, because the reason that people are desperate is that there is a dearth of safe legal routes to the United Kingdom. Can the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with the Home Office about that possibility as a long-term solution to the problem that would free up the Royal Navy for more appropriate duties?

James Heappey: The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), is sitting beside me. As the hon. and learned Lady was asking her question, I was told that the French Minister of the Interior has said in the French Parliament that the hon. and learned Lady's proposal would be completely unacceptable to France.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Red dog, dead dog, red meat—I don't know what this is, but it is a total embarrassment. Pope Francis has denounced the “narrow self-interest and nationalism”

in how European countries treat migrants and in how they

“persist in treating the problem as a matter that does not concern them”.

Is it not time, as the Pontiff says, to treat our brothers and sisters seeking sanctuary with compassion? Is it not time to attack the root causes, not the people who pay the consequences?

James Heappey: I would argue that that is exactly what our policy does. We are engaged around the world through our aid and military efforts to provide security and stabilisation in the countries from which most people are fleeing. I think that the work of our armed forces and of the brilliant people in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office who do international development is succeeding to an extent, but there is much more to be done. Criminal gangs are exploiting the most vulnerable, and it is right that we and our partners around the world get after those gangs to stop their work, because it is deeply insidious and malign.

It is also our responsibility to the people of this country to ensure that our borders are secure, for two reasons. First, it acts as a deterrent for those who are in France and are considering making an illegal crossing that will cost them their life savings and risk putting them to sea in a boat that is woefully ill-equipped for the sea state. Secondly, the people of the United Kingdom want control over their borders and over migration, and this Government are committed to delivering it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch, Mr Speaker. It is disappointing that the Minister has not ruled out pushback in his answers today, because it poses an obvious danger to life. In response to the announcement this week, navy sources have said that they deem pushback to be unethical. If Border Force implemented that policy and a small boat capsized, what would be the policy for Border Force staff?

James Heappey: I have been clear that the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines will not use the tactic, principally because they simply do not have the platforms that are appropriate for doing so. Arguably, the Border Force does; it has been doing trials with it, so it remains an option. But let us be clear: there are parts of the channel in which it definitely cannot be done, and there is a small part of the channel in which it might possibly be done. That is for the Navy commander to consider in due course.

Having a robust response that starts with the guarantee that we will intercept all boats either at sea or as they land, and then bringing people into a system that itself acts as a deterrent, is the right way to go. The people want the Government to get control of our borders—it is one of the Prime Minister's top priorities. The MOD has a part of that plan, which we are confident in our ability to deliver; the rest of the plan will be unveiled in due course.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Since 2014, more than £200 million—about half a million pounds a week of taxpayers' money—has been given to

France, yet crossings are increasing. The latest announcement will do absolutely nothing to halt those dangerous crossings. The Minister and the Government need to be smashing the criminal gangs. That is the reality; this is just red meat headlines, but more of the same failed policy.

James Heappey: The Government are introducing life sentences for people smugglers. We agree vigorously with the hon. Gentleman that the absolute key is to get upstream of the problem, prevent the migration flows in the first place ideally, and get straight after the organised crime gangs to attack the network. That is very much part of the plan, although not necessarily a part of the plan the MOD owns. As he would expect, that sits much more neatly in the Home Office and the National Crime Agency, and in the Foreign Office when it comes to diplomacy. As I have been clear throughout, it is suboptimal that I am able to unveil only our part of the plan in response to an urgent question today, but in due course the full system will be made clear.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Nearly five years on the Defence Committee has demonstrated to me that the woeful legacy of a decade of cuts to non-frontline services mean there is probably little option. The Defence Sub-Committee on contracted services to the MOD has also shown the pernicious effect of outsourcing services, such as those, for example, at HM Naval Base, Clyde, which affected so many of my constituents. Will the Minister give his word to the House today that there will be no private sector involvement in Operation Isotrope? If there is one thing we and the poor souls in the channel do not need, it is for Serco and Capita to get their tentacles into a very lucrative Government contract.

James Heappey: About 45 minutes ago, I was clear that there would be leased platforms that are far more appropriate for use in the channel. The hon. Gentleman suggests that this might be a contract with a single provider. That is not the case. What I am talking about is contracting platforms to come fully under command. I cannot say who they are owned by, but the names of the big conglomerates he just mentioned have not been mentioned.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Bringing in the military seems to be the Government's solution to everything these days, to the extent that I was surprised it was not part of the Culture Secretary's plan yesterday for the future of the BBC. Given the conflation of responsibilities, in particular around issues of aid and security, can the Minister confirm that there will be no creative accounting in any attempt to hive off the costs to the overseas development assistance budget, or, for that matter, the NATO 2% target?

James Heappey: I am not sure that the military is brought in for everything, as the hon. Gentleman says. Our country has just been through an extraordinary period. We are drawing on the mass, expertise and commitment of our armed forces to support the NHS and civilian authorities through the pandemic. I think that that is a sign of the extraordinary service and professionalism of the men and women in our armed forces. Actually, I think it is good that the Government

[James Heappey]

have been willing and able to draw on that capability throughout. As to his wider point, there is a requirement for a robust response. The Navy is able to bring that robustness not necessarily through the ships it can set to sea, but through its command and control, and through bringing all the Government's maritime assets—there are many of them—to bear in a co-ordinated way. If we can do that, we can do things differently from how they have been done over the past few years.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We must remember that we are talking about 25,000 people who came to the UK in this dangerous way last year, a threefold increase that proves the Government's plans are simply not working. The only thing we do know is that creating safe routes takes away trade from criminal gangs. Why are the Government making the situation worse without having clear objectives, rather than addressing the real problem?

James Heappey: There are many safe routes to the UK. I have been very clear that the part of the plan I have been able to answer questions on in the House today is not the full breadth of what needs to be done. The hon. Lady is right that the most decisive things we can do on migration are upstream of the channel. If she can wait just a few weeks, I am sure she will be illuminated fully.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to questions. Recent figures show that in 2021 some 28,000 migrants crossed the channel in small boats. That number is rising. The UK has a long-established asylum system, but the use of military vessels sends an unfortunate message. There are many civilian companies every bit as efficient, so can the Minister confirm co-ordination between our Border Force, other vessels in the channel, and civilian companies that have the capability, expertise and the talent to do the job? That, Minister, could be a much better solution.

James Heappey: It is absolutely the case that there are more appropriate vessels for cross-decking people in the middle of the channel than Navy vessels and, indeed, Border Force cutters. There is already a vessel contracted for that purpose. Our expectation is that we would contract more of that design in order to play a role. That is not to hand it over to a company that runs all those vessels; that is to bring those vessels into service under the command of the Navy commander.

Coronavirus Grant Schemes: Fraud

1.35 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, if he will make a statement on fraud in the coronavirus grant schemes.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Since March 2020, the Government have delivered a comprehensive multibillion-pound package to support individuals and businesses during the pandemic. As the House would expect, the Government have taken the issue of potential fraud relating to covid grant schemes extremely seriously.

Robust measures were put in place to control error and fraud in the key covid support schemes from their inception. For instance, to minimise the risk of fraud and error and unverified claims, the coronavirus job retention scheme and self-employment income support scheme were designed in a way to prevent ineligible claims being made up front, and made grants for employees and businesses using existing data held on Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' systems. That included cut-off dates around scheme eligibility and the need for customers to be registered for pay-as-you-earn online or self-assessment. In 2020-21, HMRC recovered £536 million of over-claimed grants.

To further bolster anti-fraud measures, at the spring Budget last year, the Government invested more than £100 million in a taxpayer protection taskforce of more than 1,200 HMRC staff to combat covid-related fraud. This taskforce is expected to recover between £800 million and £1 billion from fraudulent or incorrect payments during 2021-22 and 2022-23.

The Government's bounce back loan scheme supported more than £46 billion of finance to 1.5 million businesses. We are continuing to actively work with the British Business Bank, lenders and fraud authorities to tackle fraud and to recover loans obtained fraudulently. The value of prevented fraud was £2.2 billion, and we continue to recover further funds through our counter-fraud work. In addition, as part of the spring Budget last year, we announced plans to significantly strengthen enforcement activity against fraudulent bounce back loans. That included introducing processes with the Insolvency Service to prevent the fraudulent dissolution of companies being used as a means to escape liabilities, granting the Insolvency Service new powers and investing further in the National Investigation Service.

Importantly, throughout the pandemic we have been transparent about the estimated level of fraud and error in the covid schemes, and HMRC's annual report and accounts, which were laid before the House in November last year, included the latest information on error and fraud in the HMRC-administered covid-19 schemes. Figures on estimated losses and the bounce back loans, including those due to fraud, were published in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's annual reports and accounts.

Given the unprecedented efforts that the Government have made to protect jobs and livelihoods during this pandemic, it would have been impossible to prevent all related fraud. However, we have taken reasonable steps, and will continue to do so, to deflect and combat that fraud, and we will continue to be vigilant.

Mr McFadden: I am grateful to the Minister. Last week, the Government confirmed that they expect to write off around £4.3 billion of the funds allocated to coronavirus help schemes. There was no press release, no Instagram video, no statement to this House and no sight of the vanishing Chancellor at all; it was just buried away on the Government website. The Government website states, and the Minister repeated the claim, that from the beginning:

“Robust measures were put in place to control error and fraud in the key coronavirus support schemes.”

If robust measures to prevent fraud were in place, why did they fail to this shocking degree?

In November, the head of HMRC estimated that around half the money lost could be recovered. Why has that estimate now been downgraded to only a quarter of the funds? Why are the Government giving up so easily and not doing more to track down the money, rather than allowing it to remain in the hands of the fraudsters and criminals who have stolen it from taxpayers?

Mr Deputy Speaker, £4.3 billion is a huge sum of money. It is enough to take hundreds of pounds off energy bills this year for every household in the country. It is about the same annual amount as the Chancellor took off people on universal credit in the Budget in November. It is roughly the same as half the annual policing bill for the whole country. This write-off of £4.3 billion comes as households face a cost-of-living triple whammy of rocketing energy bills, the Chancellor's tax increases and a decline in real wages. Coming on top of the billions wasted on crony contracts and the amounts lost in loan schemes, these levels of waste destroy any claim that the Conservative party had of being careful stewards of the public finances. Will the Minister launch an investigation into how this happened and do more to recover this money from the fraudsters who stole it in the first place?

John Glen: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, which I am very happy to address. First, we are not writing anything off. The figures quoted are what we expect that taxpayer protection taskforce to recover in the next two years in which it will exist. HMRC has longer to address fraud in the schemes, which it will do in the context of wider compliance activity. HMRC did not produce the figure of £4.3 billion. I understand that it was an inference made by journalists who subtracted £1.5 billion from the estimate of the amount to be recovered by the taxpayer protection taskforce from the £5.8 billion estimated as error and fraud in 2020-21. That was published and Jim Harra and others from HMRC publicised all this before Christmas—in November. HMRC simply used the same numbers in a “mythbuster” article to be published later this week.

Those are the facts. There is nothing new here today, but I would like to address some of the underlying concerns. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that fraud is unacceptable. We think that, which is why—as I said in my opening remarks—in March last year, the Chancellor dedicated £100 million to employ 1,265 people from HMRC to undertake these fraud checks and to bear down on the fraud. We have had 13,000 one-to-one inquiries and sent 75,000 letters to those thought to have incorrectly claimed.

I point out to the right hon. Gentleman, however, that many of these schemes were stood up, refined and adapted very quickly. In order to meet the needs of

individuals, the self-employed and businesses up and down the country, £81.2 billion of payments were made across the three main schemes. Although I recognise that there has been an element of fraud, the Government have never been complacent about that. Grants for employees and businesses used data on HMRC systems. The design of the scheme was informed by expert advice from HMRC, which has extensive knowledge and understanding of where errors and fraud risks lay. We have implemented post-payment compliance to identify and recover overpayment, and we have invoked automated controls into digital claim processes, which have prevented 100,000 ineligible, mistaken claims.

The Government are not complacent at all about error and fraud. We will continue to bear down on it, and I urge Members of the House and members of the public to continue to contact HMRC, as they have done, as we seek to maximise the recovery of moneys lost.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I say to the Opposition that it is the easiest job in the world to stand on the sidelines and criticise, but what would they have done? Would they have waited and left businesses in peril? Would they have done that in search of the perfect? Some £407 billion has gone to businesses, the vast majority of which went to the right places. Of course there will be lessons to learn, but if the same situation happens again, will my hon. Friend prioritise the needs of business, rather than making the perfect the enemy of the good?

John Glen: I thank my hon. Friend for the clear point behind his question. We were straining every sinew in the Treasury to get money out as quickly as possible. On 14 April 2020, a Labour party press release stated:

“It is clear that additional action needs to be taken to increase the take-up of the different measures. We have called for urgent action...as take-up is worryingly low.”

That is why we intervened to change the design of the bounce back loan scheme and to make it 100% backed to get the money out quickly—£46 billion to 1.5 million businesses. I am sure that lessons can be learnt from what we have done—absolutely they can—but the principle of getting that money out and designing schemes with HMRC's excellent input during that period was imperative for the Government.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It seems, again, that when the going gets tough, the Chancellor goes missing.

HMRC said in its statement that fraud in the covid support schemes is in line with its original planning assumptions, but expecting this eye-watering level of fraud seems almost worse than it happening by accident. We see it also in the bounce back loan schemes. How much of the fraud relates to UK company structures and the related issues at Companies House, which make the UK such a magnet for money laundering?

As well as the Treasury being out of pocket, constituents of mine employed by companies deliberately employing dubious corporate structures did not even receive the furlough payments to which they were fully entitled. What consequences will there be for those companies, and for those people who never received the money that they were due, due to fraud and error? For the many people around these islands who received no support

[Alison Thewliss]

whatsoever—those who were excluded from support schemes—this fraud and error is all the more galling. Will the Minister apologise to them and put that right? Finally, when HMRC is chasing down an estimated 170,000 families who claimed child benefit in error, why is it letting fraudsters and criminals waltz off with £4.3 billion of public money, all of this in the midst of a cost of living crisis? That money should be in the pockets of our constituents, not of criminals.

John Glen: I listened very carefully, as I always do, to the hon. Lady. I totally agree that we must not accept any fraud and error as inevitable, and we will continue to bear down on that. From the start we designed the schemes to involve “know your customer” and anti-money laundering checks on application. Measures were put in place by the British Business Bank to detect multiple applications—indeed, there was co-operation among UK Finance members on that. Subsequently, we have developed further interventions involving the National Investigative Service, the Insolvency Service and Companies House data to prevent rogue company directors from escaping liability. We will continue to bear down on the fraud that may have occurred. But initial data on the repayment of bounce back loans shows that in only 2% have borrowers defaulted, and only 7% are behind repayments in any form. There is no complacency in the Government’s approach, and we will continue to look at ways to maximise what we can reclaim where there have been errors and fraud.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is right that we look carefully at how council tax payers’ money is spent, but let me refer to the current covid grant scheme, particularly for Cornwall. We in Cornwall need reassurance that Cornwall Council has absolute discretion in how to ensure that current leisure grants, for example, go to the businesses that most need them. At the moment, the council is saying that it has to pay the money to whoever applies, irrespective of how well their business is doing. My understanding from the Government is that, if a business is impacted by omicron, staff shortages, or reduced consumer demand, that is when the grant is paid. Could the Minister confirm to me, and to Cornwall Council, that it is for the council to ensure that the money goes where it is most needed, and that is what the Government intend?

John Glen: I can certainly confirm that the intention behind the range of interventions was to find the most appropriate delivery mechanism for the different support payments, and obviously we have worked with local authorities to give them that discretion. Every authority will need to be held to account for how it has decided to deliver the grants. My hon. Friend has made a clear case for where those priorities need to lie, and we are clear about the intention behind the grants, but it will be for local authorities throughout the country to make their decisions in the right way.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Seventy-one million pounds of taxpayers’ money was fraudulently claimed through the eat out to help out scheme. How many arrests have been made, and are the criminals now enjoying prison food?

John Glen: I am sorry, but I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact answer. What I can say to him is that, according to HMRC, the expectation of fraud as part of that particular intervention in the summer of 2020 was about 8.5%, and the figures submitted by Jim Harra, the head of HMRC, in last year’s report were in line with the expectations set out at the start of this journey.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Our much-loved Kettering gymnastics club provides sporting facilities for about 1,000 local young people every week. It is a not-for-profit club, registered with HMRC under the community amateur sports club scheme, and it operates as a club and not as a business. It has previously received covid grant funding from the council, but the later schemes issued in December 2021 seem to refer just to businesses, rather than to clubs. Can the Minister clarify the Government’s guidance to local authorities about whether clubs are eligible for the new funding?

John Glen: I recognise that the gymnastics club in Kettering, along with so many other clubs of that type around the country, provides an enormously valuable point of contact for young people. I should be happy to examine my hon. Friend’s point in detail and write to him with clarification, rather than dealing with it from the Dispatch Box. The principle of giving discretion to local authorities in order to meet the needs in particular communities has guided the Government throughout this process, and we have used this grant channel a number of times for that reason, but I will look as sympathetically as I can at the question that he has raised.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister referred to default as though it were the equivalent of fraud. The Public Accounts Committee has examined in great detail the issue of fraud in this area. As I am sure he knows, there are grants and bounce back loans taken fraudulently that people will be repaying, but the criterion on which they obtained them was itself fraudulent.

The Minister seems to be accepting this level of fraud. Will he make a clear statement that fraud at all levels will be investigated? We gained the impression from HMRC and others who appeared before us as witnesses that they would take the low-hanging fruit and let a lot of fraud continue without being tracked down.

John Glen: I know that the hon. Lady’s Select Committee is conducting an in-depth inquiry. I believe that the second permanent secretary and others appeared before the Committee last week, and I look forward to its report.

I can absolutely clarify that we do see the distinction between a credit loss and fraud. What we are talking about here is: what are the most effective mechanisms, and over what timeframe, to get that money back? Also, we have received moneys back from, for example, the furlough scheme: moneys and grants that were made in error. So it is a complicated picture. I am certainly not suggesting from this Dispatch Box that the Government are writing anything off, or do not grasp the distinction between a credit loss and fraud. This needs to be tackled, but it needs to be tackled in a time and money-efficient way. Obviously the law of diminishing returns

begins to apply after a certain point, and we will again be led by HMRC and its excellent advice as we pursue the matter.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Government are saying that fraudsters will still be relentlessly pursued. If, heaven forbid, the Minister ever had to implement such a scheme in the future, would he regard it as a satisfactory result to know that 99% of these huge sums of money went to the intended recipients?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He helpfully highlights that many of these grants and schemes were very effective in getting money to the right people in a timely way. I spoke earlier to an official from HMRC, who said, “We managed to get some of the money out in six days. If we had spent more time designing in more verification, we could have made it watertight. That would have taken several months and many businesses would have gone to the wall.” That was the dilemma we faced. I am not saying we got everything right, but it was certainly done in all good conscience to try to get the balance right.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The announcement that no action will be taken to recover the nearly £4 billion fraudulently claimed from the covid support schemes stands in stark contrast to the Government’s treatment of some of the poorest people in my constituency who had their benefits cut off, and who were even chased through the courts, for making the simplest of mistakes when claiming benefits.

Will the Minister concede there is a double standard when it comes to holding the rich and powerful to account, whether for breaching lockdown restrictions or even for downright fraud? Will he also commit to providing redress to my constituents who have suffered so enormously as a result of this Government’s heavy-handed approach to accidentally misclaimed benefits?

John Glen: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. The estimate of the amount of fraud is broadly in line with what we see in other Departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions. There is no complacency here. There is a desire to iterate our response by using insights into behaviour to examine all avenues to reclaim this fraud, and we will continue to take that approach fairly across all the schemes.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is interesting to hear the Minister confirm what I have often believed—that it was pressure from my colleagues on the shadow Treasury Bench that forced the Government to extend their proposed action to support businesses. I am glad he has confirmed that, but, on the specifics of this case, does it not say everything about this Chancellor that he is willing to write off £4.3 billion but does not have the courage to come to this place to respond to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden)?

John Glen: I have been in the Treasury for more than four years under three Chancellors. I have supported them all to the best of my ability, and I will continue to do so. What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that the Chancellor has been absolutely committed from the

start to design the best possible scheme to provide the money to support businesses and individuals up and down this country. Since then, the £100 million investment in extra HMRC personnel has been designed to maximise the recovery of fraud. The work on duplicate application checks, the changes in director information and the HMRC turnover check—all these insights were designed to minimise the loss to the taxpayer. That governs the Chancellor’s approach, and it governs the approach of all Ministers and officials in the Treasury.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What does it say about the integrity of this Tory Government that they are willing to write off billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money while, at the same time, cutting the income of millions of people on universal credit during a cost of living crisis?

John Glen: This Government made a range of interventions to support people in different forms and in different ways. We were clear from the very start that we would not be able to help everyone. One of the issues we had to reconcile was verification of people’s identity and status, and this measure to prevent fraud arguably stopped some people accessing the benefits of some of these schemes. I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that in 2020-21, Companies House showed the greatest ever number of incorporations. Did the Government not sniff something going on? If they did, why did they not act? If they are honest, do we not face taxpayers everywhere having to pick up the £4.3 billion bill for their failing?

John Glen: No, I do not accept that, I am afraid. At every stage the Government took the best advice that we could on the flows of data that were available from HMRC and Companies House, which conditioned the design of the schemes. Subsequently, insights and input from Companies House, HMRC and the Insolvency Service have governed how we seek to tackle and recover moneys from fraud.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister shows a degree of nervous embarrassment but very little by way of contrition. Companies in my constituency face closure because they are struggling. What would that £4.3 billion have done for those that did not qualify for any assistance from this Government?

John Glen: I am of course very concerned about businesses that are struggling and have been in difficulty, but I am pleased that the economy has recovered far quicker than many anticipated it would this time two years ago, and I am pleased that unemployment is at about 4.1%, rather than the 12% that was anticipated at the start of this crisis. There is no complacency from this Government, and there is an absolute determination to support businesses in getting back on their feet and trading. That is why we put in place so many interventions, which were designed in different ways to maximise the support to businesses and individuals across this country.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Government say time and again that support during the pandemic for the people who fell through the gap

[Wendy Chamberlain]

between the job retention scheme and the self-employed scheme would be too difficult to administer because of the risk of fraud. We now know that, simultaneously, companies that were defrauding taxpayers were being supported. We are left to conclude that the decision not to help those 3 million people was simply political. Those small businesses, sole traders and entrepreneurs should be the driving force of the UK's economic recovery in the months and years ahead. What impact has this lack of support had on those sectors, and what will the Government do to support them going forward?

John Glen: The hon. Lady points to the fact that none of these schemes was perfect. She recognises implicitly that checks against data to verify people's identity were necessary to ensure that they were suitable recipients of taxpayers' funds. Unfortunately that meant that some were not able to secure the support that they sought. Where we can, we have moved forward and iterated these schemes, focusing and targeting them on the sectors of the economy that were most hit at different stages in this crisis, but I concede that unfortunately we were not able to help everyone, as we would have liked.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister said that the Government were straining every sinew to get money out quickly, and nobody disagrees with that, but there must be retrospective due process to ensure that there was proper compliance. Defrauding the public purse can never be acceptable. One emergency loan for £4.7 million went to a firm founded just two days before it received the funds. How many other companies had only just been formed?

John Glen: Unfortunately, I am sure that there are examples of people who conducted fraud; that is self-evident. I urge the hon. Gentleman to give as much information as he can to HMRC, so that these matters can be chased up. There was always a balancing act between speed of delivery and risk of fraud, and Government and Ministers' decisions were made in the light of the best advice. It was not a perfect situation. However, we were urged to get that money out—not just by Labour but by the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and numerous other organisations—and we responded. I think that was generally acknowledged, and it certainly was by the shadow Chancellor at the time.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): This is outrageous. This is an attempt to shift the blame to everybody but the Government. Of course MPs across the House were pressing the Government for speed of action—for everyone, not just for a select few—but we were also raising issues of fraud. I wrote to the Chancellor within weeks of the scheme's being introduced about the information coming in about fraud. I tabled parliamentary questions on 3 July. I simply asked what measures were in place. What response did I get?

"I cannot go into specific detail about measures either in place or in development. For the same reason, it is not possible to release the number of fraudulent applications or associated investigations." I asked the same questions about the number of companies going bust and so on but still receiving grants.

I ask the Minister: what other organisation loses billions, yet no one is held to account, no one resigns and there is not even a word of apology—not a single sentence of regret? That money could have been used effectively to lift people out of poverty and to support jobs, yet through the incompetence of this Government, it has gone missing.

John Glen: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I do not accept the premise behind it, but I do accept that we moved £81.2 billion of support through various schemes out to businesses and individuals up and down the country, and that there was an element of fraud, which we will continue to bear down on aggressively.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may be aware that my Vauxhall constituency is home to world-renowned arts and cultural centres and small independent theatres, many of which are supported by young, up-and-coming independent actors, freelancers and artists who received no support whatsoever. Seeing the Government wipe away this £4.3 billion debt is another slap in the face for people who have struggled for the past 22 months without any support, even though they are taxpayers. I pay tribute to the many business improvement districts across Vauxhall—the South Bank BID, Vauxhall One, Brixton BID and This is Clapham—which support small and independent businesses up and down my constituency that struggled and often did not qualify for any grants because of the rateable values associated with inner-London constituencies. Does he understand that many people feel anger when they see the Government write off this £4.3 billion?

John Glen: As a former arts Minister who visited many of those organisations in the hon. Lady's constituency in years past, I recognise the enormous contribution that creative industries make there and across the country. Of course, the grants we gave through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the recovery fund, and the support through local authorities got to many of those organisations. I stand here today not with a sense that nothing could have been done better, but recognising that there was a balancing act between speed of delivery of support to businesses, and complexity, with the delays that would inevitably have ensued. I am contrite about our not getting everything right, but I am also clear about the real dilemma that we faced at the time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I think everyone in this House recognises that Government stepped in and helped; I know my constituents recognise that, and we want to put that on record. HMRC stated in November that its taskforce was expected to recover some £1 billion in fraudulent or incorrect claims over the past two years and referred to some 23,000 investigations that had been opened. Only 25% of the money will of course be returned, so can the Minister clarify how that came to be, and what lessons have been learned for any future financial claims?

John Glen: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I set out in my previous answers the dilemmas with respect to speed of delivery. However, HMRC has done a fantastic job in designing the schemes and standing them up quickly under enormous pressure.

We will continue to work closely with HMRC and take its advice as we make decisions on how to tackle enduring fraud risk. More broadly, lessons can be learned about the design of future schemes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, Minister, for responding to the urgent question. We will have a brief pause to allow those who are leaving to leave.

English Football League Governance: Derby County FC

2.9 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on matters of English Football League governance surrounding the administration of Derby County football club.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I am appearing at the Dispatch Box in place of the sports Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—who is taking a Bill through Committee. Like many Members across the House, I know how important football clubs are to local communities, and I appreciate how worrying it is to see them under jeopardy. I feel that particularly as a fan of Crystal Palace, a proud south London club that went through a similar experience about 11 years ago. It went through administration and was bought out by Steve Parish, avoided relegation, and is now in the premier league, so there is always hope, even in the darkest hours. Because the Government understand how important football clubs are to our local communities, we launched a fan-led review of football governance, and are working at pace to respond to the excellent report from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch).

I turn to Derby County. The situation is worrying for fans, the local community and football alike. No one wants to see a founding member of the Football League in administration and facing threats to its survival. Of course, Derby County has won silverware in the past, and I pay tribute to Wayne Rooney for his sterling work as manager this season—I never thought I would hear myself saying those words in the House of Commons.

We should be clear that the governance surrounding the administration of Derby County football club is a matter for the English Football League, the administrator and the club. However, the Government take a close interest and are receiving regular updates. The sports Minister spoke to the English Football League last night to understand exactly what is going on, and to urge all parties involved to take a pragmatic approach to securing the future of the Rams. I call on the English Football League, the club and the administrators to play an active and urgent role, within their remits, in seeking to facilitate an urgent solution to the situation.

The EFL has asked the administrators for details of a funding plan that will enable the club to complete this season. The administrators have tabled some options that are available to them, and the EFL has extended the deadline for proof of funding, in line with its regulations and policy. I understand that some bidders are interested in purchasing the club, and I very much hope that those conversations reach a fruitful conclusion as quickly as possible. Yesterday, the EFL issued an extensive and transparent update on its handling of the matter, which I commend to the House.

Of course, this matter raises questions about the wider financial sustainability of football. The fan-led review made a number of proposals directly addressing how to prevent clubs ending up in such situations, and

[Chris Philp]

the Government are considering them carefully. We have however endorsed in principle the review's primary recommendation, which is that football requires a strong, independent regulator to secure the future of the national game. In the meantime, the Government, and my hon. Friend the sports Minister in particular, will continue to engage closely with the EFL and Members—particularly those who represent the fine county of Derbyshire—and call for urgent pragmatism from all parties involved, so that they find a solution quickly and save this fantastic club.

Mrs Latham: I thank the Minister for his words. I spoke to the sports Minister last night, and I place on record that many Derbyshire colleagues completely support what we are doing to try to save the club. Derby County football club cannot be allowed to be removed from the English Football League on 1 February. If this can happen to Derby, which was one of the founder clubs of the Football League in 1888, it can happen to any of the other 71 clubs.

These clubs are so much more than businesses. They represent the heart and soul of communities, nowhere more so than in Derby, and they are huge drivers of economic growth and part of the cultural fabric of our country. Can the Minister assure me that in his discussions with the EFL he has been reassured that it is acting in the best interests of Derby County's fans?

I understand that there are ongoing legal proceedings between Derby and other clubs, but the reason the potential takeover cannot happen is that the EFL is refusing to rule on whether those claims could constitute football debts—a matter for EFL rules, not for the courts. Will the Minister confirm why the EFL is refusing to rule on the matter? If the EFL cannot or will not rule on it, Derby County believes that it could rely on new insolvency rules, approved by this Parliament, to exit administration. Will the Minister please confirm that he will investigate why the EFL's insolvency guidelines are not up to date, which is causing such difficulties for Derby County?

Furthermore, although the EFL's delay is effectively holding up the takeover, it appears to have set an arbitrary deadline of 1 February, at which point it can remove Derby from the league. Is the Minister convinced that the EFL is acting fast enough to resolve the football debts issue before the deadline, or will it extend the deadline accordingly?

Finally, I would like to mention the administrators of the club. Fans have no accountability mechanisms over those individuals, who themselves have no connection to the club. Will the Minister please assure me that he is in constant contact with the administrators to ensure that they are acting in the fans' best interests and as quickly as possible?

Chris Philp: As always, my hon. Friend is an outstanding advocate for Derbyshire and for matters that concern her constituents and football fans across the county and the broader region. I agree entirely with her point. Football clubs are an integral part of the fabric of their local communities; I certainly feel that in south London with Crystal Palace, and I know that colleagues across the House and their constituents certainly feel the same about their football clubs.

The sports Minister has been in close contact with the English Football League. We want to see it working urgently, pragmatically and rapidly to resolve the outstanding issues standing in the way of a takeover by a new owner, who we hope can invest the money needed to turn the club around. The sports Minister is pressing the English Football League very hard on these points; I am sure that he will do so again and that the English Football League will be listening to our proceedings this afternoon, hear the message from this House and act accordingly.

On my hon. Friend's final point, I am afraid that I do not know whether the sports Minister has spoken to the administrators yet, but since she has raised the point so forcefully and eloquently, I will certainly ask him to do so as soon as I leave the Chamber.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for bringing this urgent matter to the House today. Once again, one of our great historic football clubs—a founder member of the Football League—is in danger. That is not the fault of the players and staff, who have performed remarkably in the circumstances; it is not the fault of fans; once again, it is the fault of mismanagement by owners. It is an example of the problem that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) identified in the fan-led review of football governance: owners gambling everything on aiming for Premier League status without proper safeguards in place, leaving the club in danger. It is further evidence that football governance is broken and that we urgently need the changes recommended in the fan-led review.

We appreciate that the specifics of the current situation at Derby County are complex and that there are a number of parties involved—the EFL, potential buyers, administrators and other clubs making claims to legal challenges. Labour urges all those parties to work together to sort this out. But even bearing that in mind, may I urge the Minister and the sports Minister to do everything in their power to secure the club's future for the sake of fans, players, staff, the city and the wider community?

The question that many fans will be asking is “How did we get here again?” The review by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford has already put forward a strong set of recommendations that would overhaul football governance for the better. Introducing a new statutory independent regulator requires new legislation, but a shadow regulator fulfilling the same function could be introduced straightaway. Such a regulator could have flagged up the issues that put Derby County in jeopardy long before we got where we are today.

The Government have said that they will respond fully to the review's recommendations in the spring, but does the Minister accept that this latest crisis demonstrates that that is just too long to wait? Is the crisis not more compelling evidence that the Government need to act quickly to implement the recommendations of the fan-led review and ensure that football has a governance regime that safeguards our great clubs and our national game?

Chris Philp: I thank the shadow Minister for her question. Clearly, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire, is doing everything he can to urge the various participants, especially the English

Football League, but also the administrators and the other clubs involved, to find a resolution to this complicated situation.

I would add two points. First, I would not tar all football owners with the same brush. Those clubs I know about, particularly Palace, have been well managed, so it cannot be said that football owners as a whole conduct themselves badly. Secondly, the problems at Derby County are long-standing, and long predate the fan-led review. We are moving at pace to make sure that the fan-led review is implemented, and that work will happen as quickly as possible.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the urgent question and pay tribute to her Derbyshire colleagues, some of whom are unable to be here today but who I know are as concerned as she is.

My inbox is full of Rams fans who are understandably concerned by the perilous situation the club is in. The football review panel met Mel Morris near the end of the process and after the interim recommendations were published, and I asked him specifically whether he thought that the club would be in a different situation if an independent regulator and real-time financial monitoring had been in place. His answer was, “Yes, without a doubt.” Given that clubs think that the recommendations in the review would lead to greater sustainability in football, will the Minister—I appreciate he is standing in for the sports Minister—give a bit more detail about the pace at which implementation of the report’s recommendations is being considered and will be responded to? Many would argue that they are urgently needed so that no other club and its loyal, committed, lifelong fans will suffer the threat of ceasing to exist.

Chris Philp: Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend for the tremendous work that she has done in convening the fan-led review and producing such a comprehensive and detailed report. I can assure her that the Sports Minister is working on this as a matter of urgency. We have accepted the key principles of the fan-led review. It is a detailed review with a large number of detailed recommendations, and we want to make sure that we get the response right while doing so as quickly as possible. I can assure my hon. Friend that that work is happening very quickly, and I would be happy to ask the sports Minister to meet her to discuss the implementation timetable. I spoke to him earlier this afternoon and he is fully seized of the need to move fast.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I can confirm everything that the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) said about the importance of this issue in the city of Derby and across the whole area, as can be seen from the Members here today. Long ago, when this all began, I was one of those who took part in a meeting with the Football League in which it assured us of its earnest desire to see this matter resolved and Derby County continue. The Minister said in his opening remarks that no one wants to see the club go under: well, some of us are beginning to wonder. I assure him, and through him the Football League, that if, inadvertently—because the Football League is unable to remove the obstacles that at the moment it appears to be putting so firmly in Derby County’s way—that were to happen, none of those participating in it would be forgiven.

Chris Philp: The right hon. Lady makes her point with power and eloquence, and I echo her sentiments. As I said in my opening comments, I hope the English Football League, the other clubs involved in this saga and the administrators are listening to our proceedings this afternoon and to the message she just gave, which probably commands support across the House. I hope they listen and act accordingly.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): A little over a year ago, the sports Minister and I were in almost daily communication about the EFL’s financial crisis. Through that communication and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s actions and public hearings, we dragged the Premier League kicking and screaming into a £250 million deal to bail out the EFL. In the light of that action, does my hon. Friend agree that it is beholden on the EFL, which has benefited from financial help in the past, to show decency and understanding to Derby County football club—a former league champion club—in this, its hour of need? What is more, we need to speed up the football review and get legislation on the statute book. We all know there is limited time to bring forward legislation, but this is clearly an urgent priority, so will my hon. Friend commit today to give us a timetable for when legislation will come forward?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee echoes the sentiments so powerfully expressed by the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) a few moments ago. There is a significant burden on the English Football League and on the other clubs involved to get this matter sorted out urgently, and I agree with my hon. Friend’s sentiments in that regard.

On the timing, a number of details clearly need to be worked through. The fan-led review’s recommendations were very detailed, and primary legislation will be required. As my hon. Friend will know, the Government need to work through a number of pressing legislative priorities. I cannot make a commitment on behalf of my colleague the sports Minister—it would be wrong to commit a fellow Minister in respect of his portfolio—but I will ask him to speak to my hon. Friend, as well as to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), to discuss the timing.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I have to say that there will be real disappointment among Derby County fans that the sports Minister is not here to respond to this question. I understand that he is serving on a Bill Committee, but arrangements could have been made—[HON. MEMBERS: “Here he is.”] Well, it would be good to hear from him, because with the greatest respect to the Minister responding, he has not been able to answer the fundamental question.

The Minister has spoken about the problems that Crystal Palace had previously, but one thing about this situation is different: the threat of legal action from Middlesbrough and Wycombe and the impact of commitments that may exist in the future on the possibility of a takeover happening now. Will the Minister tell us what the sports Minister is doing to ensure that Middlesbrough and Wycombe’s claims against Derby County’s previous owners do not prevent the club from being purchased? When clubs have debts in the future,

[Mr Toby Perkins]

they go out of existence altogether, as we saw with Glasgow Rangers and Bury; if clubs have debts in the past, it can be resolved. That is the key issue we need to hear about today.

Chris Philp: If I may say so respectfully, the hon. Member's comments about the sports Minister at the beginning of his question were rather unfair: he was in a Bill Committee, taking primary legislation through Parliament, and has now arrived on the Front Bench, having completed that important task. That was an extremely unfair remark.

On the other football clubs, legal proceedings are currently pending, but I think a pragmatic solution should be found. I know the sports Minister has been in touch with the English Football League about finding a pragmatic solution. There were similar issues with Crystal Palace 11 years ago—I think it was to do with Lloyds Bank—and a pragmatic solution was found; I expect the same pragmatism to be displayed in this situation.

Finally, the fan-led review touched on some of the issues in respect of debts. When that review is implemented, it will address the issues that the hon. Member raised.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pity we cannot have a substitution of the Minister now that the sports Minister has turned up—that might be allowed on the football pitch, but it is not here.

I know the Minister is a keen football fan; does he, like me, remember how close Middlesbrough came to going out of business until Steve Gibson saved the club a few decades ago? Would it not be ironic if Steve Gibson's claim, which many of us think is probably a stretch, was what now pushed Derby County over the edge? Will the Minister urge Middlesbrough and Wycombe, in the spirit of football solidarity that fans are showing, not to press their claims and to let new owners be found? Does he agree that the Government may need to act because we cannot have, in our elite professional leagues, one club suing another because it does not like the outcome of the season? That is no way to have a sports competition with integrity. If we are going to have legal cases to decide things after the fact, we will not know what the final title decider would have been until the years go by.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There are obviously legal proceedings ongoing, but I think it would serve everybody's interests—the interests of football more generally, as well as those of Derby County in particular—if those involved show pragmatism and help a proud and long-standing club to survive. As I said a few moments ago, when Crystal Palace was in a similar situation, the bank concerned did show pragmatism, and I call on all those involved, including other clubs, to show the same kind of pragmatism.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Derby County is the latest club to find itself in difficulty, but without major and urgent reform it will not be the last. The system is broken when the club finishing at the bottom of the premier league receives 10 times more than the club at the top of the championship, despite their being separated by just one place in the football pyramid.

Can I ask the Minister what work is being done to ensure that English Football League clubs are put on a financially sound footing, including agreement on an equitable distribution of the TV money?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. One of the issues addressed by the fan-led review is precisely the question that he refers to, and I know that as the Sports Minister works through the response to the fan-led review, answers to that reasonable and important question will be forthcoming.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Although I am a Leicestershire MP, many of my constituents who have written to me are loyal supporters of Derby County and are hugely concerned about the future of the club. Derby County is in administration, and it accrued or built up £30 million of tax liabilities under the previous owner. If the club goes into liquidation, those moneys due to the Treasury will be at risk. Given this really quite huge financial vested interest of the Government in the survival of Derby County, what are they doing to ensure that the obstacles to a successful takeover are removed, to secure the future of this iconic football club and also secure the moneys due to the Treasury?

Chris Philp: The Treasury, or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs I should say, as an unsecured creditor, is like any other unsecured creditor, and the administrator will treat it fairly and even-handedly, as it would treat any creditor in this situation. I do not think the existence of that debt, among other debts, is the obstacle to completion of the transaction; other issues to do with outstanding legal proceedings and matters that the EFL is responsible for are more immediate obstacles. That is why I repeat my call for the EFL and those other clubs, such as Middlesbrough, pragmatically to get this situation resolved as quickly as possible.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I think we can all, as football fans, feel for the fans of Derby County. We can imagine what it would be like if our club were in such a position, with all that history and our fathers and grandfathers—and grandmothers—having supported a club that is about to disappear. We have to feel for them. It is unthinkable that Derby should go out of existence, but it was unthinkable that Bury should go out of existence, and look what happened.

This is really just another example of the complete mess that is football finance. Why are the rules about administration in place? It is because a few years ago Leicester City deliberately went into administration to get rid of its debts to enable it to be promoted to the premiership at the expense of Sheffield United. It is a complete mess. There are two issues that arise: get the Crouch fan-led review in place as quickly as possible to sort out football finances; and in the meantime get the EFL—I have some sympathy for it because of the difficulties it faces—to give a proportionate and proper response to Derby to make sure that club survives.

Chris Philp: We all agree, without question, that the steps to ensure Derby County's survival must be taken as quickly as possible. On the wider points made about football finance and the situation the hon. Member mentioned a few years ago, I would just point again to

the fan-led review, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. It is precisely to deal with the issues that he quite rightly raises that the review was initiated and why my hon. Friend the Sports Minister will be acting on it.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this urgent question. Like a number of local MPs, I met the EFL yesterday—as a Derbyshire MP, many constituents have written to me—and I have to say that, following that meeting, I could not help but share some of the suspicions outlined by the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), because it did not feel to me that the EFL was really putting fans at the heart of this situation and putting our communities front and foremost. I know the Minister is unable to respond directly, but does the Department have faith in the EFL as a fair arbiter which has fans in mind?

Chris Philp: It is important that the EFL and the other participants in this saga act quickly to ensure a successful resolution. As always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so let us hope, and indeed expect, that those results follow very soon.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): As a lifelong Boro fan, can I say to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) that no Middlesbrough football club fan wants to see Derby County—a great football club—go into administration and exit the league. There are great links between our clubs, not the least of which was personified by the great Brian Clough. I know that the Minister is doing his best, but the details are complicated. There is the potential claim, which is founded in the mismanagement of Derby by its previous owners, who offended against the rules and were punished as a result. That is why we are in this position today. I urge the Minister to familiarise himself with the statement from Middlesbrough football club, which has made it clear that it does not want to see Derby fall into liquidation and that it

“is happy to be realistic in its expectations in order for Derby County to exit administration.”

I encourage the Minister to encourage the EFL to encourage the administrator to engage with Middlesbrough, which is very realistic about how it can assist in this process, but at the moment is being met with silence.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important and reasonable point. My hon. Friend the Sports Minister has just confirmed to me that in his conversations last night with the English Football League he called on it to facilitate exactly the kind of conversations that the hon. Gentleman just mentioned. It is our hope that those conversations reach a resolution very quickly. The statement that the hon. Gentleman just read out from Middlesbrough football club is encouraging, but obviously actions will speak louder than words.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As a proud Nottinghamian, I did not think I would see the day when I would stand in this Chamber defending Derby County football club. Much has been made of the governance, which is clearly an issue, but I think most football fans up and down the country look at the financial fair play system, the sanctions and the points

deductions and see it generally as a mess. Does the Minister agree that the rules from the EFL need to be clearer, that punishments need to be delivered in a consistent and timely manner and that the EFL must learn the lessons to avoid these things happening in the future?

Chris Philp: Once again, my hon. Friend makes some important points, and I am sure fans of Derby County will be grateful to him for his magnanimity in the way he framed his remarks. I believe that the issues he raises will be picked up by the fan-led review to make sure that these risks do not arise again.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As a Leeds United supporter, I know all about having a renegade owner racking up hundreds of millions of pounds in transfer fees to gamble on sporting success. One of the underlying issues with Derby County and other clubs that face difficulty is hugely inflated transfer fees. Has the Sports Minister considered looking at the role of agents, who are unlicensed and unregulated, and who have no cap on the level of the transfer fees that they can receive, to help calm this situation and stop the financial escalator we are seeing in transfer fees?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. A number of people have concerns about the role that agents play—not least football clubs, managers and indeed sometimes players themselves. It is a slightly, and I choose my words diplomatically, opaque—I was going to say murky—business. As the Sports Minister responds to the fan-led review, this will be an issue that he addresses.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): It is the failure of football governance that has created the problem at Derby. In this crisis, once again, the fans see that no one is interested in their concerns, the long-term future of the club or the impact on the people of Derby. If the EFL had enforced its financial rules effectively, this would not have happened, yet it is the EFL's rules that will trigger Derby's expulsion from the league by insisting that all football debts and liabilities are met. The regulator that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) proposes in her report will stop this happening, but not before 1 February. Is the Minister prepared to consider what other direct interventions DCMS might make to keep Derby County in business?

Chris Philp: If the current system had been functioning perfectly or properly, there would have been no need for the fan-led review. There are certainly shortcomings, as my hon. Friend points out, which the fan-led review is designed to address. On the way in which the EFL's rules may have precipitated or triggered the current situation, I repeat my call and, I think, the call of all hon. Members on both sides of the House for pragmatism from those involved, including the EFL, to get this matter resolved as quickly as possible to save a great club.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We all accept the special role that football clubs have in their local communities, but they are treated like any other business, which is at the heart of the problem. With the EFL's rules and with clubs as they are currently constituted under company

[Clive Efford]

law, it is very difficult to intervene in this process. If the football regulator had been in place, with the rules and regulations that have been asked for, this problem would not have arisen. I have heard the Minister say plenty of times that the Government are determined to bring in the regulator as quickly as possible, but we not only need DCMS to say that; we need primary legislation that involves other Departments. Can he give us an assurance that those other Departments are applying the same urgency as DCMS?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is right that it requires primary legislation; and the Sports Minister, who is sitting next to me on the Front Bench, is working through those plans. As I said a few moments ago, the proposals are quite complicated in some areas and we need to make sure we get this right. Obviously it would be terrible if we acted too quickly, did not get the details right and ended up not fixing the problem. The Government's intention is to legislate as quickly as we can, but we want to make sure we get this right to avoid the situation reoccurring.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Although football finance expert Kieran Maguire warned the EFL in 2018, it was 19 months before the EFL issued financial fair play charges. This allowed the situation to escalate out of control for far too long. For the sake of Derby fans, we need the Minister to take urgent action to get the EFL, Mel Morris, potential owners, Middlesbrough and Wycombe together to thrash out a deal. He should put them in a room and throw away the key until something has been sorted. It is in no one's interest to see the future of such a proud club under immediate threat of folding.

Chris Philp: I share my hon. Friend's call for urgency. The Sports Minister, as I said, spoke to the EFL last night, and he will continue urgently and forcefully pressing the participants in this saga to get a resolution. I repeat my call for all those involved—the EFL, clubs such as Middlesbrough, the administrators—to demonstrate flexibility and pragmatism in getting this sorted out. My hon. Friend the Sports Minister will be driving that forward.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As a Newcastle United fan, I know something of sorrow and frustration. I have huge sympathy for Derby County. This Government have repeatedly failed to act on issues of financial sustainability and effective governance in our national game, and they are now dragging their feet on their response to the fan-led review of football. Does the Minister really think that the pace of the Government's response equals the importance of football in the lives of my constituents? Will he commit to putting fans at the top of the football pyramid?

Chris Philp: I do not accept the allegation that the Government have been dragging their feet. It was the Government who commissioned the fan-led review in the first place, and we have accepted its recommendations in principle. Detailed work is now taking place to get it implemented. As I said in response to a previous question, we need to make sure the details are right. Although we

are acting with urgency, we do not want to act so fast that we make a mistake in the legislation. On putting fans at the centre, the clue is in the name: it is a fan-led review.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) said in her excellent contribution that if this could happen to Derby, it could happen to anybody. Well, it did: it happened to Bury football club. When it happened to Bury football club, the fans paid the price. It was the fault of the owners, not the fault of the fans. When that process happened—Ministers on the Front Bench know I was intimately involved in it—the English Football League did not care. It did not care about any of the thousands of fans of Bury football club who were impacted by its decision to expel the club from the league. We are not talking about the local branch of Tesco. Football clubs are engines for social and economic good. They are the history and heartbeat of communities. I do not have the words to describe the impact on thousands of people in my constituency of Bury football club disappearing.

It is time for the English Football League to show that it cares, and not do what it did with Bury. It destroyed a club and nearly destroyed a town. I am not underscoring that; that is how much of an impact it had. I urge the Minister to do whatever is necessary to protect the fans of Derby. I have seen on a daily basis in my constituency what such a situation does to the fans of a football club who care about and love their club, and care about and love their town. That is bigger than all the rules in the world. The situation has got to be sorted out. Please do everything possible to protect Derby fans and please do not make the mistakes that happened with Bury.

Chris Philp: I think there is agreement across the House that what happened to Bury football club was a catastrophe for the local community. We must make sure the same does not happen to Derby County. All of us, on both sides of the House, will understand how devastating it is when a local football club disappears, as Bury did. Let us hope and take action to ensure that that never happens again. I am very sorry to hear my hon. Friend's assessment of the EFL's conduct in the Bury football club situation. I can only repeat my plea, or demand, to the EFL to act rapidly and pragmatically. Once again, to make sure these things do not happen again, the independent fan-led review and the Government response to it is vital. Just to be clear and to clarify, the Government accept the principle of an independent regulator and are studying very carefully the other recommendations. We will respond as soon as we can.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I wholeheartedly endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly). The Minister makes the point that there are good owners of football clubs and there are. Rochdale, my town's club, certainly has those. There are bad owners as well and the EFL has failed consistently to operate its duty on the fit and proper person test. The message the sports Minister has to give to the EFL is that there is no confidence in its ability and its governance of football. That message has to go out, because in the meantime, while we wait for the fan-led review to be given legal force, we have to make sure there is real pressure on the EFL so we do not lose another great club.

Chris Philp: The hon. Member makes a very powerful and eloquent point. As I said in response to the points made by the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett), I am sure the EFL is listening to our proceedings and I am certain it will act accordingly.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Although it is true that I am a proud Motherwell fan, my in-laws, Ron and Alison Wright, constituents of the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), are proud Derby County fans. They are very proud of their club's history and place in the town. As Derby County try to play out of their 21-point penalty, does the Minister agree there is a bit of a catch-22 situation for a team to try to play for its survival while it cannot keep players in the face of such financial and legal uncertainty?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right. It is a difficult situation to suffer a 21-point penalty. Back in 2010, my team, Crystal Palace, had a 10-point penalty and avoided relegation on the final day of the season. I hope—demand, really—that Derby County continue and survive. I hope they continue fighting on. I know they will show the spirit required to get every single point they can as they fight not for survival as a club, but for survival in the Championship. I wish them every bit of good luck in doing that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for coming off the subs bench to take the urgent question. I do not know who, when asked whether football was a matter of life and death, said it was more important than that—[HON. MEMBERS: “Bill Shankly.”] Shankly, there we are. I think today's urgent question proved that admirably.

Mr Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for standing in bravely, but the petition specifically went to the sports Minister. It will be matter of huge regret that he was not able to give his perspective in response to the urgent question.

We have had statements at different times, but in the future on such matters, which are of such importance to people, can we ask the Government to try to find a way

to work with the Opposition, either to delay the Bill Committee or to delay the statement, so that the Minister can be here to respond? For the sake of my constituents, who are incredibly worried about the future of Derby County FC, I feel we would have had a different response if the sports Minister had had an opportunity to respond. I do not mean to be mean to anyone, but in the future can the Government and the Speaker work together to try to ensure the relevant Minister can be here to respond on matters of such importance?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given the nature of an urgent question, does the Minister want to come in or shall I take this?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The hon. Member may be confusing two points. I am aware that there is a petition being processed at this moment in time, but today's response was to an urgent question. I am sorry that I was unable to be at the Dispatch Box because I had other business scheduled in the House. The Charities Bill had been scheduled for a long time and, by just a few minutes, time did not allow me to be here.

I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for standing in for me. As I hope I have proven over the past two years in this role, I am always open to discussion with any colleagues, on any side of the House. I have had many conversations with colleagues relating to Derby County FC, and I would happily speak to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins). There is nothing party political about the issue and we all need to work together.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think I need add anything further to that response.

We should now have the presentation of a Bill, but I do not see the Member present, so we will move on to the ten-minute rule Bill.

Digital Devices (Access for Next of Kin)

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

2.52 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to grant a right of access to the digital devices of a dead or incapacitated person to their next of kin; and for connected purposes.

At the outset, I thank the Government for giving me one of their valued spaces to introduce this private Member's Bill. They did not do that lightly. Indeed, there is an indication—I will put it no more strongly than that—of a fair wind from the Government and that the Bill could make its way to the statue book, given that they are considering whether the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill may be a mechanism to consider the matter.

I thank hon. Members from across the House for the considerable support I have received, as can be seen from the names of the sponsors of the Bill, and the welcome endorsement I have received from the other place, where they are considering similar matters. I particularly welcome the support from Baroness Beeban Kidron, who took time to draw my attention to and discuss with me the contents of the report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, and the importance of how this measure will help reset the relationship between the service provider and end user. I note a debate in the other place in the Baroness's name on Thursday, and hope that that too will give added momentum to this important matter, which both the House of Commons and the House of Lords are considering.

My Bill will grant the next of kin the right to access the smart phone and other digital devices of a person on their death or incapacity. There is no legislative definition of a "digital asset" in the United Kingdom. There is no legislation governing a personal representative or fiduciary's access to digital assets. My Bill would create a law where the default position would be that the next of kin of a deceased or incapacitated person would automatically gain access to the contents of the digital platforms held in the deceased person's name on their digital devices.

My Bill would clarify the position in the UK, and protect the assets and legacy of an individual's digital estate. It would grant immediate access to the next of kin to a deceased or incapacitated person's digital assets without their having to take costly or uncertain legal action against digital platforms. The Bill will codify the contents of digital assets as a person's possession.

Every day, without realising it, we are creating an even larger digital footprint as we go through our lives, both in a personal way and in our financial lives online. What happens to that information when someone unexpectedly or tragically dies? Leaving a treasured possession such as a photo album or a collection of memorabilia and precious memories used to be quite easy, but in the ever-increasing digital world and digital age, that now often intangible property may be buried beneath layers of cyber-security. It can be hard to locate and even harder to administer as the legal landscape has failed, on many occasions, to keep pace with the development of technology and tech companies have become increasingly powerful.

Today an estimated £25 billion of our assets in the UK are held online in password-protected cloud storage solutions such as iTunes and social media accounts. For

many people, digital assets fall into the important category of predominantly sentimental value—for example, memories, photos and videos stored on a laptop, notebook, smartphone or on social media accounts accessed via those devices. But this is not just about sentimental records. Music is purchased online, physical record, CD and book collections are replaced, and in some instances significant revenues are generated online. In the gaming world, a player's virtual character can be traded for considerable revenue. YouTube channels, cryptocurrency and frequent flyer points can each be translated into monetary value—but only if next of kin has access. Most people are under the impression that they own their online content. They do not. Many forget to make provision for access to their content material in their will, or to share their passwords and access codes with their loved ones. Of course, many do not have a will, and young people, especially, fall into that category. Much precious material, sentimental and otherwise, can therefore be lost forever.

The United States of America has attempted to legislate in the area, and the Uniform Fiduciary Access to Digital Assets Act has passed in some states, but in the UK there is no legislation on rights of access to a person's digital device or account. Even a grant of probate may not be sufficient to enable the executors to obtain legal title to a deceased person's digital content. In fact, in the UK we are at the mercy of the mechanisms laid down by the giant tech companies in trying to gain some limited access: Facebook, Google, Apple, iTunes, Instagram, Microsoft, YouTube and PayPal, to name a few. Each has different and limited practices and policies for access on death or incapacity to a person's digital content or physical device. We need to unlock that labyrinth for the public.

The Bill will go some way towards unlocking and finding a way through that labyrinth. It will allow next of kin the automatic right to access to a person's digital device and place a responsibility on the tech companies to unlock devices for those next of kin who do not have the access codes for devices left by the deceased. It will avoid unnecessary legal action by the next of kin. It will remove forever the unnecessary wall and unlock, for many, happy memories and access to what they thought was lost archive material about their loved one. Precious photos, videos, memories, messages, diaries and other material will be accessible to next of kin at the most difficult time in many families' lives. There is a need for the Government to bring our laws into the digital new century and ensure that next of kin are not blocked by tech companies from having access to their loved one's material.

During my discussions with Baroness Kidron, she related to me the tragic story of 14-year-old Molly Russell. It chimed with me given other constituency cases that I have come across and dealt with. The Bill will ensure that digital data is available to investigators, and, above all, that other bereaved parents do not have to experience what families have gone through in accessing their children's social media and other accounts.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Ian Paisley, Jeremy Wright, Damian Collins, Sir Robert Goodwill, Kevin Brennan, John Spellar, Matt Western, Nick Smith, Jim Shannon, Carla Lockhart and Sammy Wilson present the Bill.

Ian Paisley accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed (Bill 229).

Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill [Lords]

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 19 July and 7 September 2021, on the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, HC 277; Written evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, reported to the House on 13 July, 19 July and 7 September 2021 and 17 January 2022, HC 277.]

Second Reading

3.1 pm

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

The United Kingdom was the first country in the world to pass legislation to protect animals with the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822. In 1876, we were the first country to pass legislation regulating experiments on animals. In 1875, we were the first country to introduce measures to improve conditions in slaughterhouses. This House also passed the landmark Protection of Animals Act 1911, an Act emulated by many other countries around the world.

More recently, there have been further improvements. One of the first actions taken by Margaret Thatcher's Government was the introduction of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, announced to this House in July 1979 by Peter Walker. That Government then updated the law on animal experiments with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which remains an international gold standard. The Labour party has also made its contribution: our Parliament updated the 1911 Act with the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which introduced a robust framework and powers for protecting all kept animals in England and Wales.

Every piece of animal welfare legislation passed by this House since 1822 has implicitly recognised the sentience of animals. During the European Union era, the UK was a signatory to article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, which offered a form of legal recognition of the sentience of animals. Although that did not really mean very much, we believe we can now do better through this Bill.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I note that the Secretary of State did not mention the ban on hunting with dogs—a law that needs to be strengthened—which constituents up and down the country are still concerned about. Why should this not be the Government to deal with that once and for all?

George Eustice: We have had many pieces of legislation; I sought in the time I had to list some of the key ones, including the 2006 Act.

How we treat animals, and the legislation we have to govern animal welfare, is a hallmark of a civilised society. We should be constantly looking to improve and refine our legislation in this area. That is why the Government have committed to introducing this new law on animal sentience.

I take this opportunity to thank my noble friend Lord Benyon of Englefield for his work bringing the Bill through the other place. The current version underwent close scrutiny in the other place, as Members would expect. This is a succinct Bill that offers clarity and

avoids creating a wide avenue for the judicial review of Government decisions, while ensuring that animal welfare is properly considered as Governments formulate policy.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): As the MP who I think made the first attempt to put sentience recognition into UK law with my amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, I warmly welcome this Bill. I congratulate the A Better Deal for Animals coalition for the work it has put into it. The Secretary of State mentions the scrutiny in the other place. Does he have sympathy with the concern raised there about how the Bill's current wording would mean that the Animal Sentience Committee can look only at the adverse effects on the welfare of animals as sentient beings? Would he consider looking at the positive opportunities in considering those sentience issues, too?

George Eustice: I think this matter was dealt with extensively by my noble Friend, Lord Benyon. The key thing is that an adverse effect can mean a failure to make a change or consider a change that would have a positive impact on the welfare of animals, so I do not share any concerns about that expression.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for his Committee's work in scrutinising our proposals.

The Bill proposes four things. First, it establishes an Animal Sentience Committee, whose members the Secretary of State will appoint on the basis of expertise and experience. Secondly, it tasks that committee with scrutinising Ministers' policy formation and the implementation of decisions. In each instance, it will publish a report containing its views on whether Ministers have had all due regard to the welfare needs of animals as sentient beings.

Thirdly, Ministers will be held to account through a duty to respond to the committee's reports by means of a written statement to Parliament, and Parliament must receive such responses within three months. Finally, the wording of the Bill offers recognition that non-human vertebrates—that is, animals with a spine—and additionally decapod crustaceans, such as lobsters, and cephalopod molluscs, such as octopuses, are sentient. That means they are capable of experiencing pain or suffering. The Bill contains a delegated power for Ministers to add by regulation other species to the definition of animals. That is to be used if there is good scientific evidence that those particular species are sentient.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether the Bill as drafted contains birds?

George Eustice: The Bill does include birds, since they are vertebrates, and it includes fish, since they are vertebrates. I point out that those particular animals have been recognised in our law as sentient since at least 1911.

I want to be clear about what the Bill does and does not do. While its aim is to improve the policy and decision-making processes of Government, the committee's reports will not bind Ministers to any particular course of action. Ministers will remain free to determine the right balance between animal welfare and other important considerations.

[George Eustice]

Devolved matters are also excluded from the Bill's provisions. The Scottish Government have their own counterpart to the Animal Sentience Committee already, while Wales and Northern Ireland have the powers to establish equivalent bodies, should they wish to do so.

It is also important to understand that the Bill tasks the Animal Sentience Committee with scrutinising the process by which Ministers arrive at policy decisions. It is not there to tell Ministers what decisions they should make or to critique those decisions. Instead, it is there to provide technical assessments of how well a given Department obtained and assessed relevant evidence on the animal welfare effects of the policy in question.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): On that point, can my right hon. Friend say whether he has assessed the possibility of judicial review arising as a result of that assessment process?

George Eustice: As I said, we do not believe that the Bill creates a cause of action for judicial review, for the simple reason that the obligation on a Minister is to respond to the report within three months, and that response can deal with any recommendation or observation put forward by the committee.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a strong case for the Bill. Does he agree that Britain continues to lead the world in animal welfare and that the Bill enhances our role?

George Eustice: Yes. As I set out at the beginning of the debate, the United Kingdom has always been a world leader in animal welfare. We were the first country in the world to introduce animal welfare legislation; we recognised the sentience of animals as long ago as 1822. We have been in the vanguard of new legislation in the area over time, and the Bill demonstrates our continued leadership.

Our approach will promote fair and consistent consideration of animal welfare throughout Government policy decisions, but without impinging on the freedom of Ministers to make those policy decisions, for which they are democratically accountable for Parliament.

For all those reasons, I commend this short Bill to the House.

3.10 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I believe that across the country and across this House we care deeply about the welfare of animals. In that context, I am happy to reassure the Secretary of State that we support the Bill and will not divide the House on its Second Reading.

Successive Parliaments have sought to ensure that the law protects animals from cruelty inflicted by humans. The Opposition are proud that it was the Labour Government who brought in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, protecting the treatment of domestic animals and making owners and keepers responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of their animals are fully met. The Opposition do not distinguish; we believe that all animals deserve protection, whether they are on a farm, at home as a pet, at large in the wild or in the sea.

The Government's chaotic handling of our leaving the EU has left many gaps in protection and in law. The Bill will address one of those gaps by putting back into domestic legislation the recognition that animals are sentient beings. That issue has been in limbo since we left the EU, and I am pleased that it has now been reconciled. Formal legal recognition of animal sentience sends a clear message that as a country we are committed to protecting the welfare of animals—provided, of course, that the Government make sure that they deliver on what the Bill purports to promise.

What is difficult to reconcile, however, is that while animal welfare standards are constantly being raised here in the UK, the same is not true across the world. I am very proud that British farmers are leading the way, but it is a fact that many are facing a cliff edge, and with changes to EU subsidy favouring landowners keen to diversify away from farming to biodiversity schemes, it has come at the worst possible time. We are seeing food left rotting in the fields and some 20,000 pigs culled, all because of entirely foreseeable labour shortages.

To make matters worse, although the Government talk a good game on animal welfare, trade deals have been signed that not only undermine British farmers and producers, but allow the UK and its Government essentially to outsource animal cruelty in the supply chain to other countries. Take the UK-Australia trade deal: while we maintain high standards here in the UK and higher costs as a result, Australia allows intensive farming, which means that cattle may spend their entire life locked away without seeing a blade of grass, not to mention being trucked for 48 hours without rest, food or water, often in very hot conditions that would be illegal in the UK.

The Government could have used the Bill as an opportunity to address animal welfare concerns relating to those trade deals. As the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals acknowledges, the free trade agreement with Australia does not give any guarantee about equivalence of standards for imported products. We share the RSPCA's concern that that could open the door to imported products such as hormone-fed beef and chlorine-washed chicken, produced to lower standards that would be illegal in the UK. Will the Secretary of State commit to amending the Bill to prevent that, or at least to bringing forward measures that will address those widely held concerns about how our domestic legislation interacts with trade deals that have so far been negotiated and with those negotiated in future?

On British soil, action is being taken by the National Trust and the Welsh Government, but the UK Government seem intent on turning a blind eye to the abuse of the Hunting Act 2004. Lessons are literally being given on how to get around the law of the land, and it is leading to live chases of foxes in this country.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Maybe I should have asked the Minister this question, but does the hon. Member think that when the Government are creating the committee to advise Ministers, it would be advisable to consider an open and transparent process of appointment in which appointees, no matter who they are, must declare their work and their participation in events such as foxhunting?

Jim McMahon: I think that, with every public appointment made, we need transparency and we need to ensure that those around the table are there for the

right reasons, and not to look after their own interests. Where there is a genuine conflict of interest—where any normal member of the public would look at it and question whether the motives of that person were in the interests of the country at large—of course that would not be right. It is a fact, particularly during the Boxing day hunt, although it was a day delayed, that the Government were completely absent. The country was lining up to criticise the clear abuse that has been taking place for a period, where loopholes are being exploited and the Government do not take action. On one hand we say that we are an animal-loving nation and that this Government want to protect animals, but on the other we see what is happening in plain sight, but do not see anything like the action that is required.

We are pleased that the Bill has reached this House, after well over six months in the other place, where it benefited from some notable improvements. We should be grateful to their lordships for their work. I give a special mention to my colleague and the former shadow Environment Secretary, Baroness Hayman, for the work that she has done and led in that place. As a result, the Government rightly concede that octopi, lobsters and the like should receive protection upfront in the Bill, rather than waiting to be considered by the Animal Sentience Committee when eventually it meets.

Further improvements are needed, which we and campaigners will continue to argue for in Committee. We share concerns expressed about clause 2 limiting consideration to ways in which the policy might have an adverse effect on the welfare of sentient beings. We understand the legal advice is that that itself does not prevent the committee from recommending positive steps to enhance animal welfare, and that should be made clear in the terms of reference, but surely it would make far more sense to be upfront and have that in the Bill.

We agree with the argument that the Bill should require Ministers proactively to set up a cross-Government animal sentience strategy, and regularly to report to Parliament on how Government policy is working in that regard. The duty simply to respond to a report could allow Ministers simply to dismiss a committee's recommendation in that regard. That would fall far short not just of the Bill's aims of enshrining animal welfare, but of the nation's aspiration that we translate our narrative of being an animal-loving nation into the law that governs the land in which we live.

Animals are capable of bringing us huge joy, and it is right to ensure that they avoid avoidable suffering. We strongly support the need for the Bill, but the Government must recognise that if they say one thing but do another, the public will be rightly critical of the claims being made in support of the Bill. I urge the Secretary of State: where we see that the Government are saying one thing about the Bill but doing another on trade agreements or on foxhunting, we must show the world what leadership is and take action on both those fronts.

3.17 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to catch your eye in this important but short debate, on a short and, in my view, unnecessary Bill. Of course we can all accept that animals can suffer and therefore we are obliged to ensure that we maintain our high standards

of welfare. That animals can experience pain and suffering has been implicit in British animal law, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State so rightly laid out, since 1835 when Parliament passed the landmark Cruelty to Animals Act. However, the lack of definition in this Bill or use of science to decide whether an animal is sentient is concerning; it even lacks a definition of what sentience means. It is concerning that we should be passing a Bill with such a lack of detail.

There is a huge rural community in this country that is passionate about wildlife and eager to protect the environment and their activities. The Angling Trust and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation—I declare an interest; it is the secretariat for the all-party group on animal welfare and environment which I chair—represent more than 3 million fishing and shooting enthusiasts in the UK. The Bill could deliver another weapon into the hands of litigious animal rights groups that could damage both Government and those who live and work with animals.

Shooting, conservation and angling are highly important for the UK economy. Shooting contributes about £2 billion to GDP and supports the equivalent of 74,000 full-time jobs. Angling is estimated to be worth £4 billion to the UK economy and responsible for upwards of 40,000 jobs.

We need to make sure that the Animal Sentience Committee set up by the Bill does not have any unforeseen or perverse consequences, and that the Bill is not introduced simply as a public relations exercise to meet the demands of activist groups and the tabloids. A sentience committee does not require legislation. It could have been established by the Secretary of State at any time. He has already told us that the members will be Secretary of State appointments, but that covers a multitude of types of people who might be appointed. Perhaps the Minister could give us a little more idea of the type of people who will be appointed to the committee.

According to clause 2(1), the scope of the Bill encompasses:

“When any government policy is being or has been formulated or implemented”.

In other words, it gives huge breadth of remit to the committee. So what will be the committee's resources in terms of funds and secretariat? Would it not be more sensible to limit its remit to the areas currently covered by the European law on sentience, on which my party's manifesto said we would legislate?

Will the new committee by statute confuse who advises Ministers on animal welfare when the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs already has an Animal Welfare Committee with a wide remit covering all animals, but not by statute? Will the new sentience committee, which is implemented by statute, be superior to the Animal Welfare Committee, which was established decades ago and works perfectly well? Or will it be a sub-committee of the Animal Welfare Committee? If so, will the Animal Welfare Committee be required to approve its reports before publication? What will be the difference between the remit of the two committees?

There is no requirement in the Bill for the committee to consider the public interest or the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the UK relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage. In a meat-eating society where vertebrate animals are farmed and hunted for food, and used in scientific and medical research under strict legal limits,

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

the fact that the committee is not required to consider the public interest could lead to a conflict between activist groups and the Government.

Will the Minister therefore balance the requirement to have “all due regard” to animal welfare with a requirement to have regard to the public interest? Can the Minister give an assurance that the medical, scientific, farming, fishing and shooting interests will be represented? This is crucial, because otherwise it is going to breed a great deal of resentment in the rural communities.

There are other ways of recognising sentience in legislation. We could have followed New Zealand’s example and amended the Animal Welfare Act 2006 merely to include sentience. That is all that needed to happen.

Policy and legislation should always be science and evidence-based. It is extraordinary that there is no definition of sentience in the Bill. Even though 80% of the respondents to the Government consultation supported the inclusion of a definition, it still is not there. Instead, clause 5(2) says that the Secretary of State

“may by regulations ... bring invertebrates of any description within the meaning of “animal” for the purposes of this Act”.

But there is no requirement to show scientific proof that non-vertebrates are sentient. Philosophers and scientists have been arguing for centuries about which non-vertebrate animals are sentient and what that actually means, and here we have a Bill that does not clarify that debate.

The Bill originated in demands for sentience to be explicitly written into law after Brexit, but it does not contain the safeguards within the EU law on sentience. EU law on sentience is limited and balanced. It applies to agriculture, fisheries, transport, the internal market, research and technological and space policies. Member states—this is a particular part of European law—are required to have

“full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, while respecting the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the Member States relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage.”

I will try to get an amendment included in the Bill—I hope that the Government will support the amendment, which I will table shortly—stating that “the recommendations by the committee must respect the legislative or administrative provisions and customs relating in particular to religious rights, cultural traditions and regional heritage”. I say tactfully to my right hon. Friend that, as that is the wording in European law, I hope very much that he might consider such an amendment, so that we can at least focus the committee’s work, instead of it having the very wide-ranging remit that it now has.

Will the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), give us an assurance that nothing in the Bill will have an impact on activities conducted with all regard to animal welfare within the law? Does she believe, as some do, that sentience confers rights and, if so, what rights are conferred?

In conclusion, clarity, clarity, clarity is required on animal welfare advice in government. I am talking about the composition and remit of the committee, the balance between the public interest and sentience, and assurances that legal activities, such as research, farming and country sports, will not be damaged by the Bill.

I say to the Secretary of State and the Minister: please could we have an answer to that final question when the Minister sums up?

3.26 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Animal welfare is a devolved issue and the scope of the Bill is largely England-only. With that established, the Scottish National party broadly welcomes the legislation and is pleased that the UK Government are following our lead in this area. The Scottish Government pledged to maintain high animal welfare standards after we left the EU and, in June 2020, established the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission, which is an independent body of leading animal welfare experts responsible for developing expert recommendations on issues relating to animal welfare and sentience. The Bill seeks to replicate its evidence-based policymaking success and expert-driven approach.

The SNP and the Scottish Government take animal welfare extremely seriously. Our party has been vocal in addressing concerns at UK level, and the Scottish Government’s programme for government committed to taking steps to strengthen animal welfare legislation. Each financial year, the commission must prepare a work plan setting out how it intends to perform its functions. It then produces an annual report, laid before the Scottish Parliament, detailing how it has delivered against the work plan. It has the power to establish committees and sub-committees, and the first meeting of the sentience sub-committee took place in November 2021. That group has the function of reviewing sentience-related issues, filtering and prioritising the commission’s programme of work.

The establishment of the commission offered an opportunity post Brexit to replicate article 13. Given that since January 2021, for the first time in more than two decades, there has been no legal requirement for the welfare of animals as sentient beings to be considered in the UK Government’s policy process, it really is about time this place implemented its replacement.

Concerns have been raised about the membership of England’s Animal Sentience Committee, as well as its resources, structure and operation. The Bill has not been updated to address any of those concerns and is essentially the same as when it was introduced, which I note created quite a stoushie in the other place. In my view, membership regulations ought to be considered for the Bill, as should the structures in which they may operate. As an example of where issues could occur, will foxes be considered as sentient beings and will they be granted such protections by the committee, or will that be another cultural flashpoint?

We recommend that the committee avoids being too prescriptive—I know that is the Minister’s view—but rather follows the lead of the evidence-led SAWC. The commission reports welfare policies and recommendations to Scottish Ministers, and just as it has a statutory duty to publish any such advice, the Animal Sentience Committee must also publish its reporting. The Scottish Government have often acted upon the recommendations of the commission. Sensible and pragmatic solutions to policy issues such as beaver reintroduction and management of deer have been taken forward on the basis of the commission’s advice. The commission has also strongly welcomed and worked on the Animals and Wildlife

(Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (Scotland) Regulations 2021.

Let me give an example of what England's new Animal Sentience Committee might examine. Following concerns raised by a number of animal welfare groups, the Scottish Government announced a review of the trade and importation of exotic pets, and of potential threats to animal health and welfare, human health, and native species in Scotland. An interim report was published last year by the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission outlining concerns about the welfare of exotic pets, including their sourcing, breeding, transport and keeping. I understand that the Minister of State is keeping tabs on that work. We will of course be happy if the UK Government make use of the final report when it is published and carry out their own investigations. The Scottish National party also welcomes the Bill's recognition of cephalopods and decapod crustaceans as sentient.

Although the Bill largely applies only to England, there are areas of it that the SNP believes must be strengthened, notably in respect of animal cosmetics and scientific procedures, which are matters reserved to the UK Government. There has been some mention of European Union regulations today. In September last year, the European Parliament voted for an EU-wide action plan with clear objectives as well as, crucially, timelines for the phasing out of the use of animals in research, regulatory testing and education. It envisages that happening through the reduction, refining and replacement of procedures on live animals for scientific purposes, as soon as it is scientifically possible and with no lowering of the level of protection for human health and the environment. In fact, the EU has leapt in front of the UK on animal welfare standards. We call on the UK Government to reclaim the leadership on this issue that they have shown in the past.

The Bill legislates to enshrine the ability of animals to experience joy and feel suffering and pain, but unfortunately the UK Government do not seek to recognise that animals undergoing scientific experiments or Ministry of Defence tests have rights to sentience; they are excluded from protections. A written question from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) revealed that the Ministry of Defence has carried out nearly 59,000 experimental procedures on animals since 2009. The SNP therefore calls for greater transparency in the animal research industry, and for a commitment in the Bill on the sentience of animals and their welfare rights in relation to the outdated methods used in animal testing and military experiments.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend has made a good point about experimentation on animals by the MOD. Does she share my concern about the fact that it includes primates? As recently as 2018, 56 marmosets were subject to such experimentation.

Deidre Brock: I very much share my hon. Friend's concern, and I will say more about that later. I genuinely believe that the general public are not aware of the extent and nature of these experiments, or of which animals are used in them. If amendments to the Bill are tabled and accepted in Committee, that may help the public to appreciate what is going on, and may help to reduce reliance on such experiments.

Every two minutes in the UK, a dog, cat, rabbit, rat, monkey, goat, sheep, mouse, or fish suffers from brutal animal testing conducted on it against its sentience and welfare rights, but a survey conducted in 2020 by the UK charity FRAME—the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments—found that 84% of respondents would not buy a cosmetics product if they knew that it, or one of its ingredients, had been tested on animals. Animals in laboratories can legally be poisoned with toxic chemicals, shot, irradiated, gassed, blown up, drowned, stabbed, burned, starved, or restrained to the point at which they develop ulcers or heart failure. They can have their bones broken or their limbs amputated. They can be subject to inescapable electric shocks, driven to depression, deprived of sleep to the point of brain damage, or infected with diseases.

A YouGov poll commissioned by Cruelty Free International shows that people in Scotland and Wales believe that more should be done to prioritise humane and human-relevant science. The findings reveal that seven out of 10 adults living in Scotland and Wales find it unacceptable to use animals for experiments when alternative non-animal research methods are available. In addition, more than three quarters of adults living in Scotland and Wales believe that alternatives to animal tests should be a funding priority in the UK for science and innovation, and a majority in Scotland and Wales want deadlines for phasing out animal tests. I look forward to further discussions on that as the Bill goes through its stages.

When Scottish and Welsh residents were asked about use of specific species in research, they consistently said that it was unacceptable to test on dogs, cats and monkeys, yet despite those public concerns, the UK remains one of the top users in Europe of primates and dogs in experiments. The more we understand animals' sentience, capabilities and emotions, the more the idea of granting rights to animals is worth taking seriously, urgently. The Scottish National party supports the Bill but urges the Government to address those ongoing issues.

3.35 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): When I looked at the Bill, I tried first, as I do with any Bill, to work out its purpose and who or what it is trying to assist. I must say that I am still far from having the answer to either question. Actually, the more I look at the Bill, listen to experts and read the record of proceedings in the other place, the more confused I am about what we are trying to do.

While everyone knows what animal welfare is and values what the Bill is intended to do, nothing in it, and no one, can either define animal sentience or say how it is measured. As a result, the phrase becomes a kind of forerunner of what science may, but does not yet, tell us. The Bill is effectively a statement of direction, but does not quite know where to start or where it will finish. It does not define animal sentience, so Ministers will have no gauge to work against. As a result, we legislators are in effect being asked to vote blind on it. The new committee will accordingly have to make things up as it goes along.

At the same time, various lobbyists will push the committee towards reviewing everything that they see as being important to their various causes. If the committee

[Mr Jonathan Djanogly]

does not produce many—or enough—reports, it will be attacked for inaction. However, if it produces too many reports, it will be attacked for exercising power without democratic oversight or care for costs or whatever. If the Government fail to act on the committee's views, they will be attacked for inaction, or possibly judicially reviewed. If they do act on them, people could claim that such proposals should come from those who are democratically elected, rather than from an unanswerable committee, or they could say that the Government are using the committee as a stalking horse to avoid taking the blame for proposals that they might think look a bit unpopular. In effect, whichever way one looks at the proposals, they are fraught with problems on every side. One has to wonder why we are doing this. What is there to gain from the Bill other than some short-term, soft publicity because it is somehow about being nice to animals?

Of course, as was mentioned in the other place, in reality, the Bill is not just about public relations, because those involved in minority areas of activity in our national life are realising that it could easily be used against them. Yes, I did see the assurances that the Government gave in the other place that the Bill would not attack the Jewish and Muslim religious animal slaughter practices of shechita and halal, and blatantly yes, the Bill makes no direct attack on those practices, but it does open up indirect lines of attack that could easily be used to prejudice or damage those minority religious practices. Importantly, as was explained clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), the Bill has no exemptions on the grounds of religious rights, cultural traditions and regional heritage, although those exemptions were included in the equivalent EU legislation. That should be corrected; I will be with him on that.

If the new committee were, for instance, to come up with regular reports against non-stunning slaughter practices, the pressure for change would quickly switch to Ministers. I would defend those religious practices, although that is not today's debate. However, it is relevant to argue that any such changes should be formulated and debated by Ministers and then Parliament, not the new committee. If science does eventually tell us what sentience means and how it can be measured, and if all animal welfare will need to be improved as a result, why farm that out to a committee rather than deal with it directly? The committee will be appointed by the Ministers of the day, and let us acknowledge that the Ministers whom we politically support today will not be there on a change of Government. For that matter, if there is to be a committee, why does it have to be set up by statute if it will have no executive powers?

I was very surprised by the unwillingness of Ministers to engage on this issue or accept amendments in the other place, despite the Bill being hugely contentious. I hope that attitude will now change. There seems to be a lack of focus on what the committee will do, and the possible implications. It seems that it will have a full roving remit across Whitehall, although how it would interact with Departments is vague, as is how it would interact with the existing animal welfare machinery, specifically the animal welfare committee. We do not know. Why not make this new committee part of the animal welfare committee?

As chairman of the British Shooting Sports Council and a Member with a rural constituency, I have been approached by many to voice their concerns that the Bill is being used as a smokescreen to enable attacks on farming practices and wildlife management processes, as well as field sports. In the last few years, for instance, the lobby against game shooting has become increasingly litigious and now regularly uses judicial review to query a wide range of shooting issues, such as where game shooting can take place and what can be shot using general licences. The idea that such people will not attempt judicial review of decisions taken by Ministers on the back of the new committee's findings is, frankly, unrealistic.

I predict that the Bill will: complicate many rural activities; add complexity and require legal opinions and court appearances; and add cost and bureaucracy. Despite the Bill being welcomed by the Opposition, it is, to my mind, a poor piece of legislation.

3.42 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly). I do not agree with most things he said, but he made a few points that I liked and will come to in my remarks. I welcome the Bill and I will support it today.

The Bill has come a long way since it was first introduced. It is a really good example of how Bills should be improved, especially through prelegislative scrutiny, rather than being stuck in the House of Lords. Many of the amendments made in the House of Lords should have been made in prelegislative scrutiny, so that we did not have a reformed Bill coming to the House of Commons.

I echo the remarks made by the new shadow Environment Secretary, and especially the thanks to Baroness Hayman for her sterling work in the other place, particularly on including cephalopods and decapods in the scope of the Bill. I welcome the fact that the era of boiling lobsters alive will come to an end. That is down to the work of Baroness Hayman and her colleagues in the House of Lords, and is long overdue.

The Bill is not really necessary, so to a certain extent the remarks from the hon. Members for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Huntingdon were right in one respect: this really should have been mapped over in Brexit legislation. Of all the rules passed by the European Union during our membership, this is the only one that the Government chose not to map over. Why was that? Was it because there is an ideological divide over animal sentience? Was it because of a real desire to change the situation? Or was it because the Government fell foul of a debate that led to an outcry? This should not have been necessary; the measures should have been mapped over in Brexit legislation, and we should be spending our time looking at how we can improve animal welfare, rather than correcting the mistakes by the Government in the Brexit negotiations.

The Bill needs to work, however, and it is important that we get the detail right. Further work is needed to do that. Some of it is in the very short Bill, but the majority is in the terms of reference that accompany it. It is a shame that the Government have not put more effort into explaining what is in the terms of reference, because much of the detail about how the Animal Sentience Committee will work is in there. Many of the

things that we need to improve are not in the Bill, but in the terms of reference, so it is important that we look at those.

There are three main changes that we should make to the Bill and that I hope will be accepted in Committee. First, we should remove the word “adverse” from clause 2(2), which says that the Animal Sentience Committee should have

“due regard to the ways in which the policy might have an adverse effect on the welfare of animals as sentient beings.”

As my Green colleague, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), said, there really is no need to include the word “adverse”; if anything, it limits the legislation’s ambition and fails to deliver on the Government’s objectives. In the politics around animal welfare, it is quite a dated concept to use the word “adverse”, with its negative connotation in respect of animal welfare. It suggests that the job of animal welfare legislation is just to stop humans doing bad things to animals. It fails to consider the welfare agenda of the 21st century: what is a life well lived for an animal? How can we ensure not only that suffering is kept to a minimum but that animals enjoy a good quality of life? To delete “adverse” would not distract from the Government’s objectives in the Bill; indeed, it would arguably deliver a lot more on them. I hope that the Government will support an amendment to that end in Committee.

Secondly, on scope, I know that Ministers want the Bill to apply first to Government Departments—to the main Departments of State—but there is a strong case for Ministers to set out how they would accelerate its roll-out to apply it to non-departmental public bodies. For instance, I find it hard to justify the idea that the Bill will apply to the Department for Work and Pensions before it applies to Natural England and the Environment Agency. That does not make much sense, so I would be grateful if the Minister could set out the timetable for applying the Bill to every single non-departmental public body, and particularly to all the bodies in DEFRA-land, to ensure that they are within the scope of the Animal Sentience Committee. I would like this legislation and the committee to be in place by September this year; it is not unreasonable to argue that in September 2023, 12 months from that point, the legislation should apply to all non-departmental public bodies. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out whether that is the Government’s intention.

Thirdly, I am concerned about enforcement. I know that the Secretary of State will not like my saying this but, in my new-found freedom as a Back Bencher, let me be bold and speak frankly: DEFRA is a weak Department that does not really scare other Departments. The idea of DEFRA knocking on the door of, say, the Ministry of Defence to question its full implementation of animal sentience guidance is akin to a sardine taking on an Astute-class submarine: we are British and love the underdog, but it is not going to win. We need to be honest about that in relation to this legislation.

According to the guidance that accompanies the Bill, the Animal Sentience Committee will produce approximately six to eight reports a year. It seems to me that instead of allowing the delivery of written statements to the House of Commons three months after the Departments in question have made their initial reports, it makes much more sense for the Secretary of State to come to the House to make an oral statement, to enable

parliamentarians to scrutinise the Animal Sentience Committee’s bulk report all in one go. I am concerned that the lack of such a parliamentary opportunity will limit the effectiveness of the legislation.

If the Secretary of State is keen to avoid the scrutiny opportunity of an annual moment, when he may also wish to set out the year-long cross-Government animal sentience strategy that is missing from the Bill, perhaps the Minister could set out the desired route by which parliamentarians will be able to question the effectiveness of the reports and whether they have led to any action or have simply been talking shops, designed to make Departments look busy without delivering. Will we need to look to the good offices of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee to take time out of its busy schedule to analyse each report? Will we need a Backbench Business Committee slot to come free? Or will we need the Speaker to look favourably on a Member at DEFRA questions so that we can scrutinise any of the committee’s reports on the Floor of the House? I fear that without effective enforcement and proper parliamentary scrutiny, the Bill risks becoming a well-intentioned but meaningless piece of legislation.

It is important to look at the committee’s powers. The committee must have proper powers to investigate. Page 9 of the draft guidance the Government have released says that Departments will not have a legal duty to consult the committee. That is really important: Departments will not be required to co-operate with the Animal Sentience Committee. How can the committee improve accountability if Departments can simply decline to participate or to give information? The draft terms of reference suggest that if

“a Department fails to engage with the Committee or assist it with reasonable requests for information as it prepares a report, the Committee may record this non-cooperation in said report.”

That is a scary threat. How will Departments cope with the prospect of getting a black mark on their school report that will barely get any parliamentary scrutiny? What is missing here is a legal duty for Government Departments to co-operate and share information with the Animal Sentience Committee, to ensure that any concerns are properly followed up, otherwise the committee will not have the powers it needs.

I am interested in how DEFRA has come to the conclusion that there should not be a legal requirement to co-operate with the Animal Sentience Committee. Has there been an assessment of DEFRA’s own likelihood of co-operating with the committee? If so, will that assessment be published? Which Department is most likely not to co-operate with the Animal Sentience Committee? Is it the Ministry of Defence? Is it DEFRA? These are the questions to which we need an answer.

The Government admit in the draft terms of reference:

“The co-operation of UK Government Departments is necessary for the Committee to be able to work most effectively.”

But the Government are making that co-operation voluntary. It will be an option for any Secretary of State whose priority might not be animal sentience. Indeed, if they are being investigated, they probably will not have properly considered animal sentience in the development of policy. I suggest the Government take their own advice and make it a legal obligation for Departments to co-operate with the Animal Sentience Committee. That is another amendment that I hope will be moved in Committee. Perhaps the Environment Secretary will

[Luke Pollard]

report annually on how many Departments are not co-operating with this new committee, as that would be very interesting for the House to know.

There are concerns about the independence of the Animal Sentience Committee and about who should be a member. In that respect, I share some of the concerns raised by the Countryside Alliance, which is not a likely bedfellow for me—the Countryside Alliance is generous and warm in how it describes me in these remarks. It is important that the membership of the committee is broad and has expertise, but it is also important that its members are clear and transparent about their involvement.

Annex A of the draft terms of reference sets out that the interests of members of the committee will be registered, and I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that, under paragraph (h) of annex A—on any organisations or work relevant to the committee—it will be very clear that all members of the committee, if they are part of a foxhunt, will need to declare it as an interest. I agree with the Countryside Alliance that it is important we have broad-based and transparent involvement. It is important that the interests of every member of the committee are transparently declared.

Finally, I want to address the inaccurate report that the Bill could, in any way, stop our fishers and farmers doing what they do best. We are in a strange period in which the UK does not have animal sentience legislation. We have not had it since we left the European Union because the Government chose not to copy it over, but we will have it again when this Bill passes, as it will.

The hysterical reports from the media and some lobbying groups suggesting that the Bill could affect fishing and farming are incorrect. Britain rightly demands high animal welfare standards for kept and wild animals, and we should be clear that that should continue with this Bill. The Secretary of State has my full support on that, but I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) in saying that we need high animal welfare standards in our trade deals, because it is not acceptable that the Australia trade deal undercuts our farmers by allowing food produced to lower animal welfare standards to be sold in the UK.

I echo a Labour colleague in saying that we need to tighten up the Hunting Act 2004 to stop foxhunting being a 21st-century practice. Trail hunting is an excuse for the live hunting of foxes and we need to close such loopholes. I am disappointed that this Bill does not provide the opportunity to do so.

Much of the Government's animal welfare legislation has come from Labour's animal welfare manifesto. There are many members of the 2019 intake in the Chamber, and I am sure they have read it thoroughly because, in many cases, they will have voted for many of the manifesto's soundbites from the Government Benches, but it is not sufficient just to borrow the headlines from Labour's animal welfare manifesto; the Government must borrow the detail, too. I encourage the Minister to look again at his well-thumbed copy to see what more he can borrow.

This is an okay Bill. It is half a pace forward, but it could be a full stride forward if we get the detail right. I hope that will happen in Committee.

3.54 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): This is a bad Bill, an unnecessary Bill and a Trojan horse for those who have no understanding of, and sadly in some cases despise, the countryside and all that goes on in it. Before I start, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We left the EU in order to pass our own laws, I hope guided by common sense and only where necessary, but this Bill is even more intrusive than the former legislation under EU law. It is a skeleton of a Bill, one that is not necessary and, indeed, it has the potential for great harm. I say "skeleton" because many aspects of the Bill are unclear. Who will be appointed to the committee? What skills will they have? How will it be resourced? Why is this a statutory committee when others are not? Why will it have the power to pass secondary legislation, and is this because the Bill itself has simply not been thought through and revision by whoever is in power will need to be accommodated? Why is the committee's authority seemingly limitless, with its remit to cover all policy across all Departments, and what implications, which could be onerous, does that have for each Department?

As two of my colleagues have asked so far, what is sentience? It is simply not defined. To me, this will mean that the committee will examine the effect of Government policy on the welfare of animals as sentient beings. Sentience has long been recognised in Parliament. We have had animal welfare Bills since 1822. The most recent—it has already been mentioned—is the Animal Welfare Act 2006. They go far beyond the minimum standards set by the EU. Animal sentience is a fact, which is why welfare matters and why we have the highest standards. Then there is the question of the particular circumstances of the sentient animal. Animals kept by man are surely different from animals in the wild, even if both are sentient. To this end, I share the concerns of the noble Lord Etherton, who described this Bill as a magnet for judicial review.

I used the expression "Trojan horse" at the start, and what I mean is that I and many others fear that those with different agendas—often partisan and politically motivated—will hijack this committee and its role to attack activities such as shooting and fishing. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mention fishing a moment ago, but he did not include shooting. The Countryside Alliance rightly believes that the Bill lacks the necessary details and safeguards to prevent the committee from extending its reach to rural activities, and in Labour and other hands that is exactly where this committee will head.

This Bill emanated from the Lords, where on Third Reading the noble Lord Herbert said that proposed amendments defining sentience, limiting the committee's scope, ensuring scientific expertise, and balancing provision for religious, cultural and regional heritage were all refused by the Government as "not necessary". This committee will be another bureaucracy whose tentacles will reach far and wide. A partisan committee will bring with it division and hostility where there need be none. Why on earth a Conservative Government are driving a coach and horses straight at our core supporters and many others is quite beyond me. I very much look forward to dramatic changes to this Bill before I would even begin to support it.

3.59 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It feels rather odd to be rising after three Tory Back Benchers in a row—the only three Tory Back Benchers who have spoken in this debate—have all criticised a Government Bill, so I am here to lend my support to the Government, and I hope the Secretary of State is grateful for that.

By the time the Bill becomes law it will be more than six years since the UK voted to leave the European Union. It is now more than four years since the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) moved an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which I seconded, calling on the Government to recognise animal sentience, as enshrined in article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, in UK law. It is four years since the Government promised to legislate, although that was only in a bid to stave off a Back-Bench rebellion after a big public campaign urged MPs to support the amendment. It has to be said that Tory Back Benchers back then seemed a lot more enthusiastic about supporting animal sentience—perhaps that is what comes of recent electoral changes.

It has been nearly three years since I introduced my own ten-minute rule Bill on animal sentience. That was after we took evidence at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Minister kept saying, “We really want to bring measures forward, but we need the right legislative vehicle.” So I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill and said, “Here’s your legislative vehicle on a plate,” but the Government did not seem interested. It is also nearly two years since the Petitions Committee debate in Westminster Hall and well over a year since the end of the transition period, so we have been waiting a long time. Forgive me if I am a little cynical, but I am not entirely convinced that the Government really wanted this legislation at all, and I think that was borne out by the contributions from the three Conservative Back Benchers that we have heard from so far today.

I thank the campaigners and members of the public who have emailed MPs, signed petitions and kept pressing, because that is why the Government have finally produced this Bill. This pattern of promising action on animal welfare but taking forever to act is typical of this Government. We have seen it on ivory imports, trophy hunting, live exports and foie gras imports, as well as on refusing to crack down on the cruel and environmentally destructive practice of grouse shooting or to close the loopholes that have allowed fox hunting to continue. It is beyond me why an MP would stand here and say that we need to amend the Bill so that we have the right to be cruel to animals just because that has been traditional in this country. That is not exactly the definition of progress.

Nevertheless, despite my concerns about the Government’s credentials, I am glad the Bill has finally come before Parliament, and with a significant win for campaigners—the recognition of decapods and cephalopods as sentient beings. A couple of MPs have said that sentience is not defined. One reason the Government gave for the delay to this legislation was that they needed to carry out research. They got the London School of Economics to do research, and the LSE said:

“Sentience (from the Latin *sentire*, to feel) is the capacity to have feelings. Feelings may include, for example, feelings of pain, distress, anxiety, boredom, hunger, thirst, pleasure, warmth, joy, comfort, and excitement.”

There we go: that is the definition of sentience. I would have hoped that those MPs would look at the LSE definition.

Luke Pollard: The point I made in my remarks was that the terms of reference that accompany the Bill actually include a definition of sentience, and it is very similar to the one my hon. Friend has read out. Would it not be better if that definition was included in the Bill and not hidden in the terms of reference?

Kerry McCarthy: That might be a matter for the Bill Committee, so that we avoid some of the criticisms we have seen. I hope that the recognition of the sentience of decapods and cephalopods will mean an end to gross acts of cruelty, such as unstunned lobsters being boiled alive in the cooking process. When the Minister winds up, I hope she can confirm that that will indeed become illegal if the Bill passes, as the LSE recommended in its research.

We know that the octopus is an incredibly intelligent creature. I was shocked to read recently that the world’s first commercial octopus farm is set to be established in Spain. The farm will not be on UK soil, but the Government could ban imports and outlaw any such farms in UK waters, again as proposed in LSE research.

As has been mentioned, there are concerns about clause 2, which requires the proposed Animal Sentience Committee to consider only the adverse effects of policy decisions on animals, not the positive effects. I was not entirely convinced by the Minister’s very brief response to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion on that, and I hope the issue can be discussed in Committee.

I often say this in such debates, but I somewhat hate the self-congratulatory, complacent approach to animal welfare in this country. People are so very keen to boast of how good we are, but there are still many examples of where animals are abused and exploited. Industrially farmed animals can still face horrific, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions and be subject to abuse by those who purport to care for them. With live exports, we see animals suffering from thirst, overcrowding and overheating—again, in appalling conditions. The Environmental Audit Committee has just reported on poor water quality in UK rivers, and one of the key sources of water pollution was sewage run-off and agricultural slurry from intensive farming.

Undercover investigations from organisations such as Animal Equality and Viva! have exposed horrific conditions. Last year, it was revealed that cows were beaten with electric prods and sheep and pigs were slaughtered without adequate stunning at the G & GB Hewitt abattoir in Cheshire. We have seen reports of overcrowding, filthy conditions and even cannibalism among pigs on Hogwood Pig Farm. We have seen pigs being killed by having their heads slammed to the floor on Yattendon pig farm, chickens dying in heatwaves at Moy Park farm and chickens dying of thirst, suffering ammonia burns or resorting to cannibalism on multiple chicken farms that supply Tesco. All the farms I have mentioned were Red Tractor-approved, with supposedly higher animal welfare. We have a long way to go.

I echo what the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said about the need to reduce dramatically the number of animal experiments, and the shadow Secretary of State’s concern about importing

[Kerry McCarthy]

lower animal welfare standards into the country as a result of recent trade deals. All that leads me to a wider point about what we want our relationship with the animal kingdom to be. The reality is that biodiversity has plummeted by 60% since 1970, yet a staggering 60% of all mammals on this planet are now livestock, as industrial agriculture booms. Only 4% of mammals now are wild animals. That shows the impact that humans have had on the natural world: we have confined nature to farms and destroyed whatever is left outside them.

It is also estimated that since the dawn of human civilisation, 15% of fish biomass has been lost and 70% of global fish stocks are now either fully exploited or over-exploited. Renowned oceanographer Sylvia Earle recently said that humans treat oceans like a “free grocery store”, and called on us to respect marine creatures in the same way we do elephants.

Recognition of the sentience of animals is the first step in a better relationship with them, so I welcome the Bill and urge colleagues to support it—but recognition is one thing, and respect is another. If we truly respect animals, we must do a lot more than just pay lip service to sentience: we must end the exploitation and abuse of animals on factory farms; stop treating animals as commodities; end the hunting and shooting of animals for sport; and halt and reverse the devastating damage that we have done to the natural world. I hope that all those issues can come out as a result of this Bill. It is just a starting point, but it is important to get the concept of animal sentience on the record, and I am happy to support it.

Mr Speaker: We now have a maiden speech. I welcome Louie French.

4.7 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate. It is a true privilege to stand among these green Benches as the Member of Parliament for Old Bexley and Sidcup, a place I have called home all my life. I thank colleagues for their warm reception today and for the party’s support throughout the by-election. Who would have thought that someone with the surname French would be so warmly welcomed by so many Brexiteers? If the Home Secretary could have forecast my voting against the Government in my first month, she might have deployed the Navy even earlier.

All jokes aside, I am more than happy to give my full support to the Government on the Bill and their wider efforts to improve animal welfare across the UK. As already outlined, the Bill builds on the Animal Welfare Act 2006 by recognising sentience in law and requires the Government to set up an Animal Sentience Committee to examine whether the welfare of animals as sentient beings has been given due regard in policy decisions.

The Bill has rightly received support from a range of animal welfare organisations and is welcomed by the majority of residents in Old Bexley and Sidcup, who, like me, are animal lovers. We recognise that animals feel joy and pain, and as such should be considered in future policy decisions, including the strengthening of

sentencing for those who carry out the callous acts of cruelty and pet theft. Pet theft remains a real problem for families across Bexley and the country overall; I hope that the tougher sentences for such crimes will act as a deterrent to future offenders. On the subject of offenders, I confirm that I am not the lovechild of Norman Stanley Fletcher from “Porridge”, as has been speculated.

In representing the constituency of Old Bexley and Sidcup, I follow my good friend, the late James Brokenshire. I know hon. Members on both sides of the House mourn the loss of James, who was a friendly, thoughtful and well-liked gentleman. It is a great privilege to have Cathy in the Gallery today.

James was first elected to the House in 2005 as the MP for Hornchurch, and was elected in 2010 as the MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup. James was an outstanding constituency MP, who fought for the people of Old Bexley and Sidcup every day, never forgetting that it was them who placed him in this House. James was also a diligent and effective Minister, serving the country in some of the most sensitive and demanding positions under three successive Prime Ministers.

James was a true and loyal friend to me over many years, and I will always value the support he provided and the memories we shared, as I know many across this House do. Although I own significantly fewer ovens than he and Cathy, and I do not share his love for West Ham United, which largely reflected his Essex roots, I humbly recognise that he is a tough act to follow. I hope to be able to continue his legacy in some way.

Old Bexley and Sidcup is a fantastic seat to represent, and I am honoured to have been elected as the first home-grown MP to serve the communities across Old Bexley, Blackfen and Lamorbey, Blendon and Penhill, East Wickham, Longlands, North Cray, Sidcup, and Falconwood and Welling. The constituency is located in south-east London, but with its picturesque churches, charming pubs and beautiful green spaces, it is clear that Old Bexley and Sidcup is also firmly within Kent, with a strong sense of tradition and patriotism throughout the constituency.

Many hon. Friends visited my lovely home area during my election campaign, for which I am grateful. I would encourage all hon. Members to visit what I believe is the best constituency to represent, where they will find many fantastic businesses and some of the most scenic parks and open spaces, including Foots Cray meadows, with the five arches bridge over the River Cray.

Old Bexley and Sidcup also played an important role in the great war, through the pioneering work of Sir Harold Gillies at Queen Mary’s Hospital Sidcup, which opened in 1917. That was where almost every soldier who had suffered a facial injury was sent for ground-breaking facial reconstructive surgery, led by surgeon, Sir Harold, the man widely recognised as the father of modern plastic surgery. The medical staff at Queen Mary’s Hospital also went further, considering, perhaps for the first time, the long-term psychological effects on those disfigured by warfare, using methods of treatment and care that underpin the work undertaken by medical professionals in support of today’s armed forces.

The constituency also boasts two world-class drama schools, Rose Bruford College and Bird College, with notable alumni, including Gary Oldman, who most famously portrayed Winston Churchill in “The Darkest

Hour". Notable residents of Old Bexley and Sidcup are not limited to Rose Bruford alumni, and have included Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake, Roger Moore and Kate Bush, which highlights how culture and the arts lie at the heart of Old Bexley and Sidcup.

As a borough of aspiration, which is reflected in my own journey to this place, we are rightly proud of our fantastic local schools and colleges. Like many families in the constituency, my mother moved us to Bexley when I was born to benefit from the excellent local schools, in my case the old Westwood Infants and Juniors, now called Bishop Ridley Primary School; the old Westwood College, now called Harris Academy Falconwood; and not forgetting Blackfen Sixth Form, where I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) taught at one point. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I apologise, Mr Speaker, on behalf of the constituency. [*Laughter.*]

I am determined to use my time in this place to do everything I can for our community, and ensure that it continues to be a great place to live. That includes campaigning to secure extra facilities at Queen Mary's Hospital; increased availability of GP appointments and police on our streets; working to ensure our schools stay excellent; protecting our precious local green spaces; and ensuring Southeastern commuters finally see a much-needed improvement to our rail services.

I would like to finish by reciting James's words in his maiden speech. He said that

"hope is one of the most valuable things that we can offer. In a small way, I will try to provide that sense of hope to my constituents, by standing up on the issues that matter to them, by listening to those who think that no one is prepared to be interested in their concerns, and by giving a voice in the House to those who have none."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2005; Vol. 447, c. 1470.]

James remained true to his word and I will continue this when serving my local area. In electing me as their Member of Parliament, the constituents of Old Bexley and Sidcup have given me the greatest honour of my life, and I pledge to serve them with the upmost integrity, dedication and care.

Mr Speaker: A fitting tribute from the new Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup. We all think of the former Member, who was a friend to us all.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

4.14 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). I was moved by his kind and thoughtful contribution on his predecessor, who was indeed well respected and admired by Members across the House. I think his constituency sounds beautiful. I liked the talk of the meadows and I had no idea Roald Dahl lived there. Perhaps I should pop down and visit. It is always good to welcome a fellow animal lover to the House of Commons, and I wish him all the best.

It is no exaggeration to say that I am contacted daily by constituents on one aspect or another of animal welfare. The recognition of animal sentience in law has been a consistent question since I became an MP in 2017. Many of us remember the famous amendment on animal sentience tabled during the constant Brexit debates. I certainly remember the flurry of emails, social media, tweets and messages on Facebook that followed, with

numerous people telling me how important animal sentience was to them. It is, of course, entirely proper that the Government of the UK, famed as a nation of animal lovers, should act to remedy that issue. I am here to briefly, but carefully, represent the many voices of the people from Hull West and Hessle who contacted me on the issue.

No one who has looked after animals or spent time watching them in the wild can have any doubt that they are aware and can experience emotions. If you will forgive me for one moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do have to mention my two cats, Thomas and Serena, who have entirely different personalities. They are absolutely wonderful and dispel the idea that they cannot experience emotion when I can tell by looking at them exactly how they are feeling. One of the greatest inventions of the internet, of course, is #catsoftwitter, which I recommend to all Members. If they are having a bad news day, they should have a quick look at it and it will cheer them up.

It is worth reminding Members that we are animals, too. We are only different by degree, and more and more scientific research is showing us how slim that difference of degree is. Free or captive, wild or domesticated, our fellow animals should be treated with compassion and respect, and it is proper that the Bill recognises that by applying it to all. In fact, the continuing advances in our scientific understanding of animal sentience were what made the Government decide against including a definition of sentience in the Bill. I am pleased to hear that although a definition might not be in the Bill, it is in the terms of reference. That growing understanding has led to the inclusion of cephalopods and decapods, which include octopuses and lobsters, as sentient animals for the purposes of UK animal welfare law.

I want to mention the few small reservations I have. Although my remarks are in support of the Bill and those from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) were against, we share similar concerns about the composition of the committee. Who will sit on the committee? How will they be chosen? What powers will they have? How independent will they be of Government? My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) made an incredibly useful contribution to the debate, because he detailed his concerns about the committee and the fact that it will have no power even to tell DEFRA how to conduct itself.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I quite agree with the hon. Lady. Why will she not then persuade those on her Front Bench to vote against this nonsense?

Emma Hardy: In general, we support the Bill. We hope that in Committee some of our reservations will be looked at and the Bill amended—[*Interruption.*] I see the Minister nodding at me from the Government Front Bench. So far, during the passage of the Bill, the Government seem to be willing to consider amending and improving it. I hope that that will continue.

The Bill does not propose a duty on Ministers to consider the welfare needs of animals when making policy. I think those points were very well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. I draw attention to the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who is not in his place. I hope the Government will look again at hunting with dogs and at animal standards abroad.

[Emma Hardy]

The points made about free trade deals are very concerning. I have had numerous emails from constituents on that point and they are very worried. Some of the flippant responses such as, “Well, they don’t have to buy that meat, then,” fail to recognise the fact that when price is taken into consideration many families might feel that they have no choice. We need to look at some of the animal standards we are importing.

I agree that we should have an annual oral statement, as a written statement produced for Parliament does not give the same chance for scrutiny. That is a weakness of the Bill that I hope the Minister will address.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for raising a point about the use of primates in experiments by the Ministry of Defence, because I had no awareness of that whatsoever, so I am grateful that she has brought it to my attention. I hope the Minister can comment, because I find it hugely concerning.

Although I support the Bill, there are a few points that I hope the Government will take away and consider so that when it comes back for its final votes on Report it is much improved.

4.20 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

It is a pleasure and privilege to speak in the debate on a very important Bill that Opposition Members will be pleased to hear this Member of Parliament strongly supports. I declare a strong professional interest as a veterinary surgeon; the Bill will be so important in recognising animal sentience in UK legislation.

In the current political climate I am loth to get into intricate debates about the difference between the words “implicit” and “explicit”, but, as the Secretary of State said, animal sentience has been implicit in UK law since the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act 1822, and it remains implicitly acknowledged in current animal welfare legislation, including the Animal Welfare Act 2006. I feel that this House and the Government missed a trick in 2017 by not transferring into UK legislation the part of article 13 of the Lisbon treaty that recognised that animals are sentient beings, because that would have been easy to do. That said, by not doing it, we now have an amazing opportunity to put animal sentience at the heart of UK legislation, and that is very important. I also welcome it as the Government’s fulfilling of a manifesto promise, which I strongly support.

I very much welcome the fact that cephalopod molluscs and decapod crustaceans are now included in the Bill. That sets a really good example. The Government have commissioned a piece of work from the London School of Economics and they have listened to it. I am very encouraged by that; I just wish they would do it a little more often.

Although I welcome the Bill, I very much recognise the contributions from Opposition Members who say that we need to be clearer on some of the details and specifics. I recognise that, by definition, this is a brief and general overarching Bill, which is probably quite sensible. That said, I would very much like it to define

the term “sentience” in some way. In the 2017 Bill consultation, 79% of responses called for the inclusion of a definition in the Bill. A useful definition made by the Global Animal Law Project and endorsed by the British Veterinary Association states:

“Sentience shall be understood to mean the capacity to have feelings, including pain and pleasure, and implies a level of conscious awareness.”

The Minister said in the other place, and also before us in the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, that it might well be difficult to put the definition into primary legislation because the science is evolving and so potentially it could evolve. We could get round that by placing it in secondary legislation that would be easily updated, so I think that the Government can move forward on that.

I very much welcome the formation of the Animal Sentience Committee, but we need to be clear about its independence and to make sure that it has strong expertise and experience in animal welfare, animal health and veterinary matters. It needs to have some teeth and some power, including power to roam across Government. I am very glad that the committee will be based in DEFRA; although I want it to have a roaming feature, I am more comfortable with it being in the Department that is the custodian for animal health and welfare, which I think makes a lot of sense.

Sir Bill Wiggin: Given my hon. Friend’s expertise and professional experience, what examples does he have from his own life of such a committee being necessary? Why does he therefore want it based in DEFRA?

Dr Hudson: I will come on to some examples of why I think the committee will be important, and how the Government and the Secretary of State respond to it will be useful in formulating policy.

I am glad that the committee will be embedded in DEFRA, but I very much hope that it will be listened to. I draw a contrast with the Trade and Agriculture Commission, which I and many hon. Members on both sides of the House called for, as did the National Farmers Union. We were really pleased to have it scrutinising trade negotiations. It produced a report, but the Government were very slow in responding and were a little partial in their response. I very much hope that the response to the committee from DEFRA, a Department in which I have a lot of faith, will be unlike some of the responses from the Department for International Trade to the Trade and Agriculture Commission.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State will respond within three months. There has been a lot of fear that the Bill and the committee might be open to judicial review, but the fact that the Secretary of State needs to respond within three months may go some way towards mitigating that risk. I recognise that there have been concerns, however.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that a duty to create and maintain a cross-Whitehall animal sentience strategy would ensure strengthened ministerial responsibility, with greater oversight of the legislation’s impact and scientific opinions or advances?

Dr Hudson: It is very important for the committee to have a brief to look at policy across Departments. Yes, it is important that the Secretary of State responds, but it is equally important that if the committee needs information from other Departments, it should be made available. I thank the hon. Member for that intervention.

I agree with Opposition Members about adverse effects and the wording of clause 2, which relates to whether the Government have

“all due regard to the ways in which the policy might have an adverse effect on the welfare of animals as sentient beings.”

I would like the Bill and the committee not only to include adverse effects, but to look at the positives—the ways in which the policy improves animal health and welfare. I firmly believe that we have the highest animal welfare and animal health standards in the world and that the UK can be a beacon to the rest of the world. If we put it in legislation that we will look at adverse effects on animals, we should also point out, shine a light on and show the rest of the world the positive effects on animal health and welfare. I look forward hopefully to some movement from the Government on that point.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when we left the European Union there was much scaremongering about animal welfare standards falling? Does he agree that the Government have demonstrated that those fears were absolutely unfounded, whether in their work on animal sentience or puppy smuggling or in their support for my Glue Traps (Offences) Bill, which goes into Committee tomorrow and will ban glue traps? Those are really important issues to my constituents.

Dr Hudson: Leaving the European Union certainly means that the UK can put legislation on the statute book to promote animal health and welfare. I would like the Government to go further, because there are things we can do to improve animal health and welfare now that we have left the European Union. The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on which I sit, has produced a report, “Moving animals across borders”, that makes very strong recommendations about simple things that can be done.

I welcome the Bill, but I stress to the Government the need to please make animal welfare joined up across Government and across different policy areas. We need to act now to do that. The evidence is there in many of these different areas. Oftentimes, we do not need to consult and put it in the long grass; we can do the things that need to be done now.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will list some things that we could do that the Bill will help us to do. I strongly welcome the pet theft legislation. I have been campaigning for it, and I am pleased that it has come in to the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. That legislation is very much focused on the high-profile species—the dog—that has sadly been stolen in increasing numbers during the pandemic, and that is getting worse, but it is not just dogs that are being stolen; cats are being stolen every day and as we speak.

I strongly urge the Government to expand the legislation. I know there is a clause to say, “This can be done in the future. We will take evidence”, but cats, horses, ponies, farm animals and livestock are being stolen now. I represent a rural part of the world with a big farming

footprint, and farm animal and livestock theft is a big issue for us. If we are now putting on the statute book that animals are fully sentient beings, and we are taking that into consideration in legislation, I strongly urge the Government that we need to create a huge deterrent to people who commit this abhorrent crime of animal theft.

On domestic public sector food procurement, I urge the Government to close the loophole in the Government buying standards that allows public bodies to buy food products at lower standards on the grounds of cost, if it is cheaper. We need to close that loophole. When I have raised this with Government, they have been very encouraging, saying, “Yes, we will be looking at that.” Certainly our Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee looked at that closely. If we are trying to be a beacon to the rest of the world, we must get our own house in order. I urge the Government quickly to close that Government buying standards loophole.

Opposition Members have talked about international trade. My views on international trade are on the public record. As an outward-looking nation, it is important that we strike trade deals with the rest of the world, but they have to be fair to both partners. Within that, the Trade and Agriculture Commission made a lot of clear recommendations on core standards and the animal welfare side of things, which we need to respect in those trade deals. Sadly, I feel that the Government and the Department for International Trade are being very slow in responding to that.

We need to have core standards in trade deals. We need to put out the message to the rest of the world that if they want to trade with us, they need to bring their standards up to those we find acceptable in this country. We are a beacon. We have high animal health and welfare and we can drive up standards around the world. There must be red-line products that we do not allow in.

I draw a difference with Opposition Members when it comes to hormone-treated beef and chlorine-washed chicken, which the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), talked about. To a degree, that is not going to happen. The Government have been very clear that that is illegal in this country, and it will remain illegal. It is other products that we need to be thinking about in terms of substandard animal husbandry techniques.

I do not want these trade deals to undermine our fantastic British farmers. This is about not protectionism but standing up for our values. What do we believe in? This Bill shows that we firmly believe that animals are sentient beings and that we have a high regard for animal health and welfare. We need to be doing that with our domestic policy, but we also need to be doing it in our international trade deals, when we strike them.

The trade deal with Australia can be a positive thing, but we must make it work and it must be fair to both partners. As it stands, it is not fair to the United Kingdom. I urge the Government to look at the safeguards they have said they have put in place and to ensure that those safeguards have some teeth. We need the tariff rate quota mechanism that I have been calling for, but we also need an assurance that if the amount of beef—it is largely beef, but it could be lamb—coming into this country is too high, that mechanism can be used to turn down that supply. That is not protectionism; that is standing up for our farmers and our values. I also welcome the Government’s having moved, under pressure,

[Dr Hudson]

to put animal welfare chapters into these trade deals, but I firmly believe they are not strong enough. They need to be strengthened.

There is a non-regression clause in the Australian trade deal, but it is not good enough to say, “Well, our standards will not get any worse.” We need to make sure that the standards come up to the standards that we believe are right in the United Kingdom. We are a beacon on this, and we can drive up animal health and welfare standards around the world.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee made a series of pragmatic and sensible recommendations on animal health and welfare in our report “Moving animals across borders”. Unfortunately, the Government have been a little slow and—to give a cricketing analogy—a bit straight bat on it. Our recommendations included raising the minimum age of dogs that come into the country to six months, to stamp out the abhorrent crime of puppy smuggling, and banning the import of dogs that have been mutilated by ear cropping and cats that have been declawed. We need to stop that. We need to ban the movement of heavily pregnant dogs, because that fuels the puppy smuggling trade.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, which supports the argument that clause 2 ought to include positive measures. Would it not be great if we introduced legislation that addressed issues such as cropping dogs’ ears or declawing cats, which would show the world that, through this Bill, we are making progress on such issues?

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I agree with her. Pointing out where things are having an adverse effect is important, but so is pointing out positive measures. We need to put out the message about where we think things can improve.

I would also like to see—I have pushed this hard in the Chamber and would do so in the Bill Committee—improvements in the health checks on animals coming into this country, including pre-import tests for diseases such as canine brucellosis, babesiosis and leishmaniasis, and the reinstatement of mandatory tick treatment. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) talked about some of these things. Now that we have left the European Union, we can reintroduce the mandatory tick treatment for small animals that the Europeans stopped us doing. That might seem a semantic, purely veterinary point, but if we protect animals coming in, they are less likely to bring in diseases that are dangerous to our dog population, some of which have zoonotic potential and could affect people. I would also like to see reinstatement of the rabies titre checks for animals and an increase in the wait time to 12 weeks post rabies vaccination. That would indirectly stop the puppy smuggling trade because it would make it less likely that a fluffy little puppy would be coming through to fuel that market.

I declare an interest again as a veterinary surgeon with an equine background. We need to sort out the equine identification system as well. Hundreds, if not thousands, of horses are illegally exported to the continent of Europe for slaughter, and if we improved the identification of those animals, we could stamp out that abhorrent

practice. The EFRA Committee has made recommendations to Government, and I urge them to respond. Unfortunately some of the responses seem to be a bit “Little Britain”—“Computer says no.” To quote a famous sports brand, I say to the Government, “Just do it.”

Finally, I want to raise again the crisis that is facing the pig sector in this country. If we are talking about animal sentience and valuing high animal health and welfare, we need to highlight that crisis. As the EFRA Committee has said, it is an animal and human welfare crisis. I say that as a vet who spent time in the field during foot and mouth supervising the cull of farm animals on farm. Those animals did not end up in the food chain; they were disposed of. I can tell the House how upsetting that is for farmers, vets, slaughter workers and all concerned. We need to mitigate and avert that. More than 30,000 pigs have been culled on farm, and I know that the Secretary of State and DEFRA have been moving on this, putting pressure on different Departments, for example to increase cold storage. We had the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration before us and we were, frankly, pretty dissatisfied with the responses. We need some joined-up thinking across Government to improve the visa situation so that people can come here to help solve this crisis. I say to Ministers, “Please act now to avert this catastrophe.”

The Bill needs some additions, but the Government have initiated much that is to be welcomed, and it is important that that will be on the statute book. The Government have talked the talk, and I urge them to walk the walk. We have a duty of care for these sentient beings; let us put that into practice, and let us do it now.

4.40 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). He made a comprehensive speech, and, not for the first time, I agreed with the colossal majority of what he said. It is also a huge honour to follow the new hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), who spoke earlier. I congratulate him on an excellent maiden speech—I know it is customary for us to say that, but it genuinely was an excellent maiden speech. He represents a beautiful part of the country, which he described very well. I had no idea that Kate Bush owed something to his constituency, but that is massively in its favour from my perspective.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke fondly about his predecessor, the late James Brokenshire, who entered the House on the same day as me, and of whom I was always fond. People speak fondly of James because of the way he conducted himself. It is sometimes very easy to say, “I like X”—a member of another party—“because we agree on certain issues”, but it was not that I considered James to be a particularly liberal Tory, although he may have been. That was not the point; it was how he conducted himself in this place, in meetings, and in all that he did. He showed grace and decency, he treated people as he found them, he was utterly honourable and trustworthy, and he was a very competent Minister. We miss him hugely.

We also welcome the hon. Gentleman massively, and I look forward to hearing many more speeches from him. He spoke today with great knowledge of the subject of the debate and with great insight, and, for

what it is worth, I agreed with what he said. I think we may have reached a stage at which the number of Conservative Members who have spoken in favour of the Bill matches the number who have spoken against it, which is good to know.

I am broadly in favour of the Bill, because I think that how we treat animals is a moral indicator of how we are as a culture and as a society. It is a measure of our own humanity, so it is right that we as a country are proud of being a nation of animal lovers. Often the way to get any group of people to behave well is to remind them of how good they are, so it is important that we cling to this self-definition; but it is also important that our legislation follows that, so we will of course support the Bill's Second Reading.

As a member of the European Union, this country, through article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, enshrined the acknowledgement of animal sentience in legislation. I welcome the fact that—following an unnecessary delay that has been mentioned by a number of Members on both sides of the House—we are now closing that gap. However, I think that the Bill represents a missed opportunity. Members do not need me to remind them of my views on whether it was wise to leave the European Union, but in the case of a number of aspects of our departure, we have opportunities to go one better than how the EU left us. In respect of the legislation at least, we have ensured that in theory we will now be no worse than we were in the EU. In practice, though, as several Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, if we sign trade deals with countries whose animal welfare standards are poorer than ours, we will put ourselves into a position where we are worse than we were before.

The most recent example is our trade deal with Australia. It is important to recognise that the Animal Sentience Committee will have no powers, as far as we can tell, to ensure that those deals—and further deals in the future—do not undermine animal welfare. It is not just a question of the treatment of animals and recognition of their sentience within the borders of this country; it is also a question of how countries that we deal with, in our name, treat those animals. If sovereignty means anything, it means our ability to affect other countries in so far as they relate to us; in the trade deal with Australia, we have failed to do that. This is true on three counts. When it comes to husbandry, I do not need to explain much about how the geography and the nature of farming in Australia differ from ours in the United Kingdom. The vast plains and the ranch-style farming in Australia mean that, to a large degree, there is no husbandry there.

Dr Hudson: I gently disagree with the hon. Member. Although he and I agree on many aspects of what we are discussing, as a vet who has worked on farms in Australia, I think he is making a very sweeping statement about the calibre and nature of farmers across Australia. He is correct that the geography and environment there is very different, but I can tell him from personal experience that many, many farmers out there farm to the highest standards, including when it comes to animal husbandry. To say that Australia has no animal husbandry is, frankly, incorrect.

Tim Farron: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He will recognise, particularly having been in Australia, the nature of that husbandry. In Cumbria, the welfare

of livestock is tended to week in, week out. As many of my constituents who have farmed in Australia have informed me directly, the first time that someone in Australia knows that one of their animals might be ill is when they find its sun-bleached bones on the plains the following season. That is a different form of farming. Australians are not instinctively cruel people; that is not the point I am making—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that Members on both sides of the House understand that. I am saying, however, that lower standards are cheaper, including standards that do not require mandatory closed circuit television coverage in abattoirs, which we have here, or the restrictions that we have here on the transportation of live animals.

Given that we know that poorer welfare standards are cheaper, these trade deals—particularly the one with Australia—offer a financial and economic market advantage to countries with poorer standards than ours that export to us. That not only undermines the morality of the UK's commitment to high animal welfare, but massively undermines our farmers. Every farmer in Cumbria and the rest of the United Kingdom suffers because the UK Government have chosen to do a deal with a country that we have much in common with, but that does not acknowledge the animal welfare issues there. That is why the Animal Sentience Committee and the recognition of sentience in the Bill, which I support, will not have an effect on all the animals affected by decisions taken in this place. This is an abuse of an opportunity—a missed opportunity—and a waste of our sovereignty, but the Bill is good in so far as it goes, so I welcome it and will vote for it.

I do criticise those Members—not my neighbour, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, but some of his colleagues—who have been critical of the Bill not because it does not go far enough, but because it goes as far as it does. They are wrong in that. People have said that the Bill is a threat to farming, but it is no such thing. I speak to farmers throughout my communities and further afield, and they welcome the Bill. They are committed to animal welfare—it is in their DNA.

We should recognise, however, the threat to farmers from trade deals, and from the Government's dogged insistence on phasing out the basic payment scheme before the arrival of the new environmental land management scheme. Just last month, farmers lost between 5% and 25% of their basic payment, and there is no sign, even slightly over the horizon, of anything to replace it. That will put small British family farms out of business, and there will be a knock-on effect on animal welfare, because part of the reason for our animal welfare culture and why our standards are as high as they are in this country is that they are based on the model and example of the British family farm.

Although I welcome and will support the Bill, and think that there is much to be said for it, I want to rush through some areas where things need to be improved. First, I hope that the fact that the duty to enforce recognition of animal sentience falls on the committee and not primarily the Secretary of State will be changed during the passage of the Bill. That is not right; it gives less responsibility and power to the Secretary of State.

I am also very concerned that clause 3 requires the Secretary of State only to lodge before Parliament a response to reports from the Animal Sentience Committee. That could be a two-line dismissal, and then what

[Tim Farron]

would we do? I guess the Opposition could call an Opposition day debate, and we could ask questions at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, but as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, the opportunities for scrutiny are minimised. The task of initiating these things is all put on Opposition Members or Government Back Benchers. Set pieces will not be a part of the process, and it would be entirely possible for the Secretary of State effectively to dismiss any report pretty perfunctorily.

As has been said by a number of colleagues from across the House, we should not treat this matter purely in the negative, although unfortunately at the moment the Bill does that. If we are so proud of our heritage and our high animal welfare standards, why is the committee and its work not about promoting good practice around the country, and in every aspect of our life in so far as it impacts animals, as well as about trying to stamp out bad practice? Again, that feels like a missed opportunity to have gone further and done better. As I have strongly implied, the Animal Sentience Committee should have the power to comment on trade deals. My fear is that, on those matters, it could end up—a bit like the Trade and Agriculture Commission—being a watchdog that may bark occasionally but does not have very much bite. The Government are certainly under no compulsion or obligation to take any notice of it whatsoever.

Many animal welfare charities have expressed concerns to me about the lack of resource for the Animal Sentience Committee. I acknowledge that point, as it goes with our concern about the absence of parliamentary scrutiny and the relegation of these serious issues to a body that is one place removed from this place. The committee chair will be “hired”, for want of a better word, for 20 days a year, and members of the committee for 15. There is no dedicated secretariat—I understand that will be provided by DEFRA staff—and no obvious independent budget. All that adds up to just about ticking the box, and just about copying what the EU did, but without anybody watching over our shoulder. Meanwhile, we are not doing anything. We are meant to be a global trading nation whose footprint and impact is felt around the world. What a missed opportunity to make that impact and do something good when it comes to animal welfare. So this is not three cheers; it is perhaps two, or more likely one, but it is better than nothing, and I will vote for the Bill.

4.52 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this important debate. The Secretary of State's speech was reasonable, moderate and balanced, and I congratulate him on bringing forward the Bill. I appreciate the strong views highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), and I hope he will get the clarity he requires as the Bill proceeds through the House.

We have had a good debate covering wide aspects of the Bill, but I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). He made an excellent maiden speech, and we look forward to more of his speeches in

the coming weeks and months. Personally, I look forward to working closely with him in Bexley on behalf of all residents of the borough, and to continuing the work that James, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and I have done to promote our borough as one of the best in the country. I wish my hon. Friend well in his parliamentary career, and congratulate him on being elected to represent Old Bexley and Sidcup.

Britain is, of course, a nation of animal lovers, whether those animals be pets or wild. I have had a number of pets over the years. I got interested in animal welfare because I had a beagle called Skipper, and they were doing tests on beagles to do with smoking—a dreadful situation—in appalling laboratories. Now we do not have that, but there are still areas of animal welfare in which we need to do more. It is therefore good that we have such a Bill and are able to put forward our views.

Many of my constituents across Bexleyheath and Crayford are pet owners and are passionate about animals and animal welfare. Pressure from public opinion has resulted in this measure coming forward and being in the 2019 Conservative party manifesto, and I welcome those things. Britain has a proud history of animal welfare, and has always been a global leader, and I very much hope that, being outside the EU, we can go much, much further. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) about his expertise as a vet, and I learned a lot listening to his excellent speech. I am sure the Government will continue to improve the lives and welfare of animals. They launched the action plan for animal welfare to ensure that we go further, and I welcome that passionately.

I have read the enlightening debates on the Bill in the other place. I have great interest in the Bill's many issues, and very much hope to participate further in Committee and as the Bill makes its passage through the House.

The Bill will formally recognise animals as sentient beings—a scientific fact—in domestic law. I welcome the Government's ongoing commitment to ensuring that we have some of the strongest protections in the world for pets, livestock and wild animals. Following excellent research from the London School of Economics and Political Science—the university that I attended—the Government rightly extended the scope of the Bill so that it recognises that decapods and cephalopods can feel pain. They are therefore covered by this vital legislation.

The scientific community is always conducting research to improve our knowledge and understanding of animal sentience, so the Bill allows the Secretary of State to extend protections to any invertebrate species in the future, should it become apparent that they are sentient beings. That, again, is sensible. The debate has shown the House, and even those who have considerable concerns about aspects of the Bill, at their best; we can go forward, talk about the issues, and advance the interest of animals.

The sentience committee was mentioned. Its members will be appointed by the Secretary of State, and I am sure that it will be made up of experts in the animal field. The committee will not be allowed to change legislation; it will be required to report on whether central Government policy decisions have considered the effect on animal welfare. The findings will, quite rightly, be made public, for transparency. The committee

will not result in legislation through the back door, as recommendations will be only advisory. However, Ministers will be required to update Parliament on the committee's recommendations and the Government's response. We will therefore have opportunities to raise and debate issues as the Department and Secretary of State give responses. It is important that we continue to monitor animal welfare issues closely, so I welcome what the Government are doing.

We always like our pets, but we also like to go into the countryside and see a wide variety of animals; it is part of the country scene. Although I am an urban man, having grown up in suburbia and representing a suburban seat, I none the less appreciate the importance of animals for all manner of reasons, and from all manner of experiences in life. Many people are keen on their pets, and never more so than during the covid-19 pandemic, when people were often on their own and relied on their pets for company, love and affection, and to sustain their mental health.

Animals are important across the whole field—that is why the Bill is so important. I strongly recognise how passionate the Ministers are about this subject, as well as those who represent rural constituencies. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) is making sedentary comments, as usual. I support the Bill, and congratulate the Government on bringing it forward and implementing a manifesto commitment.

4.58 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): First, let me draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I farm. What a delight it was to listen to such a full tribute to my friend James Brokenshire. He was a lovely man and a good friend, and we miss him very much. He has a worthy successor in my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). What large shoes he has to fill. I am sure that he will do his very best.

Concern for animal welfare is, as everyone has said, something on which we pride ourselves in this country, and on which we already lead globally. The sentience of animals has long been recognised in this country, as is evidenced by the animal welfare legislation passed by Parliaments over the last 200 years. My great-great-grandfather was the MP for somewhere in Birmingham—I think it was Yardley. I asked the Library to look up any speeches he made in 1885, and all it could find was a speech on rabbits and hares. Here I am, 137 years later, still on animal welfare. Nothing has changed because we care about sentience in animals. That is not going to make the Bill necessary. The Bill is completely unnecessary.

Every Member who has spoken in the debate has listed things that they think are more important than the Bill when it comes to animal welfare. They are right. There are so many things on which we could do a better job. Parliamentary time is not an endless opportunity. This is the place for Governments to bring in changes and improvements to the lives we and our constituents lead. We are elected for fixed periods of time, so every day is precious, and every opportunity to improve, simplify or even tweak our legislation is both a privilege and an obligation. That is why unnecessary tokenism and gestures, although they might feel nice, are a missed

opportunity. The Bill is one of the best examples of that—glittering with good intentions, just like the road to hell, but absolutely and completely unnecessary.

First, the Bill creates an open goal for prevention. If someone wants to prevent a planning application, they can refer it to a quango and get a three-month report. There are questions about the proposed committee that will be formed to determine whether the sentience of animals has been considered by Government policy. What happened to the bonfire of quangos? DEFRA has already created a quango in the Environment Act 2021, and now it thinks we need another one. It is not so much a bonfire of quangos as a breeding ground for quangos. While most life forms fall under the scope of the Bill, the taxpayer, that most undervalued of vertebrates, would appear not to do so.

Parliament has always proceeded on the basis that animals are sentient, and has legislated for animal welfare as a result. The definition, or lack thereof, in the Bill is somewhat irrelevant. What animals are considered to be sentient can be changed to suit. All this will do is prevent things. Want to plant more trees, build more houses, improve infrastructure or open a new power station? None of that will be straightforward, just in case we might hurt the feelings of a mouse or a cuttlefish in the process. *[Interruption.]* Yes, cuttlefish are cephalopods.

The Bill directly contradicts our pledge to level up this nation. My constituency has a moratorium on house building because of phosphate pollution in the River Wye. House building is proven to contribute only a tiny fraction of that pollution, but house builders and aspiring homeowners are being punished. The Bill will be terrible news for those people, as undoubtedly, in the wildest, most natural and beautiful of constituencies, some lovely creature will be discovered in situ. Its sentience will now need to be considered and more unelected bodies will have the power to subvert the building of those much-needed homes. What is conservative about that?

The core aspect of the Bill is to embed consideration of animal welfare into the policy decision-making process, as if we could not manage that by ourselves. That consideration will be made by the Animal Sentience Committee, an opaque body. To the naive, that will appear a noble stance for the Government to take. However, there are serious misgivings about what the committee will set out to achieve. The role of the committee is apparently to scrutinise not the substance of the policy decisions, but the process by which the decisions were reached and whether all due regard has been paid to animal welfare. However, the draft terms of reference suggest that the committee could have a role in scrutinising policies. That would be at odds with the very legislation bringing it into existence.

My question to the Minister, therefore, is who the membership of the committee will report to. Will it be at arm's length? Most importantly, what safeguards will be in place to ensure that the committee will not act as a vessel by which farming, wildlife management and the rural economy are attacked? If anyone has any doubts that that might happen, they should listen to the contributions of Opposition Members. The way in which the Bill has been greeted should fire off the alarm bells in everybody's minds. Greater detail is needed on what this committee is truly being set up for and what its

[Sir Bill Wiggin]

aims are. We already have thousands of quangos in this country, and if we are not careful we will descend into the quagmire of anti-democratic legislation.

This is a crucial time for agriculture and rural life in the UK. As we leave the common agricultural policy and move to the environmental land management scheme, many farmers will be concerned about what the future holds. The Conservative party is a party of the farmer, for the farmer, so let us ensure that future animal policy recognises the calibre of our farmers, their land management practices and the deep care they have for their animals. They have not asked for this Bill, and they do not need it. This Bill is a waste of time and utterly unnecessary—

Tim Farron: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bill Wiggin: Yes. I am about to go into one, so I will happily give way.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman outlines what he thinks are threats to farmers, but I do not agree that the Bill is a threat to British farmers. However, he alluded to the transition from basic payments to ELMS being a threat, and in that case I think he is right. Would he recommend that the Secretary of State pegs basic payments at their current level and keeps them there until ELMS is available for every farmer?

Sir Bill Wiggin: It is difficult for me to answer that, because I am a member of the ELMS pilot scheme, so I am deeply involved in the formation of ELMS. What I would say is that public money for public goods is the right way forward, with carbon captured in the soil and a corresponding payment made to farmers so that we can balance up the subsidy deficit that British farmers will face compared with their European competitors. At the end of the day I do not believe in subsidy for anything other than agriculture, and we subsidise only in order that our goods are competitive globally—if do not pay our farmers enough, our produce will not compete internationally and our farmers will be at a huge disadvantage.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend alluded to the fact that the committee's work will be retrospective. Any citizen could suggest to the committee that the Government should change policy in a certain area. The committee would then look into that and make a recommendation to the Minister. That is a real gift to lobbying groups to achieve what they want, and the Government would be under difficulty to withhold it.

Sir Bill Wiggin: As always, my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The real shame about this legislation is that here we are at Second Reading and every single colleague on both sides of the House has thought of better things for the Government to deal with, whether it is ELMS, as suggested by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), or any of the other suggestions I have heard from Opposition Members. This Bill is a waste of time; it is utterly unnecessary and therefore wrong. We should not pass Bills that state the obvious and that are hostages to fortune, we should not create more quangos, we should not vote for unnecessary legislation—and we certainly should not vote for this Bill.

5.8 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Fear not, Secretary of State and Minister—the voice of the modern Conservative is bringing up the rear of the debate. May I start by paying tribute to the newest member of the bunny-hugging wing of the Conservative party, my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), and congratulate him on using the debate to make his maiden speech? Many of our constituents care passionately about animal welfare issues, and my hon. Friend has done an amazing job in representing them today.

As a long-time advocate on animal welfare issues, and in the past sometimes a lone voice on issues such as the badger cull, I have found it encouraging to see more Members joining the Government side of the House speaking out about the wellbeing of animals. I think that that has been helped by the fact that, over the last 10 years, Conservative-led Governments, and particularly this Secretary of State, have delivered enormous progress on these matters. We now have tougher sentences for animal cruelty offences, the world's strongest ivory trade ban, bans on commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens and on the use of wild animals in circuses, and much more.

At present, we also have two key pieces of legislation progressing through Parliament—the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which we are debating today, and the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Both will make good on various manifesto commitments and help to improve the lives of millions of animals. However, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to press for the immediate introduction of new legislation to ban the import of horrific hunting trophies—I do not think that is more important than this debate, but I do think it is equally important.

For this debate, I read through House of Lords *Hansard*, and I am enormously proud of Lords Benyon and Goldsmith, previously of this parish, who were often comrades on similar matters in previous Parliaments. They have done a phenomenal job in introducing this legislation and amending it where needed.

One such amendment related to decapod crustaceans and cephalopods. I warmly welcome the inclusion of those species within the scope of the Bill and pay tribute to the numerous charities and campaigners, such as Crustacean Compassion, who worked so hard to have this included in the Bill. I am pleased that the Government listened; I thank the Secretary of State and Ministers, who took notice of what was said and acted on the overwhelming scientific evidence proving that those species can feel pain. The UK will join just a handful of countries in the world, including Australia and Switzerland, in recognising decapod crustaceans as sentient beings and will introduce steps to further improve their welfare, such as pre-slaughter stunning and a ban on ice storage while alive.

Contrary to some on the Government side of the House, I welcome the establishment of an Animal Sentience Committee and am encouraged that it will work to consider the ways in which policy across Government can have an impact on animal welfare. I hope Government Departments will work effectively with the committee, including those responsible for policy areas less obviously associated with animals and animal welfare. I also

welcome the terms of reference and the fact that the committee may consider how Ministers have had a positive effect on animals as sentient beings in the policy-making process.

However, I fear the ASC may lack the operational freedom to look at different areas of policy that could be improved further; as it stands, the central focus on adverse effects suggests a minimal effort at reducing potential harms to animals. I would welcome reassurance that the committee will be able to suggest positive and proactive steps to improve animal wellbeing, as advocated by the British Veterinary Association. A dedicated budget and the inclusion of appropriate veterinary and animal welfare expertise would remove the burden on civil servants, ensure that Ministers were provided with independent, scientifically backed recommendations and help to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of best practice in animal welfare legislation.

While I welcome the fact that it will continue to be up to Ministers to assess how certain legislation may impact animal welfare and to weigh up the costs and benefits in relation to other important considerations such as social, environmental and economic matters, I do not believe it is unreasonable that the committee be able to consider other ways in which Ministers can improve regulation further. We have previously expressed a desire for the UK to go further than any other country on animal welfare legislation, improving on article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, which still allows for cultural activities that cause unimaginable animal suffering. I hope we do not lose sight of that commitment.

There is much more to be done, ranging from reviewing the use of snares and glue traps—my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) has a ten-minute rule Bill on that going into Committee tomorrow—to looking again at scents in trail hunting, considering the welfare of hens, protecting seals from intentional disturbance and coming good on ending the badger cull. There is more that we can do, but I welcome the Bill we are discussing today.

Finally, I repeat my thanks to Ministers and officials in DEFRA who have worked on this important Bill, which ensures that there is no loss of legal protections for animals following our departure from the European Union. I look forward to supporting this Bill wholeheartedly and following the rest of its progress through Parliament.

5.13 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): This is an important Bill, and I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in this Second Reading debate. There have been some thoughtful and engaging contributions—some very interesting ones—and I think we saw a House willing to work together to deliver a Bill that is fit for purpose.

It was fascinating to hear from the Government's Back Benchers, in particular from the hon. Members for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin), and I look forward to some great debates with them on the Bill Committee. It is a shame we are not dividing today, because I am sure we would have had some rebels voting with us this evening.

I particularly want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his specific and forensic action on the

wording and for his helpful comments throughout the speech he made. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her action to provide legislation for the Government in the past, and particularly for her amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in 2017.

I of course welcome the new hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) to his place, and I thank him for his maiden speech. As one by-election winner to another who has succeeded after the sad passing of their predecessor, I understand the difficulty he has felt, but I pay tribute to him for his moving and thoughtful speech today. I welcome him to this place, and I look forward to working with him in the future.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I share her love of cats, and I will now be seeking out the site she mentioned on Twitter. More seriously, her wish to see the Bill strengthened and improved as it progresses is very welcome. Obviously, the expertise as a vet of the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) is very welcome, especially on this Bill, and I welcome the input from the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch).

As the House heard from the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)—my new boss, whom I welcome to the shadow DEFRA team—the Opposition welcome this Bill, but, as ever, we want it to go further, be stronger and do more. Labour is the party of animal welfare, and a special mention again goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for all his work on these issues when he was in the shadow Cabinet. From bringing forward the landmark Hunting Act 2004 to protecting the treatment of domestic animals under the Animal Welfare Act, Labour has always placed the welfare of animals high on the policy agenda.

There is growing consensus among scientists and policy makers that animals are sentient beings capable of feeling emotions and experiencing pain. A UK parliamentary petition run by the Better Deal for Animals campaign calling for an animal sentience law recently received over 100,000 signatures, and it was debated in this place on 16 March 2020—it seems like another lifetime ago.

Colleagues who thought that unravelling our membership of the European Union would be sorted by putting a border down the Irish sea will be surprised that we are here because of our decision to leave the European Union. Our departure means that this country no longer has legislation that recognises animals as sentient beings. That is why the Opposition welcome the Bill and the opportunity to strengthen our country's approach to animal welfare that it provides.

As my noble Friend Baroness Hayman said in the other place:

“The formal legal recognition of animal sentience sends a clear message that we are committed as a country to protecting the welfare of animals, but for this to be meaningful, any commitment on paper must be followed up in practice.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 June 2021; Vol. 812, c. 1942.]

The noble Baroness is correct, as ever, and that is exactly where we will pick up. Colleagues in the other place have continued to raise concerns about the current

[Ruth Jones]

state and reach of this Bill. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), whom I welcome to her first Bill in her new position, needs to be very clear about who will sit on the Animal Sentience Committee, how it will be funded, what engagement there will be with the devolved Administrations and how we can be sure that Ministers abide by the reports that come from this independent committee. The Secretary of State said in his opening remarks that there will be “expertise and experience” on this committee. Can she outline exactly how this will be brought together?

We have the chance to make this Bill fit for purpose now and our responsibilities as Members of this House require us to do the best by our constituents, but we also have a responsibility to our natural world, our wildlife and animals. To honour that responsibility, we must be ever vigilant. That is why this Bill is so important: it provides us with another opportunity to look at our approach to animal welfare and what we can do to keep our animals safe.

That is also why we must take this Bill seriously, and we must work together to strengthen it and show that, on some key issues, this House can unite and deliver real change. When this Bill moves to Committee, as it will do when it passes Second Reading today, I hope to work constructively with the Minister, the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and others to deliver a Bill that is really fit for purpose.

A number of colleagues have touched on the views of some of the important stakeholders out there in the real world, and I want to do so, too. First, I want to thank all those campaigners and organisations that have been in touch and provided such helpful briefings. The Better Deal for Animals coalition has expressed its support for the Bill, but it says:

“Whilst we welcome the Bill in its current form, we acknowledge that the Bill could be further improved by the addition of a new duty to require ministers to proactively and strategically engage with sentience issues, including through a requirement for the government to maintain a cross-Whitehall Animal Sentience Strategy.”

The Opposition agree.

The Countryside Alliance is clear that it fully supports legal recognition of the sentience of animals, as we do. The British Veterinary Association is clear that the committee must include appropriate veterinary and animal welfare expertise and that this House must pass legislation that enshrines animal sentience in UK law; we agree on those points, too.

We will ask Ministers to work with us to strengthen the Bill and tackle the loopholes used by those who go hunting every Boxing day and the outsourcing of animal cruelty triggered by the trade deals negotiated by this Government. Baroness Hayman rightly pushed for

“guarantees that the Government will consult on membership; that there will be an open, transparent recruitment process; that wide-ranging expertise will be ensured; and that the committee will have genuine independence and not be incorporated as a sub-committee of the Animal Welfare Committee, as we believe this could potentially damage its ability to hold the Government to account.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 June 2021; Vol. 812, c. 1943.]

I agree, and I want the Minister to provide that reassurance.

The Bill is about an issue that we all take seriously and want to address. The Opposition will approach the Bill in a constructive manner that improves it and makes it fit for purpose. Our natural environment and animals deserve nothing less, and that is what Labour will deliver in Committee, on Report and back in the other place until the Bill reaches Her Majesty’s desk. I look forward to working with Members on this important Bill in Committee; I hope that the Government will listen to our reasoned amendments to strengthen and improve this long-awaited Bill.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to our lively and wide-ranging debate. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) for his excellent maiden speech; I am delighted to have his support. As he said, animal welfare is important to his and all our constituents.

I know that my hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggins) are all upholders of animal welfare who care for their own animals. Indeed, I often look fondly at Christmas cards from my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire; they are signed by him and his wife but often bear a picture of him with a cow from his herd, which is quite interesting.

I am pleased to associate myself with the comments about our former colleague the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup, with whom I worked to try to ensure that more cancer nurse specialists are there when people need them. We miss his wise counsel, but we welcome wholeheartedly our new hon. Friend.

The Bill is the latest in a series of steps that the Government are taking to develop and strengthen animal welfare protections. As we have heard from many hon. Members, it builds on the UK’s proud tradition of protecting pets, livestock and wildlife. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State laid out, our nation has a long and proud history in the area, and our action plan for animal welfare is making positive progress.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) pointed out, the Bill has been well discussed in the other place. She also alluded to other Bills. The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 came into force in June, increasing the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty, and has been welcomed by hon. Members. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill is currently going through the House. We are supporting private Members’ Bills: the Animals (Penalty Notices) Bill and the Glue Traps (Offences) Bill, which we will debate in Committee tomorrow. We introduced a Government amendment, which I know many right hon. and hon. Members have welcomed, to tackle illegal hare coursing in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. We are progressing a range of other commitments in the action plan, including on cat microchipping, and are moving forward on many other things.

Members asked many questions; I aim to answer them all, but if I do not, my door is always open. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon said that we had not yet had a conversation; I am keen to work to

deliver good legislation not only for the countryside that I represent but for all our constituents. Our primary job is to make sure we get it right.

I was asked how sentience is defined in the Bill. Our scientific understanding of sentience has come a long way in recent years, but it is well defined and continues to evolve. Baroness Hayman's work included the reviewing of 300 pieces of research to bring forward the definition of decapods and cephalopods. The situation will carry on evolving, so it would seem to be counter-intuitive to have a fixed definition, because the definition itself is not fixed. We therefore do not deem it necessary to define sentience for the work going forward. We can all recognise that animals are sentient and their welfare should be considered in any decisions we make.

As we have said, the public feel strongly about this issue, which is why we have introduced this legislation. I welcome the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) who, with this vast experience and strong expertise, highlighted the point that the committee will need to cover those areas of expertise. It is for that reason that we are not over-prescriptive. Indeed, as I said to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), somebody in one of the devolved nations could have the key expertise and we should look throughout the United Kingdom to ensure we have the right people on the committee to draw on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border also mentioned constituents who lose dogs and horses. I agree that there are other things we should be doing in the animal space, but we are moving forward with them. The Bill is tightly drafted for a distinct reason, which is why it merely has simple clauses to make sure we get it right.

I thank the EFRA Committee for all its work to get the Bill into a much better place. I notice that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) is now in his place.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I apologise to the House for not being here for the debate; I have been chairing the EFRA Committee. The advisory committee will need members with good practical animal welfare experience and an independent chair. It will also need to be given the proper resources and we will need more transparency in respect of the process of advising the Government. I really hope we can have a strong animal welfare process that is actually workable.

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for the letter that he recently wrote to me. We intend to do exactly that and I shall come to that in a moment.

The Bill delivers on our manifesto commitment and provides legal recognition that animals are sentient beings. As I have said, it is a tight, short Bill that establishes an animal sentience committee to consider how individual central Government policies and decision making take account of animal welfare. The Bill contains provisions to ensure that Ministers respond to Parliament in respect of reports published by the animal sentience committee. It establishes that committee and empowers it to scrutinise Minister's policy formation and implementation decisions, with a view to publishing

reports containing its views on whether Ministers have paid all due regard to animals' welfare needs as sentient beings.

The Bill places a duty on Ministers to respond to the reports by means of a written statement to Parliament within three months' sitting time and confirms that non-human vertebrates such as dogs, birds, decapod crustaceans and cephalopod molluscs and invertebrates such as lobsters and octopuses are sentient—that is, capable of experiencing pain or suffering. Together, these measures constitute a targeted, timely and proportionate accountability mechanism, as so aptly described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett).

The hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) asked why the Bill talks only of adverse effects. It is because the Animal Sentience Committee's role will be to encourage policy decision makers to think about the positive improvements they could make to animal welfare, rather than just minimising adverse effects. Meeting the welfare needs of animals means avoiding those negative impacts, as well as providing for positive experiences. The reference to an adverse effect allows the committee to consider whether a policy might restrict an animal's positive experience.

I was asked whether the Animal Sentience Committee will produce an animal welfare strategy, and the answer is no. The Government's current and future work on animal welfare and conservation is set out clearly in the action plan for animal welfare, and the role of the Animal Sentience Committee is not to devise future policy or strategy.

I was asked whether the committee could produce an annual report. That task is not established by the Bill, although that would not be necessary. There is nothing to prevent the committee from assessing improvements annually, if that fulfils its legislative purposes, or from issuing a report should it so wish.

Luke Pollard: The Minister slightly misunderstands the point. It is not that Members want the Animal Sentience Committee to produce an annual report but that we want the Secretary of State to have an annual parliamentary moment when the findings of those reports can be discussed and debated on the Floor of the House. Rather than being buried in a report in the House of Commons Library, will it be debated by parliamentarians?

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but I gently point out that there are plenty of other devices for ensuring plenty of parliamentary time. I am sure that we will unpick that in Committee.

Ministers will remain responsible for balancing animal welfare against other important matters of public interest. We are and will remain fully accountable to Parliament for that. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon spent some time asking whether the Bill increases the risk of judicial review, and it has been carefully considered and worded to ensure there are only two areas in which we could instigate grounds for judicial review if Ministers fail to fulfil them: by not appointing a committee or by not bringing forward a report in a timely fashion.

[Jo Churchill]

I was also asked how the Animal Sentience Committee differs from the Animal Welfare Committee. The latter offers substantive expert advice, whereas the former is a scrutinising body—that is the essential difference. The Animal Sentience Committee is there to give another line of evidence and to help Ministers make decisions, but policy decisions are and will remain a matter for Ministers, for which they are accountable to this House.

Ministers are under no legal obligation to follow the committee's recommendations. However, there is no point in having a committee that brings forward evidence unless we take it seriously. As I say, it will be balanced in the round to make sure competing interests such as the rural economy or a particular enjoyment, angling or whatever—all those things that are good for people's mental wellbeing—are considered when we make our decisions.

The key point about the terms of reference is that the Animal Sentience Committee will be classified as an expert committee. It will be funded from within DEFRA's existing budget and supported by a small secretariat. This will not run and run and be an unsupported Government quango, as suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire. The Bill is drafted to keep sentience at the forefront of policy making and implementation, in line with its statutory functions.

Wide-ranging points were made by colleagues, which flowed into medical research and respect for people's religious needs. The Bill is tight, and the reason it is a small, tight Bill is that it is important that we are aware that it does not change existing legislation. The committee does not make value judgments.

Hon. Members asked about the inclusion of decapod crustaceans, crabs, lobsters, molluscs, octopus and squid. I want to be absolutely clear about the reasoning behind the effects of that decision. At every point, it is about respecting and recognising animal sentience, and being scientifically led.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I sense the Minister is coming to a conclusion, but she has not answered one of my questions about the composition of the committee. Will she give an assurance that it will take into account rural and agricultural interests?

Jo Churchill: As I represent the constituency that I do, my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I will give him that assurance. The Opposition made the point that breadth of expertise is extremely important in order to have confidence in this Committee.

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I want to push on as the Chamber is full and it is only fair that I conclude, but I will take her intervention in a second.

It was originally thought that only vertebrates could feel pain, but decapods and cephalopods are invertebrates with complex nervous systems, and I welcome their inclusion. In 2020, DEFRA commissioned the external review of the available scientific evidence, and evaluated the findings of over 300 pieces of peer-reviewed evidence. We carefully considered the recommendations, as we

added that measure to the Bill. I reassure hon. Members that the Bill does not and will not change any existing legislation, or place any additional burdens on any part of industry or individuals.

Emma Hardy: The Minister is always kind at taking interventions. Before she concludes, can she comment on the use of testing on primates that was raised by the SNP spokesperson?

Jo Churchill: With respect, as the Chamber is full, I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady and talk further about that. It was largely to do with medical testing and military work with animals, and I would be happy to talk to her about medical animal testing, to which it is vital that we have a proportionate approach.

In summary, the Bill offers a proportionate and evidenced recognition of animal sentience in UK law. There is over whelming public demand for sentience legislation. We committed to introduce it in our manifesto, and similar pledges were made by parties represented on the Opposition Benches. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House to deliver on our promises, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTIENCE) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 10 February 2022.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Gareth Johnson.)

Question agreed to.

ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTIENCE) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under the Act by the Secretary of State.—(Gareth Johnson.)

Question agreed to.

CHARITIES BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)*Queen's recommendation signified.**Resolved,*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Charities Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Gareth Johnson.*)

House of Commons Commission*Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That Nickie Aiken be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in pursuance of section 1(2)(d) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

5.40 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I will not detain the House for long. It is clear that there is an interest in the recognition of Somaliland, something I entirely support as a representative of many constituents of Somali origin. I just wish to ask the Leader of the House a couple of administrative questions.

First, I welcome the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) to the House of Commons Commission. It is a great honour to serve with her on the Commission. We make many important decisions about the nature of this House, its operations and its staffing.

I have tried really hard to do the adding up this afternoon. It may be that I have missed something, but it appears to me that there has been a vacancy on the Commission for some time. Will the Leader of the House comment on why now is the appropriate time for that appointment? I am also aware that the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster has the great honour of being the representative for Westminster. We will shortly be discussing the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, which is in her constituency. Is the right hon. Gentleman able to advise me and other members of the Commission on whether any issues might arise from that?

I reiterate, overall, my welcome to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster to the Commission and I look forward to working with her, but I would be grateful if the right hon. Gentleman were able to answer those questions.

5.41 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I will try to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. My speaking notes only go for about 50 minutes or so, but I will try to rattle through them as quickly as possible so we can get to the debate secured by the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson).

I would like to reiterate some of the questions put by the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). I am interested to know why the position has gone unfilled for such a period of time. I would also like to ask why it is going to a Conservative Member. Obviously, I understand the need for balance across the Commission. I am sure that the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) will be an assiduous and diligent member of the Commission, and we all look forward very much to working with her, but she is replacing a Liberal Democrat, in the form of Mr Tom Brake, who unfortunately lost his seat at the last general election. Is it the case that the position could be filled from another party across the House?

I like the suggestion that we try to make the House of Commons Commission as accessible as possible to Members. Maybe we could all be included in deciding who should be on the Commission. What about an election for another member of the House of Commons

[Pete Wishart]

Commission? Let us think creatively about how we construct some of our great parliamentary institutions, such as the Commission. I think Members across the Chamber would be delighted to have an election to see who should take this very important place on the House of Commission, and they would have the confidence of everybody in this House. It would not be based on party political allegiance, but involve everybody in a democratic debate about who we want to represent the House on the Commission to do the very important work that we all know the Commission devotes itself to. That would be a diligent and sincere way of making sure this House is looked after.

5.43 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I am grateful for the support of the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), and the representative of the SNP, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). We all work very closely together on the Commission. Likewise, I do not want to detain the House unduly, but I am delighted to be proposing to appoint my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) to the House of Commons Commission.

The Commission, as hon. Members will know, is responsible for the administration of the services of the House of Commons, including the maintenance of the Palace of Westminster and the rest of the parliamentary estate. The House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended, provides for four Members of the House of Commons to be appointed by the House as members of the Commission, in addition to Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House, a Member appointed by the Leader of the Opposition and four external members. This appointment would fill the fourth vacant slot for a Member to be appointed by the House.

The hon. Member for Bristol West asks why the position has been vacant for so long. It has been a matter under discussion in the normal way between various parties to see whether it would be beneficial. The particular qualities of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster make this a very suitable appointment to make at the moment, not least because her constituency covers the parliamentary estate. Before her election she served as a councillor for, and indeed was leader of, Westminster City Council. Her executive experience at the council, including managing the refurbishment of City Hall—something we should bear in mind as we come to restoration and renewal—will prove invaluable to the Commission, which will have to address important issues of that kind, involving some discussions with Westminster City Council. Maintaining good relations at the highest level with Westminster City Council is certainly of importance to us.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked, “Why not a Liberal Democrat?”, which is always a popular question in this House. I might say, “What is a Liberal Democrat? Are there Liberal Democrats any more?” I notice that this debate is not attended by a Liberal Democrat. The Liberal Democrats used to be the third party in this House. We got used to that, and it took us a bit of time to recognise that the hon. Gentleman’s party is now the third party, so it is accorded the courtesies that used to be accorded to the Liberal Democrats, and that is democracy.

It is important to note that the Government will not have a majority on the Commission, exactly as was recommended by the Governance Committee, which I served on, actually, under the distinguished chairmanship of Jack Straw. We are maintaining the principle that the Government do not have a majority, but if the new member had not been a Government Member, we would have had 4:2 against the Government, which does not seem appropriate in view of the current set-up of the House of Commons.

There is much for the House of Commons Commission to discuss. I am grateful for the support that we have received. I am particularly grateful that the House is, I hope, going to approve the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, who I think will prove a most distinguished member of the Commission. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 7, 8 and 9 together.

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

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self-Isolation) (England) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2021 (SI, 2021, No. 1382), dated 8 December 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 December 2021, be approved.

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Entry to Venues and Events) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (SI, 2021, No. 1435), dated 14 December 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 15 December 2021, be approved.

SANCTIONS

That the Burundi (Sanctions) Regulations 2021 (SI, 2021, No. 1404), dated 8 December 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 December 2021, be approved.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

Question agreed to.

UK Government Recognition of Somaliland

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

5.47 pm

Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I am very grateful for the privilege of being able to bring this Adjournment debate to the House today.

In 1960, Somaliland emerged independent from the British empire after many years as the British Somaliland protectorate. For five days it was independent, before it took the step to merge with what was then the Trust Territory of Somaliland, historically Italian, to form a union. Both nations entered that union with optimism—a sense and a view of creating a pan-Somalia where all Somalis would be able to come together. The hope, for so many of those in Somaliland, was that this would be a union of equals.

Sadly, over the following 30 years, those hopes and aspirations for what might have been were not fulfilled. Instead, as the years progressed, the situation got worse, with military dictatorships and, tragically, people from the north of Somalia in historically British Somaliland being discriminated against. What started to emerge was attacks on civilians. There were mass killings of tens of thousands of Somali civilians. It was one of the few conflicts where fighter jets took off from cities in one area in order to bomb the cities that they had taken off from, indiscriminately killing thousands of civilians.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My constituency has a very large population from Somaliland, whose families suffered, as the right hon. Gentleman has described, in that conflict. Last year, Somaliland celebrated 30 years since the declaration of independence. It has built up its own independent Government, its own currency and democratic elections. It has shown the capability to establish a state. Is it not time that the UK Government formally recognise its right to self-determination and its need to be an independent state?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. The key reason for this debate is to discuss the fact that Somaliland has developed so much. In those years of conflict—where so many Somalilanders had their lives under threat, and so many hundreds of thousands were displaced, both internally within Somaliland and externally—that dream and that vision of creating their own homeland once again and re-establishing those old territorial borders burned bright, and that is what they were able to achieve in 1991.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my interest as one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on Somaliland. It has been a privilege to work with the right hon. Gentleman on these issues. Will he also pay tribute to my predecessor, Alun Michael, and the many members of the Somaliland community in Cardiff and across the UK for exposing those atrocities at the time, including in this House and elsewhere, and explaining what had gone on to the world? Will he commend them on what they did at that time?

Gavin Williamson: I pay tribute to the hon. Member's predecessor and the many people who live in his constituency. In his constituency is a very established Somaliland community that has been there probably far longer than he or I have been on this earth. This country has deep links with Somaliland that go back not just many decades, but a century and more, with many Somalilanders calling Britain their home, as well as Somaliland itself.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has secured this important debate. Many of us have been supporting Somaliland as an independent state, and we very much welcome the fact that he is here. On that point, he will know no doubt that many of Her Majesty's naval ships for 100 or more years have had lascars from Somaliland—stokers and others—who built the first mosques in this country. Does he not agree that recognising the Somalilanders here in the UK is also about recognising our own past and our own future together as investors in a new Africa? It would demonstrate that independent states that govern themselves well in democracies can succeed, and we can partner with them.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee is absolutely right. By taking the brave step to recognise Somaliland, we would not just be opening up opportunities for Somaliland itself, but opportunities for British investors and British business to go there and work, very much creating the gateway to the whole of the horn of Africa.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has brought this most important subject to the Floor of the House. I visited Hargeisa when I was Secretary of State for International Development, and we spent quite a lot of time on exactly the issues that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee have just raised. There is an enormous degree of normalcy there. The democratic structures, when they have elections, have held in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. There is proper governance. I have travelled on a bus in Hargeisa that was a result of British investment. The case that my right hon. Friend is making about Somaliland becoming an independent state is one where the Foreign Office normally takes the view that it does not want to lead it, but it would support it. Is he aware that the African Union is at least passively acquiescent in that view, if not actively supportive?

Gavin Williamson: On both areas that my right hon. Friend raises, he is absolutely right. One flies into Hargeisa airport, and it is a safe place to visit. One can get a bus to the centre of Hargeisa, as he did. When I visited, I must confess I did not get a bus, but I will endeavour to do so the next time I visit. He is equally right that this is an opportunity. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office so often wants to be led on these issues, but there is sometimes a moment for Britain to lead, as against to be led.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an important point about leading the world. Throughout the world, where western

[Alec Shelbrooke]

nations do not get involved, China does, and recently we have had many discussions about China's influence. Does he therefore agree that when we look at development taking place in Somaliland, we can see that it is in our strategic interests and that of western countries not just to see what happens but to take an active, leading role and not allow that vacuum to be filled with those who, perhaps, we have difficulties with?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is so correct. If we look to Djibouti, to the north of Somaliland, we see the Chinese investment that is going in. Where there is a vacuum, others do step in. If this country showed the leadership that it can by recognising Somaliland, that would show the Somaliland Government the value that we put on their friendship and partnership.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. I am honoured to represent a Somaliland community in Swindon. Building on the points made by right hon. and hon. Members about Somaliland's strategic importance, and in particular its proximity to international shipping lanes, we all know that with British leadership under our good friend the noble Lord Hague, we led the way in dealing with piracy emanating from the horn of Africa. Is this not another opportunity for Britain to show leadership and recognise stable government in a region that is in pitifully short supply of such a quality?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. and learned Friend is accurate in his assessment. Even though we are not yet in a position of recognising Somaliland, we already have that level of co-operation with Somalilanders. When I visited Somaliland as Defence Secretary, I saw at first hand the co-operation that British forces already had with Somaliland in protecting its coastal waters—and by doing so, keeping them safe for the international community.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for securing this important debate and commend the Government on the support they have been providing to the Administration in Somaliland. Liverpool Riverside has a long-established Somali community and Somalilanders. Will he join me in calling for the UK Government to support a binding referendum within two years to allow Somalilanders to express their democratic will, guaranteed by the international community?

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether you are an expert on Somaliland affairs, Madam Deputy Speaker, but this is the opportunity for you to brush up on them. The hon. Lady makes an important point, but there has already been a referendum in Somaliland, and it was absolutely clear about the wishes of the Somaliland people: they want to see recognition, to be independent and to have that independent state. However, if that is a hurdle to establishing international recognition for Somaliland, the Somaliland Government may wish to look at that.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has been extremely fortunate not only in the House allowing him a lot of time to debate this important

topic but in the number of hon. Members in their places supporting him and the cause of Somaliland. Wembley has a huge Somaliland community of expatriates who have said to me that, in all likelihood, a new Somaliland would desperately want to join the Commonwealth. Does he agree with them?

Gavin Williamson: From my visit to Somaliland and my discussions with so many Somalilanders in the UK, I have a real sense of kinship between Somaliland, Britain and other Commonwealth nations. I think that Somaliland would very much want to join the Commonwealth, and I hope that the Commonwealth would welcome them with open arms.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I have the privilege of chairing the all-party group on Somaliland, and we have a large Somaliland community in Sheffield. The way he described the formation of what is currently legally Somalia was really interesting. Immediately on gaining independence, Somaliland was an independent country, and it voluntarily chose to enter into a union. The concerns about changing post-colonial boundaries do not apply in the case of an independent Somaliland; post-colonial boundaries, it was an independent country. The idea that Mogadishu now has any remit in Somaliland is a piece of nonsense, and it is time the Government recognised that.

Gavin Williamson: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. The boundaries being proposed are exactly the same as those that were agreed between Britain, Italy, and Ethiopia, and with the French in numerous treaties prior to that. Somaliland is not asking for a change to the boundaries, as they are very much what was there in 1960. There are precedents when it comes to unwinding acts of union and confederacies. One need only look to the other side of Africa, at the confederation between Senegal and Gambia, which was unwound in the late 1980s. This is not unprecedented. We are suggesting going back and recognising what were well-established international boundaries that we ourselves recognised and drew up.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. The Defence Committee has just produced a report on the Navy and the importance of the sea in defence, and he mentioned his visits as Secretary of State for Defence. Does he agree that it is vital that we recognise Somaliland, given the strategic importance of the location in terms of defence?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is accurate in pinpointing the strategic importance of Somaliland. That is one of many reasons why it is so vital that not just Britain, but the United States and other NATO members lead the way in recognising Somaliland—not just because of the many brilliant things that have been done there, but because of the country's strategic importance. The question is how we reinforce and support that Government.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): If I may pursue that point, is it not desirable for a stable state in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable to achieve that level

of recognition? We talk a lot about supply chain vulnerability; this is one of the most vulnerable places we have found. Even one ship blocking the Suez canal caused ripples right the way throughout industry. We should also recognise the importance of enabling communities here and in Somaliland to move freely, have passports that are recognised, conclude international agreements, and unleash the country's energy. Having a properly administered state in the region would enable those communities to do those things. Is it not time that we grasped the nettle and recognised Somaliland?

Gavin Williamson: There is a level of consensus bubbling up that is not always typical of debates in this House. It is incredibly important to demonstrate the will and feeling of the House on this important issue. The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about supply chains. DP World already invests in the port of Berbera, and the welcome investment from British International Investment—the old Commonwealth Development Corporation—amounts to hundreds of millions of pounds. The Government recognise the importance of Somaliland, and we are willing to invest hundreds of millions of pounds there, because we realise that it opens up so much of the horn of Africa to British goods and investment. However, we still do not recognise the state of Somaliland, which is a real tragedy. It is so sad to see that so many Somalilanders have difficulty travelling to Somaliland. They cannot fly direct from the UK, but have to go via either Addis Ababa or Dubai. By taking the step of recognising Somaliland, we can make so many British citizens' lives easier.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate; the attendance shows the strength of feeling across the House. Does he agree that recognition can take several forms, and that the Government could take interim steps to show willing, and to demonstrate progress towards the formal recognition that we all want? That could include the Department for International Trade—or the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which has responsibilities to DIT—channelling food and aid through Somaliland. That way, Somaliland will not be at the wrong end of the supply chain; it often ends up with a raw deal.

Gavin Williamson: That is absolutely correct. For so long, international development aid has been channelled through the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Government in Mogadishu, which sadly means that people in Somaliland have often not had the assistance that this Government expected them to get. A perfect example of that is vaccines. A large supply of vaccines was sent to the people of Somaliland, but it was channelled through the Government in Mogadishu. By the time it arrived in Somaliland, sadly, there was only a few days left in which to dispense most of the vaccines.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. I do not have any Somalis in my constituency, but I have a great love for the country because my ayah came from Somaliland when we lived in Aden. I remind the House that the Aden Protectorate and the Somaliland Protectorate were very closely linked; I remember my father flying over to Somaliland as part of the Aden Protectorate

Levies when there was that close link. The people of Somaliland have a real affection for this country. That goes back a long time, and it would be absolutely right of our Government to encourage, support and allow Somaliland to be a real nation.

Gavin Williamson: We have seen the people of Somaliland pay a price for the defence of this nation in both the first and second world war. If people go to Somaliland, they can see the Commonwealth war grave cemetery. So many Somalilanders gave their life in defence of this country and beat fascism on the horn of Africa. We owe a debt of honour to the people of Somaliland, and should restore to them the freedom that they fought to preserve for us.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member on securing this debate, which has demonstrated an exceptional degree of unity across the House in support of his proposal. He makes a good point about the debt of honour that we owe to the people of Somaliland. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) highlighted that we have a strong community of people who owe their origins to Somaliland in our city. In recognition of that, the council passed a resolution in 2014 adding its voice to the demands for independence. Does the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) agree that the parliamentary and local elections held last year were another successful democratic moment in Somaliland, further reflecting the maturity and strength of democracy in the country, which is an essential building block for recognition of statehood, and which the Government should recognise?

Gavin Williamson: I do not often advocate that a Government should follow the leadership of Sheffield City Council, but on this occasion I certainly do. The Government should try to catch up with what that city council has been doing. So many communities—Sheffield, Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol, Swindon; we could go on and on—have welcomed Somalilanders, and Somalilanders have made these great cities and great communities their home, and will continue to do so.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has demonstrated just how important this topic is to all of us here. Newport is home to the second-largest Somaliland community in Wales, and I want to place on record my thanks for the community's amazing contributions to the city over the years. Has the right hon. Gentleman given any thought to how the devolved Governments can play a role in supporting the people of Somaliland as they continue to seek formal recognition?

Gavin Williamson: I strongly believe that this is a United Kingdom endeavour, in which we can all move forward in strengthening the bridges that already exist between the United Kingdom and Somaliland. Many steps have already been taken in municipal and devolved government to encourage the links between our great nations of the United Kingdom and Somaliland, but now is the time for the UK Government to take the lead—for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office not to be shy, and not to think that policy is stuck in the 1960s.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing a debate on such an important subject. There has been unanimity this evening on the many reasons why we should recognise Somaliland, but does he, as a former Education Secretary, view and accept Somaliland as a champion of education in Africa for both boys and girls? We have heard about how the devolved Administrations and this Government can assist, develop and support Somaliland. In that context, the education system is not only something to be treasured, but perhaps a way in which we can provide support.

Gavin Williamson: One of the most precious things that a nation can have is democracy. That means justice, but it also means the education that we give our children. Those who have the privilege of visiting Somaliland will see both boys and girls being educated. There is no discrimination there; Somalilanders want to educate all, because they recognise that that is what will strengthen Somaliland for the future.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend has heard representations from people in a number of places where there are large Somaliland communities. Does he agree that the level of remittances to Somaliland from the diaspora is enormous? Some years ago, it was about six times the annual state budget. Perhaps, following this debate, the Minister could consult his officials on trying to make remittancing easier, so that there is more competition and lower charges, and the enormous Somaliland community in the United Kingdom can send money back through the remittancing structure without paying exorbitant fees.

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of remittances going to Somaliland. This Government do not make that easier for people. Their view that Somaliland is locked in with Somalia makes it much more difficult for businesses to operate there, and to ensure that a flow of money from the diaspora community in this country goes back to Somaliland. The FCDO, working with Her Majesty's Treasury, could take up this practical issue and consider how it could make improvements. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to respond to that point at the end of the debate.

Somaliland is a country that has incredibly proud links with our country. When we have been in need and have asked for help, it has responded by sending its young men to defend our values and our freedoms. In 1991, it emerged from years of subjugation to the regime in Mogadishu—from having so many citizens, including children, killed in cold blood—and it was able to establish its borders once more. It was able to put in place the structures for a legal system and elections. All across Africa, we are always asking for countries to have proper legal systems, to educate their boys and their girls and to ensure the establishment of democracy. In May last year, we saw the parliamentary elections in Somaliland. They were peaceful; they were calm; they were fair. We saw the roll-out of iris-recognition technology, the first use of that technology anywhere on the continent of Africa, to ensure that they were fair and properly run.

All that goes to show the maturity of this country. In Somaliland, we have seen different parties enter government and leave it without questioning the veracity of their

opponents' claim. Indeed, as I recall, one presidential election was won by a margin of 80 votes. That vote was accepted, and we saw a peaceful transition. I cannot help thinking that there are some western democracies where, if the margin was quite so close, there might have been a little bit more controversy than we saw within Somaliland.

Somaliland has been an amazing, shining beacon of everything we want to see flourish in Africa. It is the example we want others to follow, but it needs our help and our assistance, because around it are real challenges. To the south, in Somalia, we see the challenges of al-Shabaab. We see the disorder and difficulties in Ethiopia and some of the real security challenges in Djibouti.

Somaliland is a country that wants to be our friend. It is a country that turns to us and asks us to show leadership. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister, instead of delivering the pre-prepared brief that no doubt every Foreign Office Minister has read out for the past 60 years, to show some guile, some leadership and some imagination—to show that he is a politician, not just a tool of Foreign Office officials to read their words. I have worked with him in the Whips Office; I saw some moments of merit.

As politicians, and as this House, we must show leadership on this issue. We must show our friends in Somaliland that we are willing to defend them as they have defended us. Even if the Minister cannot give us all the promises we would like to hear—even if he cannot say at the Dispatch Box today that we can recognise Somaliland—he needs to go away, sit down and work out how we take the next steps. We cannot spend another 30 years pretending that the reality on the ground, an independent Somaliland, does not exist because it is not on the Foreign Office map. We must respond to those realities. We must lead on foreign policy. We must show our Somaliland friends that we are there for them and that we will deliver for them—that we will not just talk about our history, but talk about how we can make history together in the future.

6.18 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an unusual pleasure to be able to speak in an end-of-day Adjournment debate, because of the time. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), the former Defence Secretary, and thank him for securing this debate. It has been hugely powerful, and the voices that have been heard on both sides of the House show the strength of feeling among hon. Members and Somaliland communities here in the UK on many of the issues he raised.

I declare my interest as one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on Somaliland, which has existed for a long time in this place. In the spirit of this debate, I am pleased to say that it includes Members from all parties and both Houses. Many of them, like the right hon. Gentleman and I, have travelled to Somaliland and seen for ourselves the hugely impressive progress that has been made, particularly since those very dark days that he started his speech by discussing—the atrocities that were committed and the literal levelling of Hargeisa, the capital city—and the remarkable progress since, largely driven by Somalilanders themselves and members of the diaspora. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the former International Development

Secretary, who is still in the Chamber, mentioned the importance of remittances, and the role of Somaliland communities here in the UK in raising funds and supporting projects in Somaliland has been absolutely crucial to that rebuilding since those dark days.

I also want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Alun Michael, who did so much in this place to raise Somaliland's concerns and to work with people from many different parties, communities and civil society groups, and with different parties in Somaliland, to ensure that our friendship and the progress that we had seen continued.

The all-party group visited Somaliland just a few years ago. It was the first visit we had been able to undertake for some time, and it was remarkable. I had heard so much about Somaliland from Somalilanders in Cardiff and then I was able to see it with my own eyes. We met civil society groups, women, young people, members of the legislature from both houses, and members of the Government. We also saw some of the progress that was being made and heard about the work the UK Government had done to support development projects, trade, economic development and security.

Rushanara Ali: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as Government recognition, we should also recognise, as he has, the important contribution that Somalilanders have made to the development agenda? The Government's decision to cut the aid budget from £121 million in 2020-21 to £71.2 million this year is setting the nation back, so the Government need to reconsider that.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend raises an important point. She knows my views on the aid budget—I have expressed them in this place many times, and I know they are shared by many Conservative Members. There have been some welcome investments in Somaliland through the aid budget and, as the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire mentioned, through the investment made by the former Commonwealth Development Corporation—now British International Investment—in Berbera port and the DP World partnership there, which has been very important and welcome. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that those cuts have impacted on our ability to work on a whole series of issues in a whole series of countries and strategic locations, and they were an error, as we have debated many times in this place.

As has been mentioned, the history of the Somaliland community and our friendship links goes back well beyond all of us in this Chamber. In fact, in Cardiff they go back to the middle 1800s. Cardiff was one of the largest coal ports in the world, exporting to the world and setting the price of coal, and friendship links, particularly with the horn of Africa, the Arabian peninsula and elsewhere, were absolutely crucial. That is one reason why there is such a strong Somaliland community in Cardiff, as well as a strong Yemeni community and many other communities from around the world, which made up the incredible part of the community I live in—Butetown or Tiger Bay.

At the heart of that has been the incredible contribution from Somalilanders, which continues to this day. They take great interest in what happens not only in Somaliland but, crucially, at home in Cardiff, and they are key in many of our community organisations and institutions. It has been a pleasure to hear from many of them in

advance of this debate—I do not want to name names, because I will upset people by missing them out, but all those who contact me regularly know who they are, and they continue to stand up for the interests of Somaliland and Somalilanders.

Somalilanders have a proud history in Cardiff, which also stretches to military history, with those involved in the Somaliland Camel Corps and the Somaliland Scouts. Those Somalilanders, along with many people from across the Commonwealth—from across the former empire and dominions—fought alongside us in world war one, world war two and many other conflicts. That is often overlooked, but we in Cardiff recognise those contributions regularly. We also recognise the contribution made by those who served in our merchant navy. Every year when we celebrate merchant navy memorials in Cardiff bay and elsewhere and look at the lists of names, we see Somali names and names of people from countries all around the Commonwealth that we have friendships with.

Bob Stewart: I well remember Somali soldiers coming across from the horn of Africa to the Aden protectorate and my father having the honour to command really good soldiers and decent men.

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. The hon. and gallant Gentleman makes an important point. We as a country need to recognise far more that our friends from across the Commonwealth have made contributions, and in some cases the ultimate sacrifice, in conflicts throughout many generations.

I want make a few practical points. First, we should recognise the strong links between so many cities across the UK and Somaliland. There are many British-Somaliland dual nationals, yet they experience many difficulties with travel, visas, restrictions—all sorts of things go on. We must ensure that support is available to them. That is difficult given the current situation in Somaliland, and we heard from many members of the British-Somaliland community on our visit about issues that arose if they lost a passport or wanted documentation authorised. They asked why the British Council did not have a bigger presence there.

I met young people who want to come and study here in the UK and build links between UK universities and educational institutions in Somaliland. They are often denied those opportunities. We could be doing so much more at a practical level to support those with dual nationality and dual heritage.

Kim Johnson: I support my hon. Friend's point about the need for the British Council to be located in Hargeisa. Does he agree that the Government may need to think about the funding to enable that to happen and to develop relationships with Somaliland?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. The British Council plays a key role around the world. The cuts to it have been deeply concerning and have been raised by hon. Members from all parties in the House. The issue was specifically raised when we were there, and I hope our links in that area can develop.

Huge progress has been made in health and development in particular. I have had the pleasure, as many across the House have, of meeting the remarkable former first lady and Foreign Minister Edna Adan on many occasions.

[Stephen Doughty]

If hon. Members have not listened to her “Desert Island Discs” and other fantastic interviews with her, I would strongly encourage them to do so. She is one of the most remarkable women I have had the pleasure of meeting, and I had the pleasure of visiting the hospital that Edna helped to resource and establish. She provided significant funding out of her own pocket. It is a maternity hospital; a training hospital to improve maternal health outcomes in Somaliland. Remarkable work is being done there, but so much more could be done if we were to develop our friendships further and ensure that the support was there for that.

We have seen remarkable progress in education. I visited Hargeisa University, a remarkable place doing brilliant work, where the majority of students are women and girls. That is exactly the sort of example that we want to set around the world, ensuring that young women and girls are able to thrive and seize all the opportunities that should be available for them, whether in Somaliland or elsewhere on the global stage.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution to an extremely good debate. Does he agree that Somaliland stands as a beacon of hope and shows what can be achieved where there is democracy, and that that is part of the reason why the UK Government should officially recognise it for the work that it does and the leadership it can offer within Africa?

Stephen Doughty: The leadership and the example that Somaliland has shown is there for all to see, and it is certainly there for those who have had the pleasure of visiting, as I have. Its progress in so many areas has been long overlooked. Progress has been made in trade and we met many businesses that wanted to expand their trading relationships with the UK and with their neighbours. Indeed, that is one of the crucial driving factors behind the investment in Berbera port by DP World, the UK and others. It is critical, not least when other trading routes may be more difficult and may be in the interests of strategic—I do not want to say “opponents”—challenger countries in the world that may have a different agenda. It is crucial that we are getting in there and supporting the development of trade links.

The politics has already been mentioned. Significant progress has been made in elections and democracy. Multiple elections have been held at both presidential and parliamentary level. I have met representatives of all the parties and civil society. Not everything is perfect, but significant progress has been made over recent years, and the UK has played a key role in supporting the practicality of elections and ensuring that they are free and fair. Election observation missions have often had strong UK support and included UK contingents.

Hon. Members have mentioned the security situation. I would love to see the day when a more reasonable approach is taken to travel advice about Somaliland. There have been recent improvements, but unfortunately some of the advice that is given at the moment puts people off travelling and building those links. I urge the FCDO to look again at the travel advice to Somaliland and see whether it can be more open, because in reality it is a very safe place to engage in business, education and travel. We do not want to see potential friendships and links pushed away.

Several hon. Members, particularly the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire, rightly raised the strategic location of Somaliland. There is very serious concern about the activities of opponents—Russia, China or others—operating in the region. We have a strong friendship; Somaliland wants a strong friendship with the UK. It is a key strategic location, and we would be very foolish not to recognise that in our global Britain strategy and our wider strategic posture around the world, not least in relation to a place that wants a close friendship with us.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) on securing the debate. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) raised the specific issue of strategic placement. Does he agree that if we use our Commonwealth connections across Africa, we can highlight not just Somaliland’s strategic importance for military and diplomatic links, but its strategic place within the future development of the Commonwealth?

Stephen Doughty: That point has been raised with me on a number of occasions by the Somaliland Government and members of the Somaliland community. Although at the moment Somaliland cannot attend the Commonwealth summit as a full member, our all-party group has raised the question whether observer status or attendance in another capacity might be possible even now.

Building links through the Commonwealth and other international organisations will certainly be critical. As I mentioned, it was a delight to have the support of the Inter-Parliamentary Union for our APPG links, because there is a huge opportunity for mutual training, exchange and links between our Parliaments. There is a real desire for that on both sides; again, the Commonwealth could be key.

I end by re-emphasising the huge contribution that Somalilanders have made to Cardiff and to the UK, and the huge benefits of that mutual relationship of friendship and respect. It is a relationship that has not had enough attention; it needs far more, both from our Government and in this place. I am delighted by the voices that we have heard speaking up today in friendship, support and solidarity with Somaliland: they send a very strong message to the Government. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

6.32 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure to contribute to this debate. I often make contributions to Adjournment debates, but they are usually interventions, so perhaps tonight I will get the chance to say a wee bit more.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) on securing the debate. He said many things that I totally agree with. He mentioned the words “union of equals”; I hope that that will take place. There has been much talk of Somaliland citizens having the support of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland through and alongside their participation in wartime activities. That is very important—that strong relationship is clearly there. I hope that our Minister will reply very positively.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which the right hon. Gentleman and others referred to, I wish to draw the House's attention to something that concerns me: the situation of Christians in Somaliland. It is heartbreaking that so few Christians remain in Somaliland because most have been driven out by extreme persecution or even killed. It is estimated that only a few hundred Christians live there today, but it is impossible to know the exact number because of the secrecy that they are forced into as a result of the divisive clan mentalities and vigilantism that pervade the country.

Christians suffer ostracism and discrimination from their wider families and communities wherever they are discovered. The few Christians remaining in Somaliland are forced to worship in secret for fear of attacks from extremists. The extremist group al-Shabaab, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to, propagates anti-Christian ideology and threatens converts to Christianity with execution on discovery.

Many women in Somaliland are under threat. The situation is even worse for those who are discovered to be Christians—fearing rape, forced marriage or being stoned to death. I hope that tonight's debate will illustrate and raise awareness of those things, and perhaps they can be addressed through the requests that we are making.

Our Government have made it central, in the Ministers who have been appointed, that in foreign policy we have a particular focus on religious persecution, the persecution of ethnic minorities and human rights issues. Those are key to my approach. I make a plea to the Minister for improvements in those things to be central to any steps forward that we all wish to see.

I do not have anyone in my constituency from Somaliland, as far as I am aware, but that does not lessen my support for what the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire said. Those who have Somalilanders in their constituencies, such as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who has a strong community, know that political factors are at play in the conflict. The religious motivation for attacks in the region cannot and should not be denied, with Christians suffering the worst of the persecution.

All the contributions tonight have clearly shown that we wish to help Somaliland economically, but central to any agreement must be human rights guarantees and religious freedom. We must help if we can. Others have referred to the democratic process and the education opportunities that we can build on, with jobs, a strong legal structure and improvements to health through covid vaccines, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

There has been much talk of the history that unites us, but it is important—I love history: it is probably one of the few subjects that I enjoyed at school and did fairly well at—that we also look to the future. The UK Government have stated that they will not formally recognise Somaliland as a sovereign state until it initiates a process to do so with the Federal Government of Somalia, but human rights issues and religious liberty need to improve. I agree that it is important that the UK retains diplomatic relations and a supportive presence in Hargeisa through this process, to ensure that there is no breakdown in relations between Somaliland and other African countries.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing the matter to the House. This debate has benefited from the presence of a large number of Members who all want the best for Somaliland. I believe the Minister wants the best for Somaliland and its people too, and that is what we are trying to achieve. Somaliland needs our help, and perhaps the debate tonight will be our opportunity. Let us not be found wanting. The time has arrived and the contributions from everyone tonight are an indication of our request to the Minister and the Government to do well for Somaliland.

6.38 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I did not intend to speak tonight, but I am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) on securing the debate today.

When I was first elected in 2005, I was only selected as the candidate for my constituency about 10 weeks before polling day. During that short election campaign, I was approached by people from the Bristol Somaliland community. It was the first that I had even heard of the place, but by the time I came here I was a firm supporter of the need for recognition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) paid tribute to his predecessor, Alun Michael, and news of my support had somehow reached Alun on the grapevine. I remember him accosting me in the Division Lobby on my first vote and saying that we needed to campaign on Somaliland. He was on the Front Bench at the time, but a year later in 2006 we set up the all-party group, and I am pleased to have been an officer pretty much ever since. I congratulate my hon. Friend on being the mainstay of that group, organising all our meetings and being an expert source of information on what is going on in Somaliland.

As has already been said, Somaliland is a beacon of democracy not just in the horn of Africa but in Africa. It has held peaceful elections, and the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire referred to the election in 2003 when the presidency changed hands by 80 votes. If Donald Trump had lost by that amount, we would never have heard the end of it.

What was slightly disappointing about the most recent election is that, although there was yet another peaceful handover, quite a lot of progress still needs to be made on female representation. There was one woman MP, but now there are zero, out of 82 elected MPs. There was also low turnout in some areas. Through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy or other mechanisms, I hope we can do a bit more work on that front.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth in paying tribute to Edna. I, too, have visited the hospital in Hargeisa and she is a formidable woman. Indeed, I have met many formidable women campaigning on issues such as FGM, maternal health services and recognition for Somaliland.

I echo what my hon. Friend said about the economic opportunities that would be available if we recognised Somaliland. I have heard there is amazing scuba diving on the north coast by Berbera, which could be opened up as a peaceful tourist destination if it were not associated with Somalia. Many other economic avenues could be explored, and I share the concerns of people who are worried about Chinese influence if we do not step in.

[Kerry McCarthy]

The main thing I want to say is that Somaliland is clearly an independent country, and it has functioned as such since 1991. It established itself as a post-colonial independent country, albeit for a very short time, before it went into partnership with Somalia. The message that the UK will recognise Somaliland but we want to be the second to do so is frustrating. There is sometimes a bit of concern about being seen as too colonialist and it being rather patronising that we are the ones who grant nationhood on the country.

Mark Malloch-Brown was a very good Minister for Africa in Gordon Brown's Government, and he really engaged with the APPG on Somaliland. I thought we were getting somewhere. He had had conversations with various African countries and the African Union, and it looked like we were almost there on recognition. The last we heard was the current Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), say in November 2021:

"Our policy remains that it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to decide their future".

It has nothing to do with the Federal Government of Somalia.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is effectively giving the final say, the decision-making power, to a country that does not have free and fair elections, that does not have judicial and legal systems and that does not educate boys and girls. We are effectively rewarding poor behaviour and being harsher on those who demonstrate the type of behaviour and the type of system we want to encourage.

Kerry McCarthy: That is exactly my point. The future of Somaliland has nothing to do with the Federal Government of Somalia, and it should not be in their hands. We need to be brave and step up to the plate. The Minister needs to find a country that will go first so that we can go second—I think some of the Scandinavian countries, Canada and some African countries have talked about it. If we do not do that, we will find ourselves here in another 10 years' time as Somaliland celebrates its 40th anniversary of de facto independence without being recognised.

I finish with a plea to the Minister. Will he step up? If we will not be the first, could he find someone who will be?

6.44 pm

The Minister for Europe (Chris Heaton-Harris): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) for securing the debate, and I have learned of his long-standing and enthusiastic engagement with Somaliland. I am afraid that, probably like so often in the past, I might well disappoint him a tiny bit today, but I will try to answer many of the points he made.

I am also grateful for a debate that has been a pleasure to listen to, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions—the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); my right hon. Friends the Members for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell); my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for

South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland); the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat); the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Brent North (Barry Gardiner); my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson); the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar); my right hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart); the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones); my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly); the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood); my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden); and the other Members who made speeches. They all demonstrated the depth of passion that there is for Somaliland, and many described how their constituents from Somaliland are so active in such a positive way in their constituencies, which I think is a testament and a tribute to them for making such a positive contribution.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire detailed Somaliland's proud links and friendship with the UK, and I would like to think that what he detailed is absolutely correct. The Minister for Africa—the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford)—would have been delighted to take part in the debate, but she is currently visiting east Africa, so it is my pleasure, as Minister for Europe and in post for less than a month, to respond on behalf of the Government.

Somaliland has a remarkable and unique story, and its people are rightly proud of their homeland and its achievements. Our relationship with Somaliland dates back to at least the 19th century, when a number of seafarers and merchants settled in Britain, and later the UK established a protectorate. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned not just the contributions of people from Somaliland to the city that he represents and to the United Kingdom, but the deep links and communities they have formed across Cardiff and beyond. Quite rightly, indeed, he mentioned his predecessor and his role in establishing the all-party group in this place, as well as the interest that has grown from it.

Today, we enjoy a really close partnership with Somaliland. We are the only western country with a permanent office in Hargeisa, through which we engage with the Somaliland Government on a range of issues—from trade and investment to climate change and development. The Somaliland authorities also have an office in London, and we have regular contact with their UK representative and his team.

The Government understand the strength of feeling towards Somaliland and the interest, which has obviously been demonstrated in this Chamber today, about the issue of recognition. In recent years, Somaliland has made great strides towards an inclusive democratic process, and that forms the bedrock of its stability. That was detailed in some ways by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and a number of other hon. Members. Last May, we saw successful local and parliamentary elections, and I am glad to say that the UK was the largest donor to that process, including in funding a mission to observe the elections.

Gavin Williamson: Will my hon. Friend tell the House what he thinks are the defining characteristics of what he would describe as a nation state?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I would be delighted to tell the House, but not at this point in time, because I am going to continue my contribution—

Gavin Williamson: Is he coming to that point?

Chris Heaton-Harris: If my right hon. Friend wants me to come to that point, I shall happily do so, but possibly later in my speech.

It is now important to ensure that the presidential elections and reforms to the Upper House of Parliament go ahead as planned. In a region where democratic transitions are not always the case, Somaliland, as detailed by many right hon. and hon. Members, has demonstrated that one person, one vote elections are possible and that inclusive democratic processes can be achieved. I heard the salient and wise speech on religious freedom from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I thank him for that contribution.

Somaliland is also making great progress in trade and investment. The development of Berbera is the most notable example. By 2035, trade through there could support more than 50,000 jobs in Somaliland. We have also forged a partnership with Dubai Ports World to invest in logistics facilities along the Berbera corridor, which runs from the coast of Ethiopia. These investments have the potential to drive economic growth and boost stability across the Horn of Africa. Again, those are hugely positive developments, and again, we are proud to play our part. British International Investment, the UK's development finance body, is investing in the port with Dubai Ports World as part of a \$1.72 billion investment into freeports in Africa. We are using official development assistance to construct a new road bypassing Hargeisa that means that journeys past the city will take, we hope, just 30 minutes instead of up to 12 hours because of congestion. Those investments will not only boost prosperity but bring greater regional integration, which will support peace and stability.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about the fact that the UK Government have felt able to invest in the port of Berbera and in the infrastructure of Somaliland. Does he think that such a level of investment would have been able to be done in Somalia? I think the answer would be no because of the security implications. Will he lay out what, in his view, are the defining characteristics of a nation state, and then comment on whether he thinks Somaliland corresponds to any of those defining characteristics?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I was about to come to the point about security, because we have also collaborated on security. The UK has supported training on human rights for Somaliland's police and security services, and has contributed to 20 years of work on mine clearance. Happily, we expect Somaliland to be declared mine-free in the near future.

Gavin Williamson: In the spirit of debate, which is of course what this Chamber is for, is my hon. Friend able to respond to either of my questions as to whether he

thinks it likely that the British Government would have been able to make the same investment in Somalia that they have done in Somaliland, and whether he could set out what he believes are the defining characteristics of a nation state, both of which I think he should be able to respond to as a Minister?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As my right hon. Friend asked me a question that he then answered in the same question, I will continue with my speech.

Somaliland has also made strong progress in development, which we have been proud to support. Education, particularly for girls, is a priority, as it is across all our work. Our Somali girls education programme has reached over 13,000 girls in Somaliland to support their learning and transition from primary to secondary school, a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North noted well. Through the Global Partnership for Education, the United Kingdom has supported the development of Somaliland's College of Education and trained nearly 2,200 teachers.

Sadly, climate change is having an increasing impact on Somaliland and the wider region. We are very concerned about the current drought, which has resulted in acute water shortages and reduced food security, particularly for 80,000 people living in rural areas. Early action is essential and the UK is developing a package of measures to address the drought. We are also working with international partners to ensure that additional funding is made available as soon as possible.

The strength of the partnership between the United Kingdom and Somaliland is clear, but I know that sovereignty remains at the top of the agenda for many people from Somaliland, so I want to address that question. I acknowledged earlier the strength of feeling on the issue, which is of real importance to people in the region and in diaspora communities around the world. There is a range of views on the subject and strong convictions exist on all sides of the debate. In part, that reflects the complex and at times painful history that followed the brief independence, in June 1960, of what had been British Somaliland.

The United Kingdom Government's position on this matter has been consistent, and it will not come as a surprise to my right hon. Friend, as it is exactly the same as it was when he was in government. We value the close and productive relationship with Somaliland, but in line with the rest of the international community, we do not recognise it as an independent state. We firmly believe it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to decide their future. It is for neighbours in the region to take the lead in recognising any new arrangements.

Rushanara Ali: I want to draw a parallel to the country I was born in—Bangladesh. The UK Government took a leadership role and supported the right to self-determination of the country in which I was born during the war of independence between Pakistan and Bangladesh. It did not say that Pakistan should determine the future of the independence of what became Bangladesh. Does he not see how ridiculous the position he is taking is?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No, I do not. I believe it is completely correct for neighbours in the region to take a lead in recognising any new arrangements.

Gavin Williamson: If we take the position that the Minister is espousing at the Dispatch Box, which is that he wants there to be discussions between Somaliland and the Federal Republic of Somalia, that is something that people have engaged with extensively for many years. Does he also recognise that there cannot be a situation where the Federal Republic of Somalia can have a veto over independence? Britain has a role in convening and leading the discussions, especially as the UN penholder on Somaliland and Somalia.

Chris Heaton-Harris: My right hon. Friend makes a proper point, as he always does, but the UK Government's position on the matter has been consistent. It was consistent at the time that he was in government and it remains the same. We have long encouraged dialogue between the authorities in Mogadishu and Hargeisa on the future relationship, and we continue to do so.

Bob Stewart: A nation state, according to me, is a grouping of people who all speak roughly the same language and have similar heritage. They become a nation state when people recognise them. I do not think it is fair that Somaliland becomes a nation state only if the people around it, who are traditionally against it, agree to that. We could take the lead, and I plead with my hon. Friend—a very good friend—to put it back to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office that we should be changing our attitude on that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point and the constructive manner in which he put it. My colleagues in the FCDO will doubtless be watching the debate, and will have seen the positive and supportive nature of it.

Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister give way at all?

Chris Heaton-Harris: At all? I believe I have been giving way fairly regularly, but of course.

Gavin Williamson: Will my hon. Friend inform the House when the policy on Somaliland was last reviewed and how extensive that review was?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As Minister for Europe, I am afraid I cannot give my right hon. Friend that information, but I will happily write to him.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous. On a practical point and in the light of the interventions that have been made,

the Minister is well aware that there is currently huge political instability in the Federal Republic of Somalia, including huge chaos and infighting among the Government, along with many other problems. With whom should the Somaliland Government be having discussions? That is a practical question that they have raised with me, given the chaos we have seen in Mogadishu in recent months.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The answer is with their neighbours, the African Union and those who are properly interested. Indeed, there is a representative body in this country with which we engage. Those conversations should obviously continue through the appropriate routes. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire said, I am a politician and I understand that that position obviously cannot please all parties. I recognise that the supporters of Somaliland independence will quite rightly continue to make their case.

Let me conclude by assuring the House that although we believe that it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Chris Heaton-Harris: My right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire and I will remember our happy days in the Whips Office—interesting House procedures do step in every now and then.

Let me draw my remarks to a conclusion by assuring the House that although we believe it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to decide their future, we remain committed to a close and productive partnership. We will continue to support the Hargeisa authorities and the people of Somaliland on their democratic journey. We will do that by investing in Somaliland, in pursuit of trade and prosperity, by building security for all Somalilanders and by supporting development and resilience to the impact of climate change.

I again thank all Members for their contributions to this excellent debate, which I have truly enjoyed. I look forward to having similar debates in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.1 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 January 2022

[ESTHER McVEY in the Chair]

Levelling Up: East of England

9.30 am

Esther McVey (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. This is in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the parliamentary estate. Please give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of levelling up in the East of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I am also grateful to the secretariat and supporters of the all-party parliamentary group for the East of England, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for the research that they carried out ahead of the debate, including their October 2021 publication, “Achieving Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: The East of England Offer”.

The east of England, traditionally known as East Anglia, comprises the easternmost counties of the United Kingdom: Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, and also Essex, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. The western and southern boundaries of the region are somewhat porous, and some of those living in, say, south Essex, parts of Hertfordshire and parts of Bedfordshire may not view themselves as being part of the east of England. That said, it is great that those three counties are so well represented in this Chamber this morning. Although at times understated, East Anglians are welcoming people. There is no hard border to the region, as the Devil's Dyke was never completed and ceased to function well over 1,100 years ago.

Levelling up is in many respects the Government's signature tune. The Prime Minister first spoke of the need to level up across Britain in his first speech as Prime Minister on 24 July 2019. The policy was the cornerstone of the Conservative manifesto at the 2019 general election, and we now eagerly await publication of the levelling-up White Paper, which will set out the strategy as to how levelling up will be delivered.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Aldous: I will, and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and all his colleagues on their attendance. He mentioned the Prime Minister. The week before last, the Prime Minister stated, during Prime Minister's questions, that the UK must

“get on with our job of levelling up across the whole of the UK, making sure that every part of this United Kingdom shares in our ambition to be a science superpower”.—[*Official Report*, 5 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 19.]

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that consideration must also be given to the rest of the UK? In the north of England there will be £38 per head of population, and in Northern Ireland the money is even less. The aim must be to ensure that we all benefit—I think that the Prime Minister wants us all to benefit and that the hon. Gentleman wants that as well. Does he agree?

Peter Aldous: I wholeheartedly agree. Northern Ireland and the east of England have many things in common: Northern Ireland is the most western part of the United Kingdom, and I represent the most easterly constituency in the United Kingdom. Levelling up must go round the whole United Kingdom—north and south, but also, as we are hearing today, east and west.

The White Paper is long overdue, but I recognise that the once-in-a-generation challenge of covid-19 has diverted attention and I acknowledge that my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are still relatively new in office. Although we have yet to see the detail of the Government's levelling-up policy, there are some early signs that the east of England might be overlooked. From my perspective, the purpose of this debate is to highlight that concern and to obtain from the Minister an assurance that that will not be the case—that our region will not be ignored and the needs of local people and local businesses will be fully and properly taken into account.

It is first necessary to set the scene as to what is happening in the east of England.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I intervene before my hon. Friend moves on to broaden out his argument? He was talking about the east of England being overlooked in levelling up. Is there not an additional concern that, in the levelling-up agenda, the east of England will be seen as an area where more houses can be built and taxes can be raised to be spent elsewhere? Those two considerations are important parallel aspects of levelling up that affect the east of England, particularly constituencies in Bedfordshire.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right: if more housing is to be provided, the infrastructure to go with it needs to be provided. I will comment on that. I will also address the fact that the east of England is at the moment a net contributor to the Treasury, and if we do not invest in the east, there is a risk that we will destroy the goose that lays that golden egg.

At first glance, the east of England appears relatively prosperous, even though wages in many areas lag behind the national average. In 2019, the east of England accounted for 9% of the UK's GDP, although it had a GDP per head below that of the UK as a whole. There are significant pockets of hidden deprivation, particularly in coastal communities, such as the Waveney constituency that I represent, and in rural areas. Those are often concealed, as they lie close to more affluent places.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, and I fully accept that coastal communities and some rural

[Stephen Metcalfe]

areas suffer from deprivation. However, new towns also have some of the most deprived wards in the east of England, particularly in and around Basildon. Levelling up is about levelling up opportunity, but it is also about levelling up those people's own environments and communities, so that they stay there rather than feel that they have to escape their local communities.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course, he is right: one of the challenges we face is that, if we do not invest in those communities, there will be a brain drain from the region. It is for that reason that we need to invest in those regions. In that way, we will level up, and get rid of that migration from the region.

As I have said, the east of England is one of three net contributing regions to UK plc, and it should be emphasised that investment and support in our region will not only deliver levelling up but add to national prosperity. Much of the hidden deprivation is focused in coastal areas such as Lowestoft, where traditional industries such as fishing and manufacturing have declined over the past 40 years, although there is hope that fishing can play an important role in economic recovery through the Renaissance of the East Anglian Fisheries initiative. Kirkley, in Lowestoft, is the 26th most deprived ward in the country, and 10 of Lowestoft's neighbourhoods fall within the 10% most deprived wards nationally. A 2019 study found that more than 12,000 people in Lowestoft and the rural area immediately to its north are affected by income deprivation. Some 20% of households in Lowestoft live on absolutely or relatively low incomes, and 21% of adults in the town have health issues that affect their activity, diminishing their participation in society, limiting their job opportunities and contributing to wellbeing issues. Finally, although 68% of adults in the town are economically active, 15.7% are in receipt of universal credit. That reflects the low-skilled and temporary nature of employment opportunities currently available.

It is also important to highlight one particular opportunity and one particular challenge in the east of England. The opportunity is presented by the UK's net zero target, with East Anglia right at the forefront of the Government's plans. Half of the UK's offshore wind fleet will be anchored off our coast. There is the proposed Sizewell C nuclear power station, and there is the potential to retrofit the gas infrastructure, both in the southern North sea and on land via the Bacton gas terminal. Some 30% of the UK's low-carbon electricity will in due course come through Suffolk alone. There is potential to completely transform the economy of the whole of coastal East Anglia, where many deep pockets of deprivation are found. To make the most of the opportunity from which the whole of the UK will benefit, the Government need to provide the necessary seedcorn funding. If that is done, we are not just talking about levelling up; we can provide a global exemplar as to how decarbonisation can be delivered to benefit local people and local communities.

A particular challenge that the region's councils face is adult social care, because the east of England has a relatively elderly population. Following the comprehensive spending review and the provisional local government funding settlement, there is a real worry that one year of funding certainty is not enough. Councils need at least

three years of certainty so that they can plan effectively and deliver services efficiently. There is a need for increased long-term funding for councils to close the funding gap that, by the end of 2022-23 for the east of England councils, will be in the order of £240 million. There is concern that the adult social care funding that has been provided is not enough and might not even cover the planned capital on care costs and changes to means testing. Councils face significant financial pressures owing to the rising costs of care, workforce pressures and national insurance uplifts.

I have highlighted the challenges that Lowestoft faces, but I should point out that the Government have responded positively and are currently making a significant investment in the town. Construction of the Gull Wing bridge and the Lowestoft flood defence scheme are well under way, and Lowestoft has secured a towns deal. Work on the projects is due to start later this year.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although we have infrastructure projects such as the bridge and so forth, when we talk about the anti-car debate in some of the towns, we must remember that some of our leafier suburbs do not benefit and we need transport infrastructure to keep our economy alive?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend is right that transport infrastructure is vital, and I will come on to that shortly.

Further afield from Lowestoft, the region will benefit from two freeports at Felixstowe and Harwich, as well as the Thames freeport. However, while we await the detail of the Government's levelling-up proposals, there are some early warning signs that the needs of local communities in East Anglia might be overlooked, and there is a worry that we will not be able to realise the full potential of those projects for the benefit of local people and local businesses.

With regard to funding allocated in the comprehensive spending review, the east of England received the second lowest per capita spend of any region at £92 per head. Only London received less. The UK average is £184 per person, and in Yorkshire and the Humber the provision is £359 per head. In the first round of the levelling-up fund, the east of England secured £87 million. That is £13.88 per capita compared with a national average of £23.91 and £41.72 per capita in the east midlands.

There is also concern about the prioritisation of both the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund. As I have mentioned, Lowestoft has deep pockets of deprivation, yet it is neither a priority 1 area for the levelling-up fund, nor a priority place in the community renewal fund. It is essential that that inequity is put right ahead of the next round of the levelling-up fund and the introduction of the UK shared prosperity fund.

There is also a worry that, notwithstanding opportunities in the east of England in such sectors as low carbon, agri-tech and life sciences, the Government are actively seeking to discourage Government spending on research and development in the east of England. In the Budget Red Book, the east of England is coupled with London and the south-east, which are very different from much of the region, as an area from which Government spending on R&D will be diverted and where it will be discouraged.

No debate on the east of England would be complete without highlighting the region's infrastructure deficiencies in traditional modes of transport—road, rail and bus—and digital connectivity. In many ways, we are a victim of our own geography, which in other respects is one of the region's unique selling points—a relatively dispersed population with relatively small urban centres, and a network of market towns and villages interspersed with attractive countryside—which serves not only as the breadbasket of the UK but as the home to many flourishing rural businesses. If that infrastructure, both old and new, is not upgraded, I fear that the region will not realise its full economic potential and it may be difficult for it to continue to be a net contributor to the Treasury's coffers.

I will highlight five compelling reasons why we need to upgrade the region's connectivity. First, the east of England, with 13 ports, including two freeports and four airports—Stansted, Luton, Southend and Norwich—is the UK's international gateway. If we do not have good road and rail networks from these access points, through and out of the region, it is not just East Anglia that suffers—there will be a negative knock-on impact for the whole UK. Half of the UK's containerised goods are moved through the region; 70% go to the north of England and support businesses and communities right across the UK. Air freight is critical to maintaining and growing the UK's ability to trade globally. Stansted is the only London airport with the capacity and infrastructure to support increased demand for cargo aviation over the next 10 to 15 years.

East Anglia's road and rail network is crucial to the smooth movement of these essential supplies coming into the UK, whether by sea or by air. Poor connections lead to slow, unreliable journeys adding delay and cost, which ultimately the consumer ends up paying for. For this reason, roads such as the A12, A14, A120 and A47 urgently need to be upgraded.

Secondly, linked to this, our railways need to be improved, to accelerate the shift of freight off the roads and improve services to London, to which many of the region's residents commute. The upgrades at Haughley junction and Ely junction are long overdue. Thirdly, improved transport infrastructure is needed to tackle those pockets of coastal deprivation to which I have referred. Many of these communities have poor transport links without dual carriageway connectivity and with low-frequency train services.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and making such an excellent contribution to this debate. I notice that on transport infrastructure, he seems to be looking at a very 20th-century model, as if the climate crisis was not happening. Will he talk a little more about the kind of rapid transit systems that he envisages would take individuals off the roads in their cars and move them on to buses and trains, freeing up more of that road network system and helping the environment and ecological systems that are in place?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention—he is right. As far as road investment is concerned, we have to make up for work that should have been done a long time ago. Rail network improvements are vital to the future, as he has mentioned. I have mentioned two junctions at Haughley and Ely; I could

be greedy, we need Trowse in his constituency and Bow to improve the access to London as well. Those need to be addressed.

I will now briefly address the digital connectivity which is so vital to the future.

Stephen Metcalfe: Before my hon. Friend moves on to the very important issue of digital connectivity, may I highlight the fact that in the south of Essex there are some proposals to consider a tram network? There is one very important road that he missed out of his list—the A127. It is not part of the national infrastructure, but it provides a vital route out of London down to Southend, through some of the busiest areas and areas that have the greatest opportunity to deliver the levelling-up agenda. I will just put those points on his radar.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for doing so, and I apologise if my speech is somewhat focused on the east of East Anglia. He is quite right to highlight the challenges and opportunities in the south of the region.

Finally, I will say that full-fibre connectivity for all households and businesses is vital if East Anglia is to reach its full economic potential. There are projects to deliver that connectivity in many towns across the region, including Cityfibre's £15 million investment in the network across Lowestoft. However, there is a concern that digital deserts may emerge in some rural areas, so it is vital that the Government's Project Gigabit programme is ramped up and is fully comprehensive.

For East Anglia to realise its full economic potential and provide local people with the opportunity to work in the exciting new emerging industries, a skills revolution is needed. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill provides the framework to deliver that revolution, but there is a concern that the region may again be bypassed.

Sizewell C is an enormous project, which can bring great benefits to Suffolk, Waveney and further afield. It is estimated that during the 12-year construction period, £2 billion will be put into the Suffolk economy. During that period there will be three apprenticeship cycles and 1,500 apprenticeships. There is an opportunity to leave an enduring legacy of knowledge and skills, which in the long term—once Sizewell C is completely constructed and becomes operational—can make Suffolk and Waveney a compelling location in which to set up and grow a business.

Sizewell C is exactly the sort of project that requires a gear change in training, which an institute of technology would help to deliver. However, the proposal from the University of Suffolk, East Coast College, the College of West Anglia and Norwich University of the Arts has not been successful in the institute of technology competition, in which the second wave of successful bids has just been announced. In the first two waves, 21 institutes of technology have been created, which provide comprehensive coverage across the country; and yes, there is one at South Essex College at Chelmsford, but there is a vacuum in the east. I will follow this matter up with the Minister for Higher and Further Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), to find out why the bid for our area was rejected, but there is alarm that the

[Peter Aldous]

necessary investment is not being made locally to ensure that the region fully benefits from the exciting opportunities that are emerging.

I have spoken for far too long; I must allow others their say. Generally, I am excited about the future economic prospects for East Anglia, as they provide the opportunity to reverse 40 years of economic decline in coastal communities such as Waveney. However, I have concerns that these issues are not fully taken into account in the emerging levelling-up strategy. In the east of England, it is crucial that the Government recognise the challenges faced in many coastal, rural and urban communities, and that they upgrade connectivity and invest in skills. If we do not do these things, we will not eliminate those deep pockets of deprivation, there will be a negative spin-off across the UK and the region's ability to continue to be a net contributor to UK plc will be in peril. I hope that the Minister can allay these concerns in his summing-up.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): We want to get to the Front-Bench spokespeople by just before 10.45 am—that is five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister. We are well supported today, with lots of people wanting to speak, so there will be a limit of four minutes per speech.

9.54 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. His introduction has been very thorough, and I will not go over the same points. He and I work closely on the East of England all-party parliamentary group, which I thank for its work. I also thank those who have supported us and other all-party parliamentary groups, such as the APPG for the innovation corridor. We have been trying to keep the idea of the east alive.

Some of us have been involved in regional policy for many years, and I sadly recount that I attended my 35th annual regional Labour party conference at the end of last year. I am not sure whether that is cause for celebration or concern, but we have been thinking about this issue for a long time and have discussed it in Westminster Hall before. I looked back at the previous debate on the east of England, which was in April 2016—during the referendum period, as I recall. The discussion at that time was about establishing a three-county system with an elected Mayor. It was introduced with enthusiasm by the then Minister but it died a death a few weeks later, as the Government fell. I gently suggest that slogans come and go and things come and go, but the regional issues stay with us for a very long time.

It is sometimes said that there is no such thing as the east, although the hon. Member for Waveney bravely defined it in the correct way. It is a question of regional identity. We know it is an odd construct sometimes, but I also think that what bring the east together most of all are our television regions—I do not say that just because Andrew Sinclair is sitting in the Public Gallery. It is the excellent work that is done by journalists such as Emma Hutchinson at ITV Anglia, Andrew at “Look East” and Deborah McGurran, and particularly by people such as Stewart White. I say that again in the context of the current debate: those people bring the region together in a way that very few others have managed to do.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman add his congratulations to Mark Murphy of BBC Radio Suffolk, who was awarded an MBE for services to broadcasting in the new year's honours list?

Daniel Zeichner: I am happy to do so.

On the question of the funding issues, the difficulties and the relative lack of understanding of the challenges that face our region, I agree with the statistics that the hon. Member for Waveney presented. I would also point out that if we take the London effect out of the east, we very quickly see that our region is, by UK and European standards, not nearly as prosperous as some of the initial statistics suggest. I read the House of Commons Library briefing, and one would think it is all fine. Actually, it is not all fine; it is a much more complicated picture than that, but it is not necessarily an easy question to solve. I would also look back historically and reflect that at the end of the last Labour Government we had a Minister for the East of England—I make no secret of my ambition to be the next Barbara Follett.

I have four questions to put to the Minister. As he is not a regional Minister, he may well not be in a good position to answer them, but these are important issues. East West Rail and the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford arc are absolutely crucial. Without talking too much about my constituency of Cambridge, AstraZeneca's Discovery Centre—a life sciences cluster that generates over £7 billion turnover and employs over 20,000 people—opened in November and is absolutely key. Can the Minister confirm that the project is on track, and that there is no question of any further delays?

Secondly, Ely junction, as the hon. Member for Waveney mentioned, is absolutely critical to unlocking the freight issues. My third point is that the West Anglia main line is absolutely key to improving links to our regional airport and gateway to the world, which is Stansted.

My final point is on bus funding. There is a critical point coming in the next few weeks, when the covid funding runs out. Bus operators are having to make decisions this week as to which routes will be cut. In my city of Cambridge, that is already happening. What is going on?

In conclusion, slogans may come and go but we need a proper regional policy. Scotland and Wales have the freedoms, but England is getting a rough deal.

9.59 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing such a fantastic debate and for setting out so many of the themes that many of us will champion in our remarks.

I will start by sharing a true story. Someone made a slip of the tongue in a conversation with me last week, when they referred to the Government's flagship programme as “levelling up the north”. That is not that funny to an MP speaking in this debate and representing a constituency such as mine—North Norfolk—in the east of England. I had to stop them and explain that it is not about levelling up just the north. Levelling up is about the entire country, but it is so often perceived as not that. It is about equality throughout the UK, which is why I am delighted that in the east we are proposing to launch our own group to represent our region for the powerhouse

that it is. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, the east of England is already one of the most economically successful areas in the country. It is a net contributor to the Treasury—one of only three, as he said. So you might think, why are we standing here with this plea? Because we can do so much more for a small marginal investment. The gains in the east will be felt throughout the country.

I could say plenty on many of the subjects that have been mentioned, such as transport connectivity and the like, but in the time available I shall limit my thoughts to two sectors that would need only marginal investment to unleash their power across the area and help tackle the skill and labour shortages, already mentioned, that go hand in hand in so many of our constituencies, which are often rural and coastal.

North Norfolk has the highest age demographic in the country, as I have often said during my time in the House. As such, the opportunities to invest in people, specifically in medical and social care, are second to none. We are crying out for more carers, more nurses and more dentists—the son of a dentist is allowed to get away with saying that; I share that passion with my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney.

We also need more mental health practitioners. Could there be a better region, in a country that often shares those traits, for people to train and gain those valuable skills and apply them throughout the east? We should be investing in dental training facilities, alongside the University of East Anglia's flagship medical training facilities. Is it right that anyone who wants to progress as a nurse has to travel, on what we know are not very good connectivity routes, all the way to Ipswich to further their career? The demand is enormous in our region and we need the investment to fill those plentiful jobs.

The same goes for green jobs. We have a third of the UK gas supply coming in at Bacton, a very rural area in my constituency. That is ripe for improvement with R&D research. Why should those jobs be going to Teesside? We have the skills, entrepreneurs, talent and young people who have their lives ahead of them. Those jobs must also come to the east—not to mention that we have the highest proliferation of wind turbines off my coast as well.

We need the Government to recognise that we have the demand, the people and the skills. Invest in the east and we will give a bigger bang for our buck than any other part of the country.

10.3 am

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this vital debate. I speak very much for the west of the eastern region.

Forgive the idiom, but there are more holes in the Government's levelling-up strategy than in a block of Swiss cheese. Rather than improving living standards and changing lives, the reality is an extension of the underfunding that existed during the decade-long Tory austerity agenda. As has already been mentioned, it has been used to pit regions and nations against each other as they vie for a cut of limited funding.

The funding available in the levelling-up fund and the towns fund restricts communities' ability to decide for themselves how to spend money, bring in investment and jobs and revive their towns. Instead, it empowers Ministers to decide from Whitehall which projects might receive funding. The Government's spending review also failed to resemble a genuine plan to support areas neglected during austerity. We have already heard that the eastern region received the second-lowest per capita spend of any region. The east received £92 per person, compared with the UK average of £184. How can that be considered to be levelling up our region?

It is not hyperbole to say that continued underfunding, especially in deprived areas of Luton South that have suffered huge cuts to vital local services under the coalition and Conservative Governments, will only exacerbate inequalities in our communities. The Government's various regeneration schemes do not come close to making up for the £15 billion of Conservative cuts to local government since 2010. Local councils have seen 60p in every £1 cut, resulting in almost all discretionary and preventive services being cut.

Against that backdrop, I was very happy to support Luton Council's bid to the levelling-up fund and was pleased that it was successful, but let us be frank: £20 million in one-off capital project funding will be limited in making up for the more than £100 million stripped from Luton Council's overall budget since 2010. In that context, the Bute Street car park redevelopment project that secured the levelling-up funding is fewer than 100 metres from our decrepit Luton town train station. How can the Government claim that they are levelling up communities when our Luton station is not fit for purpose? Its lack of accessibility marginalises many disabled and elderly people and young families from rail travel. While the station has been allocated long-awaited access for all funding, this hardly represents levelling up; it simply makes the decrepit station usable for many by putting in lifts. The gateway to our town should reflect the 21st-century town that we are. The station needs full redevelopment. A modern, accessible train station would play a critical role in truly regenerating our town, encouraging prosperity in our community through potential new investment and job creation.

Levelling up can only be considered a success if deprived areas receive investment and targeted policy initiatives that directly improve the living standards of all communities. It must be about people, not just projects. By that measure, levelling up cannot be considered as anything more than a hollow Tory strapline. My town, Luton, and our region, the east, still suffer shameful underfunding and inequality, with no sign of the Government proposing change on the scale needed.

10.7 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on bringing this much-needed debate. Sometimes gratitude is in slightly short supply where the Government are concerned, so I start with a thanks before I come on to my shopping list, because the town of Houghton Regis in my constituency received £19.9 million for a new community wellbeing centre hub, which I am very pleased about. It is much needed.

[Andrew Selous]

We have a new one in Dunstable, and the local authority just committed to a new one in Leighton Buzzard, so this completes the piece. I am extremely grateful.

An enormous number of new homes are being built in my area. Around 14,000 are going up—about 8,000 north of Houghton Regis and around 6,000 to the east of Leighton Buzzard. My particular concern, which I have raised repeatedly and will go on raising until we get a solution, is the need for infrastructure to come in at the same time as the new houses are built. I see a few nods—in fact, quite a lot—around the Chamber, because I think we all agree that that should be the case. I believe other European nations sometimes manage to do this a little bit better than we do. I think we all agree that that should happen, and I think every Government have been committed to its happening, but it has not happened under previous Governments and is not quite yet happening in the way it needs to.

I will just put a few figures from August 2021 on the record relating to the number of GPs per 10,000 registered patients in my area. In the three primary care networks in south Bedfordshire it is only 4.5. In the east of England it is 5.3, and in England as a whole it is 5.9. We are starting at a disadvantage and we have these 14,000 new houses coming on top. There is a serious amount of levelling up and catching up to do to make sure that all those residents can get to a doctor when they need to. The same is true for direct patient care roles. The full-time equivalent per 10,000 registered patients in the three primary care networks in my area, south Bedfordshire, is 1.6. For the east of England it is 2.9, and for England as a whole it is 2.3. South Bedfordshire is already at the bottom of the league in terms of the number of GPs and direct patient care roles per 10,000 patients, and all these new houses are coming. We really must do better.

If there is one thing that I want my hon. Friend the Minister to take back to his Department, it is that when the levelling-up White Paper comes out, if we do not have a solution to ensure that general practice capacity is installed at the same time as the new homes come up, I, for one, will not be happy. I will keep on raising this issue until we get a solution. We can do better as a country; we are a bright, capable country, it is within our power to do it and we need to do it.

In my last 40 seconds I will raise police funding, where we also need levelling up. Sometimes, I think that the Home Office views Bedfordshire as a sort of corn-chewing county out in the sticks somewhere. However, I am afraid that we are quite busy, in policing terms. We are the fourth-highest, nationally, for county lines. When Operation Venetic came out—the deciphering of the EncroChat criminal communications system—there were 26 packages for Bedfordshire, only 11 for Hertfordshire and none for Cambridgeshire. We are a busy police county, and we are surviving, I am afraid, on one-off grants. It all goes back to damping in 2004. We must amend the national funding formula to treat Bedfordshire police fairly.

10.11 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this important debate.

The East of England Local Government Association has found that the region has been disadvantaged from the outset of the Government's levelling-up programme, and it is not receiving its fair share. Just three of the region's seven priority 1 geographical areas will receive funding, creating a risk that deprived areas in the region will be left out and left behind. I am deeply disappointed that my constituency is one of them.

The Government are yet to explain to my constituents in Kempston why its levelling-up funding bid, which had a strong economic and social case and would have contributed towards a much-needed new health hub, was rejected, while neighbouring Central Bedfordshire received £26.7 million, despite being among the least-deprived fifth of local authorities in the country.

Actions speak louder than words. This decision makes a mockery of the Government's hollow levelling-up agenda, and it is yet another example of the Government ignoring the real needs of our towns. As a member of the newly named Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, I know just how important it is that we revitalise our high streets and towns, particularly after the pandemic.

The failure of the funding formula for towns that really need funding demonstrates the problem of having a system of bidding for funds, rather than an ongoing, fairly divided allocation of money for our towns, which would allow us to plan a steady programme of improvements. The whole bids system appears arbitrary and opaque, and I am not alone in thinking that.

In July, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee published its report, "Post-pandemic economic growth: Levelling up", describing the levelling-up policy initiatives and funding announced to date as "disjointed" and

"lacking any overall coherent strategic purpose".

If the Government had ever been serious about their levelling-up agenda, they would have presented clear priorities, a road map and timeline for delivery, and robust metrics for measuring success, with routine reporting on progress. However, I have seen no evidence that it is any more than a slogan.

It is telling that, as the Prime Minister puts the whole machinery of government into saving his own bacon, the delayed White Paper to finally tell us what levelling up might mean in practical terms is part of his Operation Red Meat policy platform. It is desperate and undignified behaviour. If the White Paper emerges in the coming weeks, I hope that it will not have been thrown together in the way that yesterday's announcements on the licence fee and migrant crossings obviously were. However, I suspect that, by then, the Prime Minister's levelling-up agenda will be too little, too late.

10.14 am

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): I rise to strongly support the levelling-up agenda, in particular in the east of England. I strongly support the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) put the case. He speaks for the east of England, for East Anglia and, indeed, for the east of East Anglia. Devil's Dyke, which he mentioned, runs right through my constituency, and is best seen in between the two racecourses in Newmarket. In that sense, my West Suffolk constituency is absolutely at the heart of the east of England.

The east of England is a net contributor to the Treasury, but its GDP per head is below average. To pick up on a point that was very well made by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), if one takes out London from the east of England, the figures look very different; indeed, if one takes out both Cambridge and London, the figures look more different still. The hon. Gentleman was modest—he represents undoubtedly the greatest economic powerhouse in the east of England.

We have heard from other Opposition Members a critique of the concept of levelling up, but all we have had are accusations; we have not had a constructive set of proposals. The point of levelling up is that the attitude that prevailed under the last Labour Government—that we enhance opportunity by helping people to move out of their areas—is being replaced by the principle of levelling up. Levelling up is about enhancing opportunity in an area and in a community. It turns on its head the principles that underpinned the last Labour Government.

Rachel Hopkins: The right hon. Gentleman made a point about people wanting to stay in their towns and the places where they live. However, under the last 10 years of this Government, the levelling-up agenda has meant that many people have been forced away because they cannot afford housing, particularly in towns such as Luton. We have to be careful here. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree?

Matt Hancock: I strongly agree with the need for more housing that people can afford, hence the increase in the level of house building from the record lows that we saw in the last couple of decades.

What does levelling up mean in practice? First, it means infrastructure, on which, again, I strongly support everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney said. The improvement to the A14 shows that, in the east of England, we can do it—on time and under budget. That is a magnificent improvement scheme. The A11 needs continued improvement, as do the Fiveways junction and the A1307. The Ely junction scheme has been mentioned. We need to continue the railway from Cambridge to the coast and make sure that, on the Norwich to Cambridge and Ipswich to Cambridge lines, some trains continue directly all the way through to London.

Giles Watling: What about the A12?

Matt Hancock: I am not an expert on the A12, but I am sure that it is a wonderful road, and I am sure that my hon. Friend thinks it needs improving.

We also need support for enterprise, such as the very successful EpiCentre, in Haverhill, which benefits from being close to Cambridge but is much cheaper than Cambridge. A brilliant company called CodiKoat, for instance, is revolutionising antimicrobial and antiviral coatings. This expansion is necessary.

Finally, in addition to all those points, will the Minister address the need for devolution? Through devolution, we can help to level up. In Suffolk, there is support from the county council, the district councils and all the MPs. That devolution should include the devolution of health, because there is no greater levelling up than in health. By combining health and social care in a devolution

deal, we can improve people's lives as well as their economic prospects. That is what levelling up is all about.

10.19 am

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend—I mean the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). *[Laughter.]* I have often thought that the hon. Member is on the wrong side of the House; as a centrist, he would be far better over here on the Labour Benches, where I could berate him for his lack of ideological purity. None the less, he has brought this fantastic and important debate forward. Sorry—I will get him into trouble.

I want to make a few key points and observations, some of which I can pick up from the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock). One of my appeals is that, when we talk about the regeneration of the east and investing in the east, we must not base that simply on 20th-century infrastructure. We must recognise that we have an opportunity in the eastern region, which has been underfunded and under-resourced.

One of the reasons we are net contributors to the Treasury is probably that it spends so little on us in real terms. One of my appeals to the Minister is that we should take that weakness and use it as an opportunity so that we can jump over the failures of the 20th century—the pollution, the carbon, the ecological destruction—and move to a 21st-century, sustainable, wellbeing-based economy with mass-transit systems. There may be a need at times to invest in roads, because road infrastructure is required, but let us ensure that we are not simply doing so because that is what we have always done. There is an opportunity to think about rail and public transport, and I think that is critical for the future.

I also want to talk about how devolution is done. I will quickly read an extract from an IPPR report on levelling up, which stated:

“Crucially, the competitive nature of existing devolution deals pitches areas against one another – making them race for increasingly small and centrally controlled pots of money. This has exposed disparities in terms of institutional capacity across local authorities: not all places have a history of cooperation, or indeed the resources, especially after over a decade of austerity, to enter good bids.”

Another area we need to look at is how levelling up is done. The key rule should be subsidiarity, meaning that powers to make decisions on key local political, economic and social issues should be closest to the people affected. Some Members have discussed this already. In my city of Norwich, which is obviously the cultural capital of the east, as most people will acknowledge, we have some cases where infrastructure is being done to us. The Wensum link is deeply unpopular across much of my city because of the ecological damage it will do to vast swathes of our ecosystem.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): It may be unpopular in the hon. Member's part of the city, but does he recognise that it is very popular in the county of Norfolk?

Clive Lewis: Yes, I do. The opposition to the Wensum link is more a cry for a decent public transport system instead of building yet more roads. The evidence shows that the more roads we build, the more cars and congestion

[Clive Lewis]

we have. This has been happening for 50 years and I see no reason why that should change. We have an opportunity to make a real difference.

My city has the second worst social mobility in the country, and our city council has been the worst hit by central Government. The key thing when we are talking about devolution and levelling up is—I take this analogy from my time in the military—mission command. Basically, that means centralised intent with decentralised execution; the Government set the “what” and the local people do the “how”. If we can apply those principles and give people a real say in how they get to those objectives, we can make devolution work. In Norwich, we know what our priorities are. They often interlink with the Government’s priorities, but let us get there in our way. Give us the resources to do that. If we are given the opportunity, we will add to this country’s economic and wellbeing output, as will the rest of our region. I hope that the Minister listens to that.

10.23 am

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for calling this debate. We have limited time, so, inevitably, all the high-falutin’ arguments that I was going to express have been ditched in favour of the shopping list. I apologise in advance for that.

So what are we talking about? I think levelling up is about investment. If I were to put my finger on it, I would say that it is about increasing productivity for the future so that we get the growth in the east of England that then pays for all the good stuff that everyone in the Chamber wants for our residents.

If we want to increase productivity in the east, the key element will be connectivity in all its forms. Levelling up is not really about north versus south, as it is often portrayed; really, it is about urban versus rural. In rural areas, we are under-served by the connectivity, both physical and digital, that is increasingly important in the developing economy.

That starts with mobile phone coverage. According to a relatively recent survey, 82% of calls by mobile phone in Norfolk are connected. That means that 18% failed. That is incredibly annoying and makes it much harder to undertake business as well as everyday life. I very much welcome the shared rural network project, but the 95% coverage that was promised by, I think, about 2030 is only for coverage outside buildings. That is fine if people are in the garden, but in rural areas where we have quite substantial buildings, typically of stone or brick construction, connectivity inside buildings is much worse. I invite the Government to look at that.

Superfast broadband is a huge opportunity, particularly for rural growth. Some 80% of rural businesses tell us that the single biggest thing that the Government can provide to improve their economic prospects is superfast broadband, so let us focus on that. As I said, the first priority is mobile phone coverage, and the second is superfast broadband. I welcome Project Gigabit and I celebrate the recent milestone of 50% coverage in the UK, but we need to go further, particularly in the east.

Not all connectivity is digital; we also need physical access to markets. I disagree with the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) about the western link

road. We have created, essentially, an orbital route around Norwich, but rather like the situation with the M25 and the Thames, we have decided not to build the bridge. It is very damaging to connectivity, particularly for the north-east of the county getting access to the physical markets in the rest of the country—

Clive Lewis: The hon. Gentleman talks about a bridge over the Thames, but this is a massive road bulldozed through an ecologically sensitive area. There were options to go over the most ecologically sensitive parts, but they were a bit more expensive and were rejected. I think that point needs to be made.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. It is also a bridge over the River Wensum, as he knows. A consultation was undertaken and, taking that into account, the best route was reached. It deals with a huge amount of rat-running and links north Norfolk to the rest of the country.

In relation to the A47, I welcome the imminent work for the Tuddenham to Easton dualling, but what about the Acle Straight? What about linking Great Yarmouth to the rest of the country? That is overdue and much needed.

On rail, regularity of services is an issue. Norwich to London takes about two hours; London to Birmingham, which is a shorter distance, takes about 80 minutes. That has a huge impact on the economic potential of our part of the country. It is the same for the Ely junction and the Haughley narrows.

We need access to markets, and that means access to staff. We lose 50% of our graduates from Norfolk. We need to change that, and one thing that we have to look at is the quality of life in our community. That includes health and dental services. We have a real paucity of dental services in the county. It would assist the situation if we had a teaching facility at UEA. I have run out of time, so I will have to conclude at this point.

10.28 am

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I would like to thank the hon. Member behind me—pantomime season is over—my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for securing this incredibly important debate. Yes, the A12 is incredibly important. It is the road that comes to our area—it goes all the way up through Essex—and it is probably one of the worst roads in Britain. I therefore make the plea to whoever is listening that we need that road upgraded, and soon.

We think of the east of England as having wonderful rolling countryside and an incredibly powerful economy, and it does have a powerful economy, as we have heard today. We had this report, “Achieving Sustainable and Inclusive Growth: The East of England Offer”, which was our offer to Government and made the case that some of the most deprived areas in the country are in the east of England. That is despite the fact that Essex, my county, is an economic powerhouse.

Understandably, the Treasury thinks that the east can take care of itself. It can, to a great extent, but we all have issues in our own areas. As we have heard, the east of England received the lowest per capita spend of any region—£92 per person. It is clear that the east of

England is not being levelled up as many other areas of the country are. Within the east, we have coastal areas that have intense issues, so if the east is not being levelled up fairly, the coastal areas within the east are suffering even more. The “east” is a deceptive catch-all term for that rich and leafy region.

The east is not homogenous. We have far from common levels of wealth. In my constituency of Clacton, Jaywick is consistently and regularly, on many indices, the most deprived ward in the country. That not something I am proud of, and it is not something any of us can be proud of. My local council, Tendring District Council, is working hard and making great strides by purchasing land and building flood-proof houses. However, this problem has been stuck in the mud for so long, and we keep missing out on funding.

I realise that we are short of time, so my plea is: treat coastal areas as the data tells us—they are, in fact, in need of funding, as are many northern towns—and do not just lump us in with the richer parts of the east. When we talk about levelling up, it is vital that we talk about levelling up sideways, as well as up and down.

10.30 am

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for bringing forward this vital debate. We are very lucky in the east of England to have the oldest town in the country, which of course is Ipswich, but we also have the second oldest town, which is Colchester, so I think we are quite lucky.

We have significant pockets of deprivation in the region, which has been referred to and that includes in Ipswich, but it is that mix of deprivation and potential that means East Anglia should be right at the forefront of a levelling-up agenda. I must say it is in among the most deprived parts of the town that I have the honour of representing that I have met the best people, and some of the most honest people with the best values and the strongest communities, but they do need investment in education, tackling crime and everything else.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend talks about pockets of deprivation. While individual projects can help levelling up, it is actually about lifting the whole area—the whole pocket—up by improving housing and education, which will keep people there and enable the whole area to improve.

Tom Hunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why I think we need to balance the educational provision of technical skills and apprenticeships as well as academic education.

As for some good things that are happening on levelling up in the east of England, particularly in relation to Ipswich, we have benefited from a £25 million town deal and 11 exciting projects, many of which relate to skills, which we know is at the heart of levelling up. Also, the freeport in Felixstowe, if done in the right way, could bring forward about 10,000 new jobs, so my constituents stand to benefit almost more than anybody else.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has already mentioned the fact that we were unsuccessful in the institute of technology bid, which is very disappointing.

It is also worth mentioning that we were not successful in becoming a pilot for the local skills improvement plan. That was slightly disappointing because we know there is probably nothing more important than skills for levelling up.

What do we need to tackle the levelling-up issue? First, we need to look at how we fund our core public services. Of course, things like the levelling-up fund and the town deal are important, but it is simply not right that when it comes to education, particularly special educational needs provision, and police funding, Suffolk gets an incredibly raw deal, and that has been the case for decades. The east of England does badly from a lot of those funding formulas, but I argue that Suffolk does particularly badly. I was pleased to support a recent letter to the Secretary of State for Education on special educational needs provision.

The Government need to go further and extend the good things they have already done in terms of the towns deal and freeports. I think they need to get fully behind the Felixstowe and Harwich freeport, which the Government are doing and should continue to do, but they need to look at how we fund our core public services. That means bringing forward things, such as the review of the police funding formula as soon as possible, and in terms of the levelling-up fund, being imaginative about the way in which it can be spent. I would be excited about the prospect of a grassroots sports club fund, because we know that clubs and grassroots sports are incredibly important for levelling up.

In terms of infrastructure, I echo the comments made by other hon. Members about Ely North junction. It has been promised for a very long time, but it keeps being delayed, and it is amazing how many things are linked to it. There is also Haughley junction, and the “Ipswich in 60” service is vital. Small things, such as the hourly Peterborough to Ipswich train, would also make a big difference to many of my constituents in getting about the region.

I simply say this: I have never thought the Government see levelling up as purely about the north and the midlands. That has never been my view, and there is a lot of evidence that that is not the case, but that is not to say that I do not think the Government could go further. If I was going to say one thing, it would be about the way in which we fund our core public services, because for too long Suffolk has got a raw deal.

10.35 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing this important debate. He represents the most easterly constituency in the east of England, and I probably represent the region’s most westerly constituency, so there is a nice balance.

Levelling up is about being inclusive and making sure that people really are able to achieve the best of their opportunity. It is not always about money—my apologies if that is controversial. As a Conservative, I believe it is about empowering communities to help themselves as much as it is about giving them a ladder to raise themselves up. It is not just about business, but about education, health, transport, broadband—especially in rural areas such as mine—and high streets.

[Mr Gagan Mohindra]

My constituency of South West Hertfordshire has great transport links, north to south, to London. As someone who commutes every day, the worry that I have is about the east-to-west transport links. If I were to go to the neighbouring constituency of Hemel Hempstead or Watford, it is a bit of a nightmare from where I live, whereas getting to London or Birmingham is relatively easy.

It is a real shame that one of my more affluent villages, Belsize, has a really poor mobile telephone signal as well as really poor broadband. During the global pandemic, when people were reliant on home deliveries and on communications that they were not normally used to, that became quite profound. One of my personal tasks and ambitions is to resolve these things over my parliamentary career. Levelling up is not always about spending money; it is actually about making communities viable for private sector businesses to get more involved.

As a former furniture retailer, I remain quite concerned about the level of usage of our high streets. I would argue that we have seen businesses with a real customer focus survive and prosper during the global pandemic, but I say to residents and communities up and down the country that if they value their high streets, they need to use them. It is all well and good using high streets during the global pandemic, but if people want to retain their local butcher or grocer, they need to use them in better times as well.

Healthcare remains a really big issue in my constituency. I have Watford General Hospital down in the south, and St Albans City Hospital to the east. Although I may not have an acute hospital in my constituency, healthcare remains a big issue because of my ageing population, and I look forward to hopefully having further conversations with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on how we ensure that we are able to offer first-class health provision, which is not necessarily always aligned with the big white elephant that a primary acute hospital may be regarded as.

Although my constituency of South West Hertfordshire is regarded as an affluent area, there is quite a large commuter population. About 10,000 people use public transport to get to work—that is quite a dated figure, and obviously from before the pandemic—which is a significantly higher number than the average in the east of England and nationally. Making sure that local transport provision is having an impact—while not necessarily being the most expensive—will ensure that people can stay in the community and do not have to resort to moving to more urbanised areas. I would argue that that is a better outcome for the community.

Right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about development. I represent a community that is 80% green belt, which remains a big issue, and I look forward to further discussions on what levelling up means for housing numbers and population growth post pandemic.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I thank everybody for keeping to time, because we managed to get in everybody who wanted to speak. We will now move to the Front-Bench spokespeople.

10.39 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I will confess that I love fielding debates for the Opposition in this place. No other parliamentary moment offers the chance to hear the hon. Member for Waveney talk in such depth and with such thoughtfulness to make his case. I was glad to be here and learn plenty from it, as I am sure the Minister did, although I have my own reflections. It set the tone for what has been a brilliant debate. He said at the beginning that his purpose was to highlight the possibility of the east of England being ignored by the levelling-up White Paper and to seek to avoid that. I suspect he managed that with aplomb, with the support of colleagues across party. His case was very well made.

As the hon. Member said, it has been two and half years since the Prime Minister spoke of the need to level up Britain. Two and half years later we are still waiting to find out what that means. It appears we may not have to wait too much longer. I hope the Minister will give us a little sneak preview among friends, including a sense of the timing, though I suspect he might wish to keep his powder dry, as might I to an extent. I might disappoint the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) who wants a detailed response and an alternative, but the Government will have to show their hand first. After all, we have waited two and half years. The case made around regional and local authority disparities is important. As the conversations on levelling up evolve, that will become even more important.

I will reflect on contributions from colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the East of England, made an important point about the London effect. We need to have that understanding at a regional, sub-regional and local authority level about how data can be skewed. So that, in trying to ensure that communities are not left behind—not a great phrase but we know what it means—we do not create a new collection of left-behind areas.

I share a lot of the frustrations of my hon. Friends the Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) around how things have been done previously. It is sad, avoidable and reductive, and does not serve an agenda of trying to move the country forward together, that we seem to be constantly pitted against each other in bidding rounds, where some must be winners and others must be losers. The funding is one off, so maybe someone wins today and loses tomorrow, or vice versa. In reality, no community that has been funded through levelling-up programmes so far is not worse off when losses to the local authority are taken into account. That test must be passed, and it must be a comprehensive settlement that everybody has a stake in.

I will reiterate a point made by colleagues of all persuasions. The Opposition do not accept the framing of levelling up as north versus south. That was a point made by the hon. Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew). I represent one of the poorest communities in the country, based in

the east midlands, and I hate the assumptions that come with that. That cuts both ways and I should not make assumptions about communities that might be better off according to their top lines. I should not assume that that is a place with streets paved with gold, with no social problems, challenges or pockets of deprivation. That is not what the evidence shows.

This is an all-regions approach, and the east of England is a study in that. Taken as a whole, looking at those top lines, the region is a net contributor, with an above average GDP growth rate over the past decade, which is forecast to continue, above average employment, below average unemployment and above average house prices. That would suggest that the east of England is fine and that levelling up should happen elsewhere. As we have heard, the reality is different. There is a different experience for those in the south of the region, which makes up the London commuter belt, while much of East Anglia would not. Even within those communities, there are pockets of deprivation.

We have heard that there are many areas that suffer high levels of deprivation. Those could be coastal communities, such as Lowestoft, referred to by the hon. Member for Waveney, Great Yarmouth just up the coast, and Clacton-on-Sea, as the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) mentioned, or they could be rural areas with associated challenges, such as Thetford, March and Wisbech, or parts of cities such as Peterborough and Norwich.

When the levelling-up White Paper is finally published, that nuanced understanding of regional variation will be one of the tests by which colleagues will judge it. However, the key point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South made in a couple of different contexts, is not just adopting the same approaches, because they will get the same outcomes. He made an important point about sustainability, saying that levelling up is not just about helping different communities to catch up on the same development model, because we know the impact that will have. That is profoundly true globally, and the question of how we support global development so that we do not just repeat the old models is a thorny question that we must address. However, it is true at home, too.

The East of England Local Government Association's analysis of the autumn Budget was interesting, showing once again that 40% less—considerably less—was being made available for the east of England than for other areas. Of course, that was repeated in round one of the levelling-up fund bid, with just three of the seven of the region's priority 1 projects having success. The EELGA is worried and says there is a clear risk that other deprived areas in the east of England will be left out and left behind, presumably on account of the wider region's overall performance. Again, that creates a profound challenge, which applies across the region.

Transport is another key theme. I dare say that the Minister and I will participate in a lot of debates about different regions and different communities, which I very much look forward to, and transport will be a constant theme. It sometimes felt necessary to have an A to Z to follow things in this debate, but the sheer volume of A roads referred to was illustrative, telling us an awful lot about the natural geography and the infrastructure of the east of England, and about the challenges that come with that sort of road. The focus

over the last year has been more on city region settlements, particularly around rail, but that focus alone clearly will not pass the overall test, because otherwise this becomes a long-running, self-perpetuating cycle.

The publication of the White Paper really ought to be the moment that that cycle is broken, because many rural and coastal communities—across the country, but particularly in the east of England—have faced significant challenges for a long time. As the hon. Member for Waveney said, over the past 40 years good jobs have left the region and not always been replaced, forcing young people to leave the area and seek opportunities elsewhere, taking their spending power away with them, which causes high streets to struggle, local institutions to decay and transport networks to close down. And so it goes, and so it goes. More of that decline just begets even more and more, until we break the cycle.

I will conclude there, because I know that colleagues will be keen that the long list of issues that have been put to the Minister are all comprehensively addressed, with a commitment today to addressing them. However, I will just say finally that in preparing for this debate, I thought that we were perhaps a couple of weeks—three or four weeks—too early, and timing is everything in politics, because we do not yet know what the Government will say on levelling up, and I suspect that they may not quite know themselves yet what they will say. Actually, though, the timing for this debate was perfect, because the east of England offers an illustrative case of what has happened in the past, which we do not want to see repeated, and it is better for the Minister to hear that before the Government make their statement than it would be afterwards. I look forward to hearing his response to the debate.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I call the Minister to respond, and also mention that Peter Aldous needs a couple of minutes at the end to wind up the debate.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate. He is a tireless—indeed, relentless—advocate, not just for his own constituency, but for the whole of the east of England.

I will address a huge bugbear of mine, which is the idea in the media that levelling up is about north and south. Recently, I was in Norwich—with the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), and the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis)—to visit an amazing new digital facility, which was part-funded by the towns fund. The first thing I said then was that the east of England is absolutely central to our vision for levelling up this country; indeed, the levelling-up agenda is for the whole of the UK. There was an intervention earlier by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is obviously part of the “greater” east of England, showing the cultural reach of the area. *[Laughter.]* The levelling-up agenda is an agenda for the whole UK, and the east of England is absolutely central to it, as I say.

[Neil O'Brien]

Let me take on, right at the start of my speech, a question that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney asked: the east of England will absolutely not be overlooked by the levelling-up agenda. Let me also take on, right at the start of my contribution, some of the other questions that were put. My hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) both talked about the challenges of growth in their areas, particularly in housing. We are absolutely conscious of those challenges in the fast-growing parts of the east of England and the need for infrastructure always to match that new housing development. That is a passion of mine and of my hon. Friends.

I will also take on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) by saying that we absolutely do not regard the situation in the east of England as “job done”; there is a lot more to do. I say that because although the east of England has an economy with many strengths, it also has massive untapped potential that we must unleash, because the Government’s belief is that a more balanced economy is not just a fairer one but one that is stronger overall. If parts of the economy are overheating with sky-high house prices and people being unable to get on a train, and at the same time we have parts of the country crying out for investment, we can see the potential for a win-win that can benefit the country as a whole and make the economy stronger overall.

On the point that a lot of Members made about total public spending, it is completely fair for Opposition Members to talk about the difficult decisions we had to make in the coalition years. No one denies that they were difficult decisions, but it is also fair to flag that things have changed since then, particularly since 2019. From 2016-17 to 2020-21, total public spending in the east of England rose from £49.7 billion to £78.25 billion—a 57% increase. There is public funding, but we also need a different plan.

Levelling up is about four different things: growing the private sector and boosting living standards, particularly where they are lower; spreading opportunity and improving public services, particularly where they are lacking; restoring local pride—that *je ne sais quoi*—in important local institutions that mean so much to us all; and empowering local leaders and communities. There are no good examples around the world of places that have turned themselves round and taken it to the next level without strong local leadership, which is something that we are bringing to the east of England.

Levelling up is an idea that cannot be distilled into just one thing—there is no single magic bullet—but it fundamentally addresses the problem that, for too many people, geography has turned out to be destiny; where they are born and happen to live determines, and perhaps limits, their life chances.

At the moment the east of England finds itself on the wrong side of two averages, with qualification levels below the national average, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) pointed out, and the proportion of people aged 16 to 24 not in employment, education or training above the average. We have to address that. As everyone has said, addressing things at

a regional level does not give us a sense of the huge differences within a region. As my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) pointed out, Jaywick in Essex is the most deprived place in the entire country. Other places, such as Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft, have great strengths, but at the same time there are significant challenges that we have to address. We absolutely must take that granular view.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney pointed out, the east of England is one of only three regions in the whole country that makes a net contribution to the Exchequer, and that is a testament to the host of amazing companies and institutions that have built the east of England’s reputation as a powerhouse in fields such as life sciences, clean energy, agrifood and so on.

Over the last 18 months of incredible turbulence, we have done everything that we can to preserve the great strengths that we have already in the east of England, with financial support of £1.18 billion to help 100,000 businesses and more than 1 million individuals to preserve their livelihoods in the east of England. As we come out of the pandemic and have more good news about omicron, we can look forward to not just building back, but building back better and strengthening the underpinnings of the economy in the east of England.

One difference that a few colleagues have pointed out is the new Freeport East, centred on the port of Felixstowe, Harwich International port and Gateway 14. The freeport status will help the area to realise its potential of becoming a real energy capital for the UK, which my hon. Friend talked about. Meanwhile, the Thames freeport also opened its doors for business on 15 December, paving the way for a lot of new investment and growth in and around Thurrock.

We have talked about the different funding streams backing local opportunities. As a few people mentioned, the levelling-up fund is putting £87 million into a range of different local priorities, with transport upgrades in Bedfordshire, new science facilities in Peterborough, upgrades to the coastal attractions in Southend, and £20 million to help Great Yarmouth to recapitalise on its cultural heritage and the unique strength that it has in green energy. New money from the levelling-up fund could help to transform the fortunes of a town such as Luton, with new housing in the centre of town or the new community and business space. Those are important things to help turn around the fortunes of that town.

All these injections of cash are being complemented by our investments through the town deals and the lasting partnerships for enhanced growth. Some £280 million is going into the east of England through 12 town deals, including Norwich, Great Yarmouth, King’s Lynn, Ipswich, Harlow, Stevenage and Grays. At the same time we are putting £23 million into the east of England through the future high streets fund to help regenerate the high streets that have been battered by online shopping in places such as March, St Neots and Great Yarmouth. Through the community renewal fund, we aim to support at a local level the people in communities that are most in need by investing in their skills, their communities and their places. There are lots of different funding streams to try to build on those local strengths, while addressing the big infrastructure challenges that have been central to so many Members’ brilliant contributions.

In recent years, we have seen some really big road investments, such as the completion of the £1.5 billion upgrade to the A14, the dualling of the A11 and the new trains on the Greater Anglia franchise. Meanwhile, the lower Thames crossing, which forms part of the biggest investment in roads for a generation, will connect Essex to Kent via a road tunnel, supporting thousands of new jobs across both counties. We cannot stop there, which is why the Department for Transport is investing £73 million in the Gull Wing bridge, which has been mentioned, to link the northern and southern halves of Lowestoft, and to save commuters and families thousands of hours in an average year. In the western part of the region—there are, of course, huge differences across the east—£162 million is being provided for the A5 to M1 link road in Bedfordshire.

While we are upgrading the physical connectivity, which is hugely important for an area where often it feels surprisingly difficult to get to places that are not that far away, we are also focusing on digital connectivity. The east of England was provided with £233 million from the £5 billion Project Gigabit. We now have 60% of premises able to get gigabit-capable broadband, up from just 4% in 2019.

Matt Hancock: The incredible improvement in digital connectivity has been noticeable in the east, including almost all parts of my constituency, but we must complete the job. Will the Minister say a word about devolution? In his four elements of levelling up, the fourth was local leadership. In Suffolk, we have excellent local leadership under Matthew Hicks, the head of the county council. There is very strong support for a devolution deal, which will help to unleash the potential of Suffolk.

Neil O'Brien: My right hon. Friend is totally right. I will just finish addressing the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew): 4G is essential. Dropping calls are incredibly frustrating in rural areas, and the shared rural network will enhance connectivity across the east of England.

Let me turn to devolution and local leadership. While no single place got everything right in the pandemic, we saw the incredible importance and strength of local government. Around the country we have seen trailblazers such as Ben Houchen and Andy Street—amazing local leaders who, when properly empowered, can really change the fortunes of the area. We have already seen how deals

such as the Cambridge and Peterborough devolution deal can be a way to tackle important local issues such as affordable housing in Cambridge.

Local leadership simultaneously gives places a champion—to be their strong voice and provide leadership—and a single point of accountability. County deals will be a core part of that, and they will look different in different places. A few years back we tried to bring devolution to a wider part of the east of England, but we can return to that. We have seen some impressive, joined-up bids from leaders in the east of England who are seeking county deals. Nothing, including the health issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), is off the table. That could be a big win for the devolution agenda. Those deals will bring together all the local partners to really strengthen them, with the powers and funding they need to turn things around in their areas.

There is a lot still to do to realise the full potential of the east of England. A lot of exciting change is already happening. By working together on a cross-party basis with all local leaders and MPs in the region, we can realise some of the incredible potential in the east of England.

10.58 am

Peter Aldous: We have had a comprehensive debate. I apologise if I took too long setting the scene. I would like to highlight some of the issues that have arisen. There has been great emphasis on bidding for capital projects, but improvement to our core funding—education, health and police—is vital. Likewise, on new housing, the infrastructure must come at the same time.

We heard from the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), my APPG co-chair, who mentioned the importance of noting that if we take out the London effect and the Cambridge effect, suddenly the east of England really does have challenges. I focused on coastal and rural deprivation, but there are deep pockets of deprivation in our urban centres that need to be addressed. On connectivity, there is no debate on East Anglia that does not highlight our poor infrastructure—both the deficiencies in the past, and looking to the future with that digital connectivity. On devolution, I liked what the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) said about the importance of centralised intent—

11 am

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

Covid-19: Small Businesses in Streatham

11.1 am

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for small businesses in Streatham during the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms McVey. I am glad to be introducing this debate on a vital issue in my constituency—an area that includes Brixton Hill, Clapham Common and Tulse Hill.

As we all know, small businesses are the backbone of our local economy, culture and community, and I recognise the enormous contribution that small and medium-sized enterprises make in Streatham and all over the UK. Whether it be corner shops and cafes that have had to work throughout the pandemic, or independent retailers and the self-employed who have been short-changed by the Government, they deserve support and recognition for the diverse range of services and support that they continue to provide to our communities. However, it is devastating that small businesses are likely to have seen their turnover plummet by more than half, and that freelance workers and the self-employed have been completely ignored by the Government and left with minimal financial support during the coronavirus pandemic. Almost 50 shops a day vanished from our UK high streets over the first six months of 2021, and Labour projections from October suggest that 263 businesses in Streatham alone are at risk of closure over the next three months. The situation is completely dire.

Members may know that Streatham was home to the UK's first supermarket, and that Streatham High Road is the longest high street in Europe and home to a hub of creative and diverse small businesses, which is reflected through our thriving arts and culture scene. I always tell people that should an apocalypse come, my constituency is probably where they would want to be. We have the windmill at Brixton Hill, which was the last operational windmill in London; two operational beehives; and numerous community gardens, such as Railside gardens, Urban Growth and St Matthew's gardens, which always produce the best in fruit and veg.

If vegan January has not quite hit, we also have London Smoke & Cure, which offers the very best in smoked and cured fish and meats. If the practicalities are not enough to convince people, we are also home to the Inkspot brewery, not to mention some of the finest craftspeople in the country. In Streatham, we grow, produce and sell locally. We also regularly host the Streatham Festival, the Streatham Food Festival and the Streatham Literature Festival, run by Jane Wroe Wright and her tenacious team, and there has been an enthusiastic local campaign to reopen the historically listed Streatham Hill Theatre as a community arts hub.

Over the past two years, I have visited dozens of small businesses in Streatham to talk to owners and staff about the impact of the pandemic. Since the earliest phases of the pandemic, they have thrown themselves into the coronavirus response, fighting to keep their businesses open while demonstrating their sense of duty to the wider community. In Streatham, we saw independent coffee shops giving away free coffee to NHS workers, computer repair specialists offering to

repair laptops at no cost, and local firms stepping up to laser-cut personal protective equipment to meet shortages in our care homes.

We have also seen some amazing and original initiatives get off the ground. Whether it is local people donating their used devices to disadvantaged school pupils, food banks managing to meet a 134% increase in demand or mutual aid groups springing up to help the community, we have seen people pull together and innovate. Time after time during this acute period of hardship, our small businesses have stepped up. However, the pandemic has meant that SMEs in my constituency and across the country have had to close their premises permanently due to the impact of declining footfall.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. I asked a question on this issue in the Chamber some time ago. All too often, we have heard of businesses across the United Kingdom having to close for isolation periods as there are not enough staff to keep them open, as she said. Does she agree that consideration should be given to a scheme whereby businesses with fewer than five members of staff, which we are referring to, are eligible for some sort of financial assistance should they have to close due to staff isolation, such as if staff have been a close contact of a covid case?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I will make that point later. We have to do everything we can to support our small businesses.

Examples of business closures in Streatham include acclaimed live music and hospitality venue the Hideaway, where I and others across the city have spent many a good night out. This has been a major loss for the area—an independent venue at the heart of the community that for many years has been growing local and international music and comedy. Due to the number of lockdowns, the slow response for those in the night-time economy, and social distancing requirements, its business model was untenable. We also saw the closure of Fal Patel's local convenience shop in Clapham Park and E & A Wates furniture shop on Mitcham Lane, which once undertook restoration work for the parliamentary estate during its 120-year history.

Many start-ups that would have grown to become high street businesses were unable to access any grants due to not having a high street premises, which has impacted the long-term economic growth of the area as our cafés, co-working spaces and performance spaces, and the buoyancy of our local business hubs, rely on the small enterprises of the daytime economy.

These are only some of the publicised closures within the constituency. It is fair to say that the demise of small businesses is so vast that we all personally know of someone in our local community who has lost out on their business during the pandemic; maybe it was a local restaurant, an appliance shop, a corner shop, a pub, a bar, a butcher, a baker, a greengrocer, a hairdresser—the list goes on.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. My hon. Friend is making a really good speech, outlining the many issues faced by businesses in Streatham. In my neighbouring constituency in Lambeth, we face a number of similar issues. She outlined that many businesses

missed out. A number of those businesses also missed out on loans offered by the Government. To see the Government want to wipe away £4.3 billion of loans given to fraudsters is another kick in the teeth to those businesses that folded because they were not eligible for any support. Does my hon. Friend think that the Government should rethink that proposal?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right. The Government need to rethink that proposal because it is leading to the closure of high street businesses and small businesses. Let us not forget that, when these 50 businesses a day shut up shop across the country, that is 50 people a day, along with their families, who depend on their business as a primary source of income, now out of work. It is not only the economic value that is disappearing from our high streets; the wider cultural contributions that these businesses make to the community disappear too, all because Government support was inadequate.

Supporting business in my constituency and my hon. Friend's constituency are Brixton business improvement district, This is Clapham BID and the mighty InStreatham BID headed by Louise Abbotts. Our BIDs have worked tirelessly over the past few years against a tide of transport issues and the growth of online sales to keep people going out and shopping locally. We cannot forget the impact this has had on their budgets and capability to continue sustaining our local businesses in the long term. Even before the pandemic began, small businesses found themselves on an uneven playing field, and the original form of Government relief saddled small businesses with further debt, offering them loans at high interest rates through commercial and retail lenders or effectively deferring their rent payments. At the start of the pandemic, these no-strings-attached loans were offered to companies registered in tax havens, yet uptake on small business loans remained low. The 2017 business rates revaluation meant that the average small shop would see a £3,663 hike over the next five years while supermarket chains would see 6% reductions. It cannot be fair that some independent businesses, such as small cafés, contribute to the taxman at a higher effective rate than big corporations and high street names. Business rates are a 20th-century system of taxation, yet we are already over a fifth of the way into this century. Four out of five retailers say they may have to close some locations without an urgent easing of the burden of business rates. Retail pays over the odds at the moment; it accounts for a quarter of the business rates bill while representing a mere 10% of economic output. The current system does not work for our local public services, as the funding of local councils is linked to rates revenue in an area, rather than local needs. We need a system that is fit for the 21st century.

There is an emerging economic consensus that the state has a role to play in helping the economy to function properly, although it is a role that the party of government seem reluctant to accept. In the early days of the pandemic I called on the Treasury to impose financial conditions on loans for big companies asking for state support. It is galling that it ignored this call, and instead gave no-strings support to companies that were registered in tax havens, paid out huge dividends to shareholders and paid CEOs and senior executives ridiculous compensation packages, in some cases while laying off their rank and file workforce—all while small businesses have languished.

While businesses were grateful for the little support they received during the covid-19 pandemic, it simply was not enough. More substantial support is desperately needed to fight the onslaught of rising costs in food, inflation, energy and the major recruitment crisis that Brexit and covid have created for business communities. The Government's own figures suggest that we will see our household economy shrink by £1,250 per year because of their trade deal with the EU. It will not be the Amazons of the world or big Government contractors that feel this loss—it will be ordinary people and small independent businesses.

Figures that we have seen show that smaller businesses lack the infrastructure to respond to the challenges that Brexit has presented compared with larger companies. A recent survey by the British Chambers of Commerce found that half of small businesses are finding it harder to export to the EU. Due to the new complexities of the trading relationship, the Government set up a small and medium enterprise fund offering grants to help our businesses overcome those challenges. However, this fund has rightfully been criticised for being too complex. At the end of last year, we saw a report from *City A.M.* on information from the cloud accounting provider FreeAgent that found over half of businesses experienced shrinking customer bases, while 43% were impacted by supply chain issues. Meanwhile, two in five SMEs said that their costs had increased since Brexit, particularly to import goods, while 16% suffered a shortage of talent as they are finding it harder to recruit staff. Nearly one in five SMEs have considered closing their business during Brexit and one in five did not think their business would survive Brexit.

The Government have been found wanting yet again; instead of looking forward and trying to alleviate these situations we are instead told to keep calm and carry on, as if Brexit has not impacted us. We can clearly see that it has. The Chancellor's £1 billion hospitality support package has come too late. It is woefully short of what is needed to ensure the survival of our small businesses and was woefully slow to start, coming in on 22 December when plan B restrictions had already been in place for 19 days. It is estimated that during this period of no support, £4 billion in revenue was lost from the hospitality and leisure sector. When cases rose and the demand on our high streets slumped, small businesses were not getting the support they needed, and workers were being sent home without pay and their shifts cancelled.

During the festive period, local authorities stated that the detailed guidance for the grants was only issued on 30 December and updated on 12 January, when businesses were desperate for support to meet various costs at the end of last year. Both the Federation of Small Businesses and UK Hospitality criticised the Chancellor's support package for being far too slow to help the most vulnerable hospitality businesses during the omicron surge. It is ridiculous for the Government to put March as the timeframe for the grants to be paid when businesses needed this support months ago.

My local business non-profit organisation, InStreatham BID, has stated:

"The grants are valued but won't cover the cost of wage bills and food waste for that period of November and December which is usually what covers the costs for hospitality in the new year when things are naturally quieter."

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

We should not have to drag the Government into supporting workers and businesses because Ministers are too preoccupied with who gets the top job to focus on the crisis at hand. Proper support packages should be announced alongside public health measures as and when they are needed. Streatham BID said:

“A £6,000 grant in no way compensates for the dramatic loss in trading hospitality businesses in particular are facing, and more important they can’t wait weeks for financial aid.”

This incoherence is exactly why small businesses are increasingly frustrated and want clearer and quicker decision making from this Government. Because the new omicron variant has hindered growth in retail, hospitality and leisure, a reduction in VAT or retaining the 5% VAT rate for hospitality is seriously needed. A business rates holiday applied until December 2022 and a reform of business taxation to level the playing field would be most helpful to businesses over the next 12 months.

We could also put in place flexible and targeted furlough throughout the ongoing pandemic—not just until the end of September—to help businesses to retain their staff. It would also be incredibly helpful during this period when many businesses have just recruited full staffing levels to sustain a busy Christmas period, only to be hit with cancellations in the region of 40% to 50% because restrictions were reintroduced. The TUC has stated that furlough needs to cover at least 80% of workers’ wages and that the Government must guarantee that no one who is furloughed is paid less than the minimum wage. That is exactly the type of furlough we need.

We also need decent sick pay that is paid at the real living wage and is available to everyone so that workers can afford to self-isolate when they need to. It has been insisted on by many hon. Members across the House over the past couple of years, but it is still being played around with by the Government as a short-term concession during a crisis, not a long-term employment right available in law.

The Government need to do more to step up and deliver the necessary support measures to the businesses of Streatham and those across the country and ensure the democratic, cultural and economic benefits of our small businesses. If the Government claim to be the party of business, why they are presiding over the decimation of our small businesses, which make up 99% of the total UK business population? It seems the unfortunate truth about coronavirus business measures is that the smaller the business, the smaller the Government’s concern for its survival.

The economic case for stronger Government intervention could not be clearer and the stakes could not be higher. The cost of bankrupt businesses, unemployed workers and lost tax revenue far outweighs the cost of acting now. Allowing small businesses to go bust is not only bad policy—risking a deeper recession and job losses—but deeply damaging to our local communities, which makes it all the more important for the Government to learn from mistakes so far and prioritise the survival of our small businesses.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing the debate and thank her neighbour, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for her intervention.

The hon. Member for Streatham is right to raise the issues that she and her constituents see on a daily basis in Streatham and Lambeth as a whole; they are issues that we have seen across the country over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. There is no denying that the last two years have been difficult and variable. It has been necessary for businesses, people and communities alike to make quick changes to deal with the biggest public health emergency of our generation—one that we certainly hope never to see again—and that has caused issues, problems and difficulties.

I mourn every single business that is no longer in place, whether that is in Streatham, Vauxhall or my constituency of North East Derbyshire, or any other constituency represented by the hon. Members present. I regret that anybody has lost their job and I wholeheartedly regret that businesses have not been able to focus on the things they are good at: building businesses and growth; ensuring that they can take on employees; innovating and finding new ways to do things that people and markets want. That is the problem that we have had over the last two years, but it is not a problem that we can wish away. The ultimate reality is that none of us had a choice about coronavirus; none of us have had a choice about omicron.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response and for what he is going to say. I asked about those small businesses, perhaps with five staff members, in which, when one staff member has a positive test, they have to isolate and the business closes. Will the Minister and Government consider some scheme to help those small businesses, which I think the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and I are both keen to see assisted?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I completely appreciate the challenge that he gives to Government and the points that he makes. I know that the Government are looking at all times at what is the most appropriate kind of support for businesses and for communities as a whole. Although we hope—we pray—that we are moving into a new phase of living with the virus that allows businesses to get on with what they are doing, I know that the Government will review what is possible on a regular basis.

Although I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham on the outline that she has given of her constituency, it will not surprise her that we disagree on a number of the points that she has made, and I will spend a few minutes on those. We disagree about the support that has been given. It is not reasonable to suggest that what the Government have done over the past two years does not demonstrate a level of commitment to our communities and to our businesses—small, medium and large—to try to get people through the most extraordinary time of our lives. We cannot simply suggest that £400 billion—nearly half of the United Kingdom’s annual spend in the years since I have been a Member of Parliament—is not a substantial amount of money and not unprecedented in our political lifetime, and beyond, as a response to a

public health emergency. I do not think that under any circumstances that can be suggested to be minimal financial support.

Because the hon. Lady has quite rightly dealt specifically with Lambeth and Streatham, it is important to read into the record the amount of support that has been given to the area. I do so not because the support is perfect, not because there have not been challenges and not because lots of rules do not mean, inevitably, that unfortunately there are some businesses that can benefit but some businesses that cannot—one of the reasons I am in politics is in principle to try to reduce the number of rules, where that is possible—but because we need to recognise the amount of money and support that the Government have provided. We have provided 2,000 local restrictions support grants; 147 LRSO open grants; 399 restart grants; 4,000 retail, hospitality and leisure grant fund grants; 1,163 LRSO open allocations up to 28 March, and 10,000 LRSO closed allocations; restarts of nearly 1,700 grants, which is nearly £15 million in terms of spend; and nearly £10 million of additional restrictions grants.

I have information about literally dozens of additional grants for the Streatham constituency and for the Lambeth Council area. That demonstrates central Government's level of commitment to ensuring that businesses can, where possible, get through an extraordinarily difficult time and are able to face the future with confidence.

Florence Eshalomi: I appreciate that the Minister has outlined some of the figures for Streatham and for Lambeth, which includes my Vauxhall constituency. However, does he appreciate that the nature of inner London boroughs such as Lambeth, which includes my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), means a number of businesses do not qualify for any support because of their high rateable values? A number of our constituents who work in self-employed businesses—the very same people who should be supporting these small businesses—have formed part of ExcludedUK. They did not receive any help whatsoever. Can the Minister address those points?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I completely appreciate that there are businesses and individuals who, over the past 18 months, have not been able to secure the support that they wanted and felt they needed. In an ideal world, when making public policy we would perhaps spend literally years trying to design policies to ensure that the right level of rules were around them, but we simply did not have that time in the period in which we had to move. We had to move quickly and ensure that we got as much out there to as many people as possible. The Chancellor and others have explained the reasons why the rules were drawn in that way, and I think that most people accept that, although there were difficulties, a huge amount of work was done, notwithstanding some of the challenges that have been outlined.

The second area that I will touch on is a disagreement on the situation that faces us. I accept that there are challenges, but some of the surveys and economic data coming out of London demonstrate the resilience of London businesses, and the ability of small businesses and others, not just in Streatham but across the Greater London area as a whole, to move forward, build, achieve

what they can, and look to the future with confidence. Although the situation is difficult, and we have been through extraordinarily difficult times, I gently take issue with the suggestion that it is dire. Ultimately, businesses are helping us to get through it. They are doing the work that they need to do to build the economy that we need in order to pay for the extraordinary amounts of spending that have happened, and the even larger amounts of spending that the hon. Member for Streatham wants, given some of her statements.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will speak for two more minutes, and then leave time for the hon. Lady to sum up. I hope that she can come to the point that she wishes to make.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. There is no summing up.

Lee Rowley: As there is no summing up, I happily give way.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I hope that the Minister agrees that unprecedented times call for unprecedented measures. Although I appreciate what he says, and all the grants that he outlined, businesses in my community simply cannot access them for a variety of reasons. Will he commit to coming down to Streatham, talking to those businesses, seeing what the problem is and perhaps designing a solution that is better for all? We may even treat him to a complimentary beer if he is willing to come down.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the kind offer. I point out that the statistics that I used are actual grants that have been issued, actual money that has been paid, and actual businesses in and around Streatham and Lambeth that have received support. I will decline her very kind invitation for one reason. Although I am extremely proud to call north-east Derbyshire my home, and to represent my home area in this place, when I am in London I live in Lambeth, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Vauxhall; we occasionally see each other on the tube. I spend quite a bit of time down Streatham High Road, so I have some experience of running around Clapham Common, and an understanding of all the fantastic businesses in the hon. Ladies' constituencies. I recognise that there have been difficulties, but I have also seen great opportunity in those areas.

As a resident at times of Lambeth, there is something that I would encourage those in local politics to do. When I walked out of my house in Brixton this morning, I walked past glass on the road that has been there for three months because it has not been swept up by Lambeth Council. I walked past a tree stump that has not been replaced in the three years I have worked there. I walked through a low traffic neighbourhood that the Labour party has put in, which is not really wanted by residents in my part of Brixton. I walked through an alleyway that is graffitied to an incredible extent, and which nobody has cleaned up in the past few months. I walked down to Brixton tube station to come here today, and it looks shabby. It has not been cleaned up and it has graffiti up and down the walls. If Lambeth Council wants to do something to help its constituents and businesses, I hope that it will consider concentrating on its core services, which people who spend a lot of time in Lambeth, as I do, would appreciate.

[Lee Rowley]

None the less, I am genuinely grateful to both hon. Ladies, and particularly to the hon. Member for Streatham for the points that she raised and for highlighting the challenges. I do not deny that there are challenges, but I hope that she and her constituents will accept that during a period of unprecedented health crises, when we have had to do things that we neither expected nor wanted to do, the Government have provided an unprecedented level of support not just for small businesses but for businesses across Streatham, Lambeth, the Greater London area and the country as a whole, including my constituency. We will see what we can do in the weeks, months and years ahead, recognising that it looks as if, as we all hope, we are moving into a new phase of the pandemic in which we learn to live with it, and ensure that we allow businesses to get on with doing what they do well, which is to create wealth, jobs and the tax revenue that can provide the good public services that we all want. I wish the hon. Ladies' constituents and businesses in Lambeth all the luck in the world in taking the great opportunities in front of them. I look forward to hopefully taking part in some of them as a resident of London.

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

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Gas and Electricity Costs

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of gas and electricity.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Obviously, the debate is very dear to my heart, because I represent the part of the United Kingdom that every year seems to have the lowest temperature recorded in any community: the village of Altnaharra in Sutherland.

Much of what I am about say is blindingly obvious, but I want to roll out a few statistics. It is a fact that household electricity and gas bills are predicted to rise in April by around 45%. That would see the price cap reach £2,000 a year, or £165 a month. I would suggest that without Government intervention, this rise could take the total number of households in fuel poverty to no less than 6 million. The high level of global gas prices affects the whole economy; it does not impact only on energy retailers, suppliers and household customers. It could mean between a 1% and 2% inflationary increase across the whole UK economy, which would result in more than £10 billion a year in additional Government costs from indexing debt to pensions, salaries and other payments.

Some 33% of households in rural Scotland are in extreme poverty, with a further 9% in ordinary fuel poverty. That makes a total of 42%. The figure is even more acute in the far north and my constituency, where, as I have already said, temperatures are regularly the coldest in the United Kingdom.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is absolutely right about Altnaharra, and the fuel poverty that is shared by his constituency and mine. The UK Government talk about levelling up, but one of the best things that could be done in that regard would be to tackle the differences and inequities between distribution costs of the electricity network, as well as the transmission costs to generate. I note that our part of the world is a net generator and contributor of electricity, particularly to the grid.

Jamie Stone: My highland colleague makes a sage and wise point. [*Interruption.*]—with all due reference to my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

The figure that I have outlined compares with 24% of households living in poverty in the rest of Scotland, which is still a high figure. I believe that fuel poverty is a clear priority issue for remote rural constituencies but, overall, I would suggest that is an unacceptable blight across society.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My hon. Friend has talked eloquently about the hardship of fuel poverty experienced in rural Scotland, and particularly in the highlands. I want to talk about disabled people, who are also disproportionately suffering as a result of

the energy crisis. They have higher energy costs because of the equipment that they often need for assisted living. Just living from day to day is simply more expensive for them, so does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should be putting in place additional support—similar to the warm home discount—for families of disabled children and for disabled people of working age?

Jamie Stone: My hon. Friend must be clairvoyant, because she has anticipated a point that I shall make in due course. I thank her for her intervention.

There are two major contributory factors to fuel poverty in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross: the absence of mains gas supply to many properties, and the comparative price of electricity, which costs four to five times more than mains gas and domestic oil per unit. Both of these power sources are often used to heat things that we rely on—for instance, water. Rural and remote households are more exposed to rising household costs due to paying an extra premium.

I suggest that energy policy in the UK is fundamentally broken. Consider this: the highlands and islands, to which the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) referred, produce more than 300% of their electricity demand from renewable sources—we produce three times more than we use. We export the rest to other parts of the UK, but as the hon. Member pointed out, a highland or island household pays more per unit of electricity due to the transmission charging regime, which pushes up energy bills even further. This is fundamentally wrong. Root and branch reform is required to design a UK energy policy that is fit for the 21st century, and that, most importantly, puts consumers at its heart.

Turning to business, energy price hikes are having a serious impact on the viability of businesses in the far north and, indeed, across the UK. I will quote two examples. Sitting at the back of the Public Gallery, I witness today Mr Andrew Mackay, my constituent. He and his brother own three hotels in Caithness known as the Caithness Collection—excellent hotels. They are facing an annual increase in electricity costs from almost £77,000 to—can Members believe?—nearly £130,000, which is a 70% rise.

Also in Caithness, we have a local engineering company, JGC Engineering, which is owned by the Campbell family and makes excellent pieces of stainless steel for the nuclear and other industries. The company's annual electricity bill runs into six figures. The owners have been forced—they had no choice; it was the best deal they could get—to sign a deal that, believe it or not, means an 80% increase in costs starting in March 2022. To enable sustainable economic growth and—to borrow an expression from Her Majesty's Government—to level up the United Kingdom, it is imperative that measures are put in place to protect consumers and businesses from crippling energy costs.

Looking ahead at the UK's future energy mix, it is crucial that investment in renewables is kept up to pace. However, I believe that the Government can also look seriously at novel solutions to age-old problems. In terms of nuclear power, small modular reactors, such as those being designed by Rolls-Royce, could provide districts with heating and electricity in areas where it is costly to receive utilities on the national grid.

This kind of out-of-the-box thinking could reduce the cost of gas and electricity, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and ensure the economic future of areas that consider themselves left behind, such as Caithness.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is there an estimated cost for these modular reactors? How much will it cost overall? Is there a policy for how nuclear waste will be dealt with?

Jamie Stone: A conversation with Rolls-Royce would be rewarding for the hon. Member. It is working up the proposals, but has some interesting thinking; I think we would be unwise not to take a good look at it.

Solutions do not stop there. Governments could soften the impact on consumers in the short term by providing loans up front to energy suppliers to cover the costs incurred from the significant rise in global wholesale prices for gas. I suggest constructively to the Minister that the Government could remove VAT from energy bills, or double and extend the warm home discount, taking £300 a year off the heating bills of around 7.5 million vulnerable households.

Her Majesty's Government could introduce a new social tariff for those in fuel poverty—perhaps double the winter fuel allowance, giving up to £600 a year to 11.3 million elderly pensioners who currently face a £208 real-terms cut to their state pension next year, due to the Government's decision to scrap the triple lock.

The Government could also implement a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas companies' super-profits—the extra profits. This would not impact companies' usual profits and thereby keep jobs secure, and would target the unprecedented extra profits that they have made in the last six months.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree there is also a role for the energy companies in all this? I suspect that he will have as many constituents as I do who, over the years, in order to compensate for the lack of access to mains gas, have taken other options, including storage heating and going on to tariffs such as “total heating total control”, which is now being used by SSE to keep their customers prisoner because it is impossible for them to switch. Does he join me in calling on companies such as SSE to treat their customers, who have been loyal for generations across the highlands and islands, rather better than that?

Jamie Stone: I have no hesitation in joining my right hon. Friend in making that plea. His points are well made.

I hope that in getting this debate under way today, we start a dialogue with energy companies, Her Majesty's Government and all concerned parties—not least those people who stand to be faced with crippling debts. I think of a young mother I know, who lives in the village of Balintore in my constituency. She tells me that she has to budget absolutely to balance the books; it is just a few pounds between surviving and going into the red. She says to me that if the electricity bill or the cost of diesel for her car goes up, she is in trouble. To square the books, she would then have to cut down on her expenditure. In turn, that hits the local shops, the local chemist and so on, in the seaboard villages of my constituency. I hope there will be a dialogue.

[*Jamie Stone*]

There have been, in what I have said, a lot of “coulds”, “shoulds” and “woulds”. What we really need from the Government is real, urgent action. I would suggest that they have failed millions of hard-working families and thousands of pensioners, at a time when energy bills are going through the roof. At this stage, the nation is plummeting further into a fuel poverty crisis. As far as I can see, there seem to be no plans to tackle it, but I await the Minister’s comments with great interest and expectation. At the end of the day, old people, single parents and people on very limited incomes are wondering how the heck they will get through the next period, because we all dread getting into debt.

Members from across the House have put forward suggestions to the Government on how to stop this disaster in its tracks. I respectfully suggest to Her Majesty’s Government that we stop the dither and delay, get talking, and do something about it.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. It is a fact that all economies are facing an energy price rise, for international reasons. The hon. Member has not mentioned gas at all. No matter anyone’s views on gas, it will be part of our energy mix for a generation. I wonder if he might agree that we have been uniquely silly in diminishing our storage capacity, with the closure of the Rough field. Mother nature has given us a gift in this country: a lot of gas. No matter anyone’s view on the path to net zero, a super report by the House of Commons Library charts the reduction in our gas use over the years, and shows that we have reduced our gas capacity and production even faster, leading to imports. Does the hon. Member agree that it might be sensible to increase our domestic supply while gas is such an important part of our energy mix? That might give a longer-term solution to price volatility.

Jamie Stone: I will conclude in just a moment or two. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The bottom line is that if we care about the people I have mentioned, who are petrified of getting into fuel poverty, then we must look at all possible solutions. There will be a mix to the answer. I would not rule out anything that the hon. Member said. We will take a look at it.

Of course, if we get hydrogen production right, that also makes enormous sense, because it is absolutely neutral for the environment. Hydrogen is a gas, and we should be thinking about that as a possibility. I conclude my remarks there, Sir Edward. Thank you for your forbearance.

2.44 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): The cost of gas and electricity has been a real challenge for my constituents. Although the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) makes a good point about the rural communities in Scotland, it is not just in Scotland that this is a challenge.

Down in the south-west, we have one of the lowest-wage economies, a very high cost of living, and a disproportionate number of over-65s with complex comorbidities. Our economy depends heavily on hospitality and tourism, and that has been decimated. The hope for recovery over the Christmas period went with plan B.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady is making a very good speech and she is absolutely right—it is not just the north of Scotland that is affected, although I, like the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), would argue that that is where things are most acute.

House of Commons Library figures for all the neighbouring countries in north-west Europe show that 11.7% of people in the UK are living in relative poverty by the OECD’s definition, and of the 13 countries that were looked at, the Gini coefficient of inequality is highest in the UK. That puts this problem firmly in the Government’s ballpark; they really have to get to grips with it.

Anne Marie Morris: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point—this is a real problem. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross made the clear point that the answer and solution has to be found now.

I look at my constituents—indeed, I was on a telephone call just this morning—and I see that the food banks are doing great business. Increasingly, I am hearing that the people who are using them are not the usual attendees. We are in a state of crisis, which needs to be addressed right now. I have constituents—mostly pensioners—who are ringing my constituency office, and are very concerned. They are worried because of the cost of living and because of everything they hear about the energy costs that they will be facing.

For me, it is that uncertainty that is most challenging, because although the Government, to their credit, recognise the problem, the real issue is that to deal with that fear, we need an answer, a commitment and a solution. Looking at what we might or might not do in April is not soon enough. I am sure that even you, Sir Edward, will have looked at the barometer as you got up this morning. It is now that we are seeing minus temperatures. It is now that people need their heating at night. It is now that they need hot food.

Clearly, it is not the Government’s fault that there has been a global challenge in terms of energy prices. Indeed, they have risen to the challenge and recognised that security of domestic supply has to move further up the agenda. I welcome their investment—or promised investment—in more nuclear. But the real challenge is that despite all those good words and despite the concept of a price cap, which was effectively intended to protect consumers from very challenging prices, consumers are not being protected.

No scheme is perfect, but what happened here is that when it became clear that the prices meant that some of the smaller suppliers would go out of business, those customers were picked up by the bigger players but were inevitably put on the highest tariffs available. Those individuals, having done the right thing by seeking out good policies and good schemes, suddenly found themselves in the worst possible position. Then we hear—understandably, on one level—that the cap will not hold and that we expect that there will be an announcement on 7 February that it will increase substantially, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross has already indicated—it will be an extra £700 per household, taking the average bill to £2,000. Suddenly energy costs will be going up 50% overnight.

When the Government set their energy retail market strategy for the 2020s, they set two objectives. The first was that there should be a sustainable retail market, whereby it was easy and rewarding to go green. However, that is not what is actually being delivered. Although they were well intended, many of the tariffs to try to encourage—to nudge, if you like—greener use have effectively pushed people further and further into fuel poverty.

The second objective was that all consumers would pay a fair price for their energy and would be protected from excess charges. Although I appreciate that those are charges for production rather than the other elements—the tax and the levies—it has all come together in a horrible, nightmarish mix, whereby, because of the global cost increase, the Government are now scrabbling to try to honour what I think was their intended commitment to make energy prices affordable by considering some of the things that they can move, which clearly will be taxes and levies, as opposed to some of the things that they cannot move, which include the global price of gas.

Therefore, for me, Government intervention is not optional. As has been said, the number of households in fuel poverty is increasing from 4 million to 6 million. That will affect a very large number of my constituents. The Government have a number of options. They can mix targeted initiatives and universal ones. The comment in the media is that the Government are uncomfortable about solutions that are more universal in nature.

This energy crisis—this energy cost—comes on top of a huge increase in the cost of living. We know from figures out today that people's wages are not going up to meet those costs, and therefore it is not just the usual smaller percentage of the population that is suffering; it is actually a much larger percentage of the population. People at all levels make commitments, and they are struggling to meet them. They have to meet their mortgages; that is not negotiable. They have to pay their rent; that is not negotiable. Businesses have to pay business rates; that is not negotiable. To be reluctant to reduce, and to resist reducing, VAT from 5% to 0%—the most obvious, quickest and easiest universal solution—is perhaps a little disingenuous. It seems to me that at least 60% of the people who would benefit from that actually deserve it.

The other universal approach is what we do about universal levies. That is something that we will have to review, and we will have to look at how the burden can be moved to general taxation. We need to recognise that those levies are subject to a number of contracts, which means that they cannot be the first thing that the Government fix. None the less, they need to be in the bag of solutions.

The obvious targeted solution—I think that it is an “as well as” rather than an “instead of”—is expanding the warm home discount, changing the eligibility, taking it beyond winter and looking at how we might make it generally taxpayer funded rather than funded by those that contribute to it.

How are we going to pay for this? Of course, it is right that the Government consider that. A number of things have been looked at, including a windfall tax on the oil and energy industry. Only this morning, there have been suggestions that fraudulent covid payments claims, which the Government have committed to claw back and at the moment are estimated at £4.3 billion, would go a long way to covering the most urgent and easiest solution, which is to reduce VAT from 5% to 0%.

The VAT bill that the Treasury would have to cover would be somewhere between £1.7 billion and £2 billion. Affordable is the wrong word, but it is the right thing to do, and it is entirely affordable given the likely income that the Government can expect as the economic forecast improves across the country—although, sadly, not in my constituency—and what they might get back from the covid claims.

Of course, the people who are most impacted are the ones who are most vulnerable: the over 65s on fixed incomes and those in poorly insulated houses, which is definitely the case in my constituency. Those people are the most important, but they are not the only ones. I ask the Government not just to look at this as a matter of money, but to ask what is the right thing to do. What is the timeframe in which they must act? It is now—it is cold now. I ask the Government not only to acknowledge that there is a problem but to put forward steps now, before the new cap is introduced—and certainly long before April.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Will Members now keep to about five minutes, so that everybody can speak?

2.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. I reassure you that I will be brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this urgent debate. In Bath, in north-east Somerset, more than 10% of households are already living in fuel poverty and, as we have heard, that is likely to increase dramatically.

The council is working hard to provide a local household support fund, with grants of £250 to help the least well-off with their energy costs this winter but, again as we have heard, energy costs are likely to rise by about £600. That grant is something, but it is clearly not what is needed. Many more of my constituents are worried about their next heating bill. What have the Government done to protect them? They have scrapped the programmes to insulate our homes, which would have reduced bills long ago. They have cut universal credit and increased the UK's dependence on imported gas, rather than investing in renewables: green energy homemade in the UK—something the Minister knows I keep saying in these debates. That is what should have happened a long time ago.

I hear reports that the Treasury is scrapping the energy company obligation scheme, which has been a powerful driver in reducing household emissions. The Government must not touch that scheme. Instead, they should double and extend the warm home discount, as has been said. It cannot be right that gas companies are profiting from record prices, way up from where they were last year, when millions cannot afford to heat their homes. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a one-off windfall tax on the profits of oil and gas firms, to fund support for those who are struggling. Seventy-one per cent. of people support that move, as do 75% of the Government's own voters. Why are the Government not severely and sincerely looking at the proposal of a windfall tax on the profits of oil and gas companies?

We need a long-term plan to prevent another energy crisis. Where is the urgent plan for a long-term home insulation programme that will cut bills permanently? This is a particular challenge for my constituents in

[Wera Hobhouse]

Bath. Bath and North East Somerset Council proposes that the Government require landlords to bring housing up to an agreed energy certification standard, and I urge the Minister to look at that. The Government's heat and buildings strategy was a missed opportunity for real ambition in this area. We have one of the oldest, least energy-efficient housing stocks in Europe. It is an emergency, and the Government should finally treat it as such.

Liberal Democrats are committed to reducing most emissions by 2030, which means a massive expansion of renewables and the replacement of the gas grid. In the context of this debate, we all know that there are some energy companies leading the way. Companies such as E.ON pride themselves on the fact that nearly all of their electricity is generated from renewables, but the shocking fact is that, while the price of renewables falls continuously, the customers of E.ON and other renewable electricity companies will find that their electricity bills go up by just as much as those of customers who buy electricity from burning gas. I have asked E.ON directly—

Craig Mackinlay: The hon. Lady has a high number of listed properties in her constituency of Bath, as I have in mine. Sandwich is the oldest medieval town in the country. Has she considered how old buildings, which are listed or in conservation areas and structurally virtually impossible to insulate, can be dealt with in a way that is affordable or achievable?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We have had a debate on listed buildings and how we can help owners. It is complicated, but I do believe it is important that owners of listed buildings get proper support, including help from the council to change the structure of their buildings to make them more energy efficient.

As I said, it is shocking that those trying to do the right thing by buying from companies getting their electricity only from renewables are facing the same cost rises as those buying their energy from companies making electricity from burning gas. It is a massive failure of Government, who have set the terms of the wholesale market to ensure that everybody pays when gas prices go up, even if they do not use gas. That is shocking and unforgivable. The Government must urgently look into how this issue can be fixed now.

3 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing the debate.

People will die. Those are not my words; they are not the words of an Opposition politician. They are the words of Martin Lewis, who was voted the most trusted man in Britain. Heating bills are going up by more than £700 a year in April and they are likely to go up more in October. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 54% of single adults and 25% of single parents spend more than half their income on heating. That is simply not sustainable, especially when they are facing other increased costs. We are in one of the world's richest economies, yet people are looking at the stark choice of eating or heating.

Wages are not keeping up with inflation, which in particular penalises low-income people, who spend much more of their income on essentials. The solution cannot be an increase in personal debt. Christians Against Poverty has reported a 41% increase in people requesting help from it in January, while searches for fuel help on the Citizens Advice website have gone up phenomenally. We have to find a way to deal with the debt crisis, but the first step is to deal with the fuel price increase. That is urgent. It has been caused by not only the higher wholesale prices, but the explosion and lack of regulation in new energy companies entering the market and offering low and unsustainable prices to switchers. That is supposed to increase competition, but it has always failed the most vulnerable and it penalises many who cannot or do not want to switch. We have to look at that.

What can we do? An immediate cut to VAT on fuel would be a quick fix to start. I agree that it is a blunt instrument, but it is easy, quick and would help a number of people. However, it cannot be the only measure. We need to increase the warm home discount and widen the eligibility for that scheme, and we need to fund it from a different source. It cannot be funded from a levy on all electricity bills, because that will penalise everybody again.

I agree that we have to look at greener and more sustainable means of producing electricity.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. I want to pick up on an interesting point made by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). At the moment, the UK consumes about 41.8 GWe. People can check that on their telephone apps quite easily. Some 16.9% of that electricity is from wind, but that figure could be greater. Wind has been supported by the Government's contracts for difference. Is there not a question as to why wind is being bundled into those energy prices? Why, as the hon. Member for Bath suggested, are companies profiting by bundling it into energy prices, when it is actually supported by the Government? We all know that the marginal cost of producing wind energy is zero. Our wind energy output could be greater, had things been built on the Scottish islands with a minor bit of Government planning over the years.

Yvonne Fovargue: We need to look at all the ways in which energy is produced and we need a mix of energy. We have to look at the green levy as well. At the moment it is a levy on all bills, so the poorest are paying the most.

We need to look at a social or below-cost tariff funded by the energy industry: each gas or electricity supplier should pay a sum into a central pot, based on the number of customers, which could then be redistributed to people in fuel poverty. We should not forget the people on prepayment meters; often, they are the poorest and have been in difficulty with their bills before. There is no way that people on prepayment meters should be paying the amounts they are paying for gas and electricity even now. There should be help and adequate protection for those people.

We have to accept that people should spend only a certain proportion of their income on energy. I am not saying where we should draw the line, but more than 10% is far too much—without even getting into the eye-watering figures we have heard from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

People on low incomes budget very carefully, but it is a bit like spinning plates—they pay one bill, they pay another bill, they look at the next bill. With the cost of electricity and gas forecast to increase so much, those plates will come crashing to the ground. That is why we need to act now to make sure that people are not, as one of my constituents said, out of their minds with worry. People need real help to keep the heating on, pay all their other bills and eat properly. If we are not careful, it will not only be free socks that energy companies offer; they will have to offer food parcels as well—ones that do not need heating up.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. You caught me off guard there; the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) just asked if I was next and I said, “No, I will be at the end.” However, I am pleased to participate at any stage.

I commend the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on setting the scene so well. It was a superb introduction, which I think we all endorse and support, because we understand the issues. I am pleased to be here to discuss this important matter. To say I have been contacted by a few constituents about gas and electricity prices would be an understatement. The emails to my office on this are legion, so it is great to be here to air the concerns that are important to the livelihoods of so many. I commend the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris). We all know her position and what happened to her in the last week. In the debate in the Chamber on VAT, the hon. Lady felt constrained and supported a cut. We should put that on the record.

Soaring global gas prices are fuelling a domestic living crisis in the UK and could potentially have economy-wide implications. Energy bills are set to rise by up to £2,000 per year from April, which will be detrimental to those who are already in fuel poverty—people who need help and on whom I will focus. Recent statistics from National Energy Action reveal that an estimated 1.2 million to 1.5 million households across the UK will struggle to pay their electricity or gas bills. Those figures equate to almost the whole population of Northern Ireland, but are spread across the United Kingdom, which is just astonishing. The most vulnerable and those in poverty will be hit.

Back home in Northern Ireland in the past year, gas providers and all six electricity providers have increased their prices. In September, Firmus Energy announced that 50,000 people in its Greater Belfast network would see their gas price rise by a third. SSE Airtricity, which others have referred to, has increased its gas prices by 21.8%, which adds about £112 to the average household bill. Power NI announced that it will increase its electricity price for domestic customers by 21.4% from the start of this month. As we have seen in the press, prices for commercial businesses will also rise by as much as 30% to 40%. Some of the figures quoted by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar tell us just how important this matter is. The figures are truly astronomical and will have a significant impact on those who already struggle to make ends meet.

An emergency fuel payment has been introduced in Northern Ireland by the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, which I welcome. It is a £200 payment

made through the Bryson Charitable Group for those who are vulnerable or in special circumstances and need help. We have taken some steps in Northern Ireland to make that happen. However, the Communities Minister and her respective counterpart in this House must take more of a lead, instead of leaving this responsibility solely to charities, which are doing their very best but need help from our Government to deal with the sheer volume of applications.

We must stand up for those who are directly affected. I stated in the debate on VAT on household bills that I support the green energy push as the only sustainable way forward, but at a time when there is a fuel crisis and pressure on those in financial distress, the £750 that has been referred to should be put on hold for a short term to help our constituents find a way forward. Viable ways to bring down prices must be considered. A plan needs to be put in place to assist those who need help. E3G suggests an extension and increase in winter fuel payments to support those on pension credit and low incomes.

The Minister knows I respect him, and he is always very capable and able to answer questions, but we need an indication of what we can do to help. No doubt all Members are hearing concerns about this issue. It is not about politics; it is about helping those who need it most. I look to the Minister and the Government for reassurance that more financial help will be considered.

It is the most vulnerable who will be most susceptible to gas, electricity and oil prices rising more than in other countries. Therefore, more needs to be done—this is an easy point to make, but it is a fact—to help those who need it most amid the rising electricity, gas and oil prices that we face now, and more so in the future. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross referred to new technology. Perhaps the Minister will say something about that. It is not his direct responsibility, but perhaps he could say how we might use new technology to reduce prices.

3.10 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing today's timely and critical debate.

We should soon, hopefully, begin to see some economic recovery at the end of a very long couple of years. Unfortunately, there are too many people across the UK who cannot wait indefinitely for things to improve. The cost of living crisis is here, and it is not avoidable. When the price cap was reviewed and bills subsequently rose, I was contacted by many constituents who were worried about the impact it would have on their living costs. It came just at the time when the universal credit uplift was removed and furlough ended.

At the same time, the Government were struggling to keep on top of state pension claims, and vulnerable pensioners were waiting months for their first payment. There was nothing to address that in the Chancellor's autumn Budget, and the national insurance hike was also missing from the announcement. It was not missing from the minds of taxpayers, though, particularly those on lower incomes, where every penny counts.

Next month we will hear from Ofgem, and its announcement that the price cap will rise once more come April will be no surprise. Recent projections estimate

[Margaret Ferrier]

that household bills could rise by over £700 a year. In my constituency, that is almost the equivalent of the average monthly rent. It is almost an extra £59 added to bills each month. Some people might be privileged enough not to miss £59 a month, but they are few and far between. The average weekly family food shop is around £63. The average cost of sending one child to five after-school club sessions is £62. Are those the kinds of sacrifices the Government expect our constituents to make to keep the heating on?

A coalition of 25 charities, including Age UK and Save the Children, have warned that the rise could push the number of families living in fuel poverty from 4 million to a massive 6 million. That is 6 million households, not individuals, although if it were 6 million individuals it would not be acceptable either. Industry has warned that it might take from 18 months to three years for the energy crisis to resolve.

Jim Shannon: Has the hon. Lady experienced in her constituency an increase in the number of people who are referred to food banks, as the hon. Member for Newton Abbot described? I know I have in my constituency, where the figure is up by almost two thirds on this time last year. That indicates that there are real pressures on those who did not apply in the past, but are applying now.

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I think we all find the rise in the use of food banks in our constituencies shocking. As the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) said earlier, people who would not normally have to attend a food bank who are having to do so now, so there definitely is a squeeze on people's incomes.

These households cannot and should not have to wait up to three years for the energy crisis to resolve, so what is the solution? What can the Government realistically do? The answer does not lie in defunding the BBC, or in small changes to the universal credit taper rate. The only way to ease the burden on families up and down the UK is to tackle the energy price crisis in a pragmatic, meaningful way. Many options have been put forward to the Government, and I urge them in the strongest terms to please consider those options as a matter of urgency.

A reduction to the VAT rate on energy would provide some much needed breathing space for those who need it most. The Government are keen to keep repeating that, as an importer, we are held to the whims of the current market's rapid and substantial levels of demand. To a great extent, that is true, but a VAT reduction is within the Treasury's gift and should be given. A windfall tax on North sea oil and gas companies would also mean that it is not the most vulnerable paying the price for this unusually and regrettably high cost. After all, those companies are expected to report almost record-breaking profit levels for this financial year. They have unarguably benefitted considerably, whereas our constituents have suffered and will continue to do so. Suspending or reducing green levies on energy bills could help too, as could expanding the warm home discount, which many hon. Members have mentioned, or increasing universal credit.

Whatever route the Government decide to take, they must do something; it would be heartbreaking to hear the same stories from my constituents for another 18 months

or three years when there are solutions, should the Government choose to implement them—I hope that they do.

3.15 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this debate, and for his excellent introduction to the issues involved. Our constituents are genuinely worried about their gas and electricity bills. In Scotland, 640,000 people—one in seven—find that their energy bills are unaffordable at the moment, and those bills are only going to rise. The energy crisis and the cost of energy have once again thrown into sharp relief the glaring inequalities in our society. Inflation is expected to rise to 6%, energy costs are doubling and the national insurance hike is about to kick in, so there is huge concern. Alongside and because of that, we face a debt time bomb as credit card lending jumped by 41% in recent months. Much of that borrowing was to pay for household essentials.

As things stand, 6 million people will slide into fuel poverty because of the rising cost of energy. That will impact on the wider economy, driving up the cost of food, goods and other services. As petrol prices increase, consumer prices will continue to rise, and at a faster rate. Alongside that, we can expect the cost of mortgage repayments to rise as well. We need Government action to tackle this. It is real, and it is crushing my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran.

We have heard today about the need to cut VAT on energy bills and on the warm home discount, to offer some respite to those who are struggling right now. In 2016, the now Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), said:

“If we vote to leave the European Union, we can cut VAT on domestic fuel to zero and that would save households about £60 a year... that would help the poorest families most of all.”

Let us ask the Minister to do what his Government promised they could and would do. We need action on that.

It is time for the Government to listen to the calls to provide loans to energy companies, which are teetering on the brink, rule out a future rise in the energy price cap and reintroduce the £20 universal credit uplift. Households need help right now. The Scottish child payment could be replicated across the UK, and we could deliver a low-income energy payment, introduce a real living wage and raise the level of sick pay. There are a number of things that the Government could do to help families who are struggling right now.

We heard earlier that there are real, genuine and well-founded worries about cold-related morbidity this winter. In this day and age, in a state as rich as the UK, that is a cause for embarrassment and shame. Even the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), has admitted that it was a “mistake” to close off the storage sites, which the Government withdrew support from. Although these issues are global and there are many global factors at play, not having sufficient storage for energy leaves the UK much more exposed to price shocks than it needs to be. We have the lowest storage capacity in all of Europe—1% of all of Europe's

capacity. Any kind of protection we might have had from dramatic price shocks has been given away by this Government. That is really not acceptable.

The UK is going through this whole situation while suffering from the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north-west Europe; in-work poverty is at record levels this century. We really need to get a grip here and listen to our constituents' problems. We need fundamental and radical measures to protect our constituents. Some have no idea how they are going to cope with the price rises hitting their doorsteps. We have heard about the differentials in energy transmission costs. Those need to be tackled, but when will they be? We need an equitable energy policy that works for all consumers, and I am really looking forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.20 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I start by congratulating my dear hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on bringing forward this important debate. I also commend the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who this week has had the backbone to stand up for her constituents on the cost of living crisis, while the Prime Minister seems to have inadvertently misled himself as to whether or not he attended a party. That does rather stick in the throat and perhaps shows the priorities of this Government.

This issue really matters because it matters to millions. Like many, I have received emails from concerned constituents. One, Margaret, is desperately concerned. Some 3,000 people in Oxford West and Abingdon are already classed as being in fuel poverty, and she is concerned about how many more are going to succumb. She is right to be. Jessica, who lives literally 10 minutes down the road from Margaret, emailed me on the same day. She is already classed as being in fuel poverty. She is considered vulnerable by her energy supplier. She currently pays £85 a month for her energy and has been told that that is going to increase to £200 a month—she says that there is no way she can afford those kinds of prices. Dave, who is on £10 an hour, contacted me with a similar story and Jane, who is a pensioner, told me that when she looks at what she will have to pay, she knows that she simply does not have the money. I ask the Minister: what are these people meant to do?

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I also welcome this debate and thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing it. My constituency of Manchester, Gorton has long faced a fuel poverty crisis. In 2019, almost a quarter of families there were in fuel poverty; given current concerns about sky-rocketing fuel bills, the number will now undoubtedly be substantially higher. Does the hon. Member agree that this issue predates today's cost of living crisis and that this Government have overseen a dramatic rise in fuel poverty without taking any of the action necessary to mitigate it?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I absolutely agree. I am also deeply concerned that the problem will get worse over the next few weeks. We have only to read the emails or listen to the stories to be moved by them. Martin Lewis, who

was mentioned earlier, dedicated an entire episode of his "Martin Lewis Money Show Live" to energy prices the other day. Afterwards, he tweeted that he was "near tears" after being unable to help a single mother, who had recently lost her partner, to afford her energy bills. He called on the Government to do more, and I agree with Martin.

The Minister will have heard many good suggestions today. My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross mentioned cutting VAT on bills, a social tariff and an increase in the winter fuel allowance. Age UK has suggested a £50 one-off payment to those eligible for the cold weather payment and a doubling of household support. All those could work, and we have to ask the question: when are they going to come in? People are already hurting now.

There is also a secondary question, and a correct one: who is going to pay for it? Even more galling than all I have discussed is that after hearing all these stories of hardship and heartache, Gazprom announced a dividend of £179 million. Energy giants such as Gazprom are profiteering from the misfortunes of others. Frankly, the Government are complicit because they are letting them.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady mentions Gazprom and how the UK is in hock to such gas producers from outside the UK. If we cast our minds back, do we not see that a mistake of George Osborne's penny-pinching, bean-counting style of five, six or seven years ago was his reluctance to use the climate change levy to invest in renewables to make us less dependent on energy from overseas and give us more renewable capacity, which could have been built here? For the sake of a few pennies, it was his argument—I disputed it at the time, when I was the Chair of the Energy and Climate Change Committee—that we should not do so. Now the customers of the UK are on the hook for hundreds and hundreds of pounds each and every year.

Layla Moran: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. It is for exactly that strategic reason that the Liberal Democrats are calling for a Robin Hood tax on the super-profits of oil and gas companies. This one-off levy would raise over £5 billion to support households in need of help. Surely that is the fairest way to help the worst off.

However, there is a wider geopolitical point. Gazprom, as we know, is owned by the Russian state, and Gazprom, at the behest of Putin, sent 25% less gas than before to Europe in the last year. We all know that Putin is playing politics with our energy prices, and that is making all of us and our constituents suffer. On one hand, the Government say they will not reward Russia for aggression; on the other hand, by doing nothing about the situation, they are allowing Putin to manipulate the energy market and he is being rewarded for it. We believe that instituting a Robin Hood tax would have many advantages, but one would be to send a powerful message to Putin in Moscow: "You cannot interfere with our energy market".

Fundamentally—this comes to the point that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) made—in the long term we need to wean this country, and indeed the entire world, off gas and oil altogether as soon as possible. That is why the answer to this problem is not to cut investment in green energy, as

[Layla Moran]

some have suggested. Whether it comes into general taxation or there is another way to fund it—that is the conversation that needs to be had—we need to increase investment in renewable energy, because to protect people now we need to think strategically in the medium and long term. The answer is to end our dependency on rogue states and protect the poorest in our communities.

Alan Brown: I just wonder how a Robin Hood tax on oil companies operating in the North sea would affect reliance on Putin or Gazprom, or how it would affect Gazprom's share price or dividend. Those things seem to me to be almost diametrically opposite.

Layla Moran: We need to ensure that there is fairness in the system, and we know that all oil and gas companies have made enormous profits. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made the point earlier about customers who had been loyal to oil and gas companies but who now face high bills, when the companies themselves are profiteering. There are many reasons why a Robin Hood tax would work, but one is the geopolitical point that I am making today.

3.28 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Sir Edward, to serve under your chairmanship.

As others have done, I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this debate. He highlighted that the gas and electricity issue is a UK-wide one, but he also made relevant and pertinent points about just how much it affects rural Scotland, and in particular his own constituency. His illustration of the effect that it will have on his constituent who is sitting in the Public Gallery, and on an already struggling hospitality industry, was really stark. I hope that the Minister thought the same and pays heed to what was said.

I thank all other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. A clear theme seemed to come from all the contributions: basically, we have this cost of living crisis and the UK Government are doing nothing about it. The UK Government really need to start taking action.

The UK Government have sat back as household incomes have dropped in real terms by up to £1,200 and energy bills are sky-rocketing. We have had the broken promises about lower energy bills post Brexit, and yet when Labour proposed a 5% cut in VAT in last week's Opposition day debate, we had the absurd situation of all the Tory Brexiter MPs questioning the validity of such a VAT cut and voting it down. That makes no sense to me, given the broken promises. As a couple of other Members have done, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who followed the courage of her convictions and voted for something that her Prime Minister had promised us.

To return to the theme, without further action, a real crisis is looming—if it is not already upon us, if truth be told. As others have said, it is not credible for the cap to rise to approximately £2,000 per year in April. Previously, National Energy Action estimated there were 4.5 million fuel-poor households in the UK. When the October cap increased, that added a further 500,000. If the cap goes

ahead in April as predicted, we will end up with 6 million fuel-poor households in the UK. That is a 33% increase in the number of fuel-poor households in two overnight increments. It is disgraceful, and something needs to be done to prevent it getting worse.

Worse, National Energy Action previously estimated that there are roughly 10,000 premature deaths a year arising from fuel poverty. How many more premature deaths are likely to occur, given the number of households that will be plunged further into fuel poverty? One cohort who have not been mentioned so far today are the terminally ill, who suffer badly from fuel poverty. I cannot think of anything more distressing than someone who wanted to spend the end of their life in a dignified way in their own home being forced, because of fuel poverty, to spend their final days in a hospice. It is distressing for them and for their family, and that is the real impact of fuel poverty.

A common theme has been the impact of a VAT holiday on fuel Bills, which it is estimated would save £80 a year, so on its own it is insufficient—it is hardly even a sticking plaster—but it could provide a small amount of help.

It is critical that the UK Government take proactive action to ensure that this cap rise is not passed on to consumers in April, so direct intervention is required. Some of that intervention could be in the form of loans, to smooth out the £2 billion of additional costs that are estimated to have arisen from the 28 energy companies that went bust in 2021—money that will otherwise be lumped on to consumers' bills. Again, that is due to the failure of the Government and the regulator.

As others have said, a proper debate is required about the merits of different levies currently on our electricity bills, which contribute 23% of our bills, according to Ofgem. The reality is that these levies are a regressive tax and general taxation is much fairer. At the moment, the Government are putting out to tender the contracts for difference fourth allocation round, which commit £265 million per year for renewable energy projects. I am all in favour of that financial commitment, because we need more renewable energy, but again that money will be lumped directly on to our electricity bills, where it disproportionately affects lower income households and does not form part of a wider just transition.

Last week, the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill was considered on Report. The impact assessment for the Bill estimates the capital and financing costs to be as high as £63 billion for a new nuclear power station. Again, it is proposed that that will be added to our energy bills.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government, going back to 2015, have taken their eye off the ball? They have scrapped the Department of Energy and have lost focus on energy. Then they have had 10 years trying to do a smart meter roll-out, which has been bungled, depriving consumers of information about when they could get the best tariffs, which adds to the present problems. The Government have to own the responsibility of the trouble that UK consumers find themselves in at the moment.

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly that the Government have taken their eye off the ball. The previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, talked about cutting out all

the “green crap”. That set back the renewable industry badly. Not only did they scrap the Department of Energy but, given that we now have a legally binding target of net zero by 2050, it beggars belief that there is not a stand-alone Department for energy and climate change, or for energy and net zero. The Government need to take responsibility on that.

I have a question on nuclear for the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross on small modular reactors. Rolls-Royce is looking for something like £30 billion in capital costs to deliver 15 or 16 small modular reactors. Again, that is money that will be lumped on to our bills. With the financing on top, the costs are eye-watering. Nuclear is not a solution; renewable energy is the solution.

In terms of direct spending, the Treasury allocated £1.7 billion in the Budget for the development of Sizewell C. That is something like £60 from every household in Great Britain going towards a new nuclear station, instead of helping them pay their bills. That £1.7 billion could offset the cap for the estimated 3 million households that are eligible for the warm home discount this year, or completely fund a VAT holiday for one year for everybody. Under present policies, not only are the UK Government not doing anything; they are making things worse with their long-term planning. At the moment, costs will be added to energy bills, making things more difficult.

As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross said, people in the Scottish highlands not only have more challenging weather to deal with and risk being off the gas grid, which makes fuel immediately more expensive, but pay up to £400 more to heat their homes because they are on restricted meters—paying up to 4p more per unit of electricity. Why does the Minister think that it is fair that this surcharge is added to an area that is actually supplying energy to the rest of the UK?

Direct intervention could be paid for through a windfall tax on the Treasury. As our energy bills have increased, so have the VAT returns to the Treasury. As fuel prices have increased, the Treasury has raked in more money in fuel duty and VAT. The November Budget's Red Book showed that, over the lifetime of this Parliament, North sea oil and gas revenues will contribute an extra £6 billion compared to what was predicted just in March 2021. The Treasury should unlock the extra money that it is getting from the North sea.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It is a subsidy from Scotland.

Alan Brown: Yes. It is the broad shoulders of the UK working in the opposite way from the way in which we are always told it is supposed to work.

By contrast, the Scottish Government are doing their best while operating on a fixed budget. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross can at least tell his constituents in Scotland that they can benefit as follows. The Scottish Government's child winter heating assistance, introduced in 2020, supports the families of around 14,000 of the most seriously disabled children and young people with automatic payments of £200 a year. Low income winter heating assistance, which will replace the UK Government's cold weather payment, will give 400,000 low-income households a guaranteed £50 payment, instead of that “maybe” £25 payment.

Jamie Stone: There is an economic point here. The money that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, whichever level of Government is giving it to individuals or businesses to see them through all of this, is money that, as well as giving assurance and comfort, ultimately will be spent in shops and other businesses, and will boost local economies. I might suggest that the Government can then recoup that through corporation tax and other means.

Alan Brown: I agree. People on lower incomes are the ones who spend all of their disposable income, and they spend it in local businesses and support local businesses. For families in Scotland, there is also the game-changing £20 a week Scottish child payment. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, that compares with the heartless £20 a week cut to universal credit by the UK Government. Again, that universal credit uplift was spent in local businesses. It was direct support.

It is absurd that Scotland has paid £375 billion of oil and gas revenues to the Exchequer and that it has been squandered over the years. There should have been an oil and gas fund, which would have provided an additional buffer that could have been used in this time of need. It is time that the UK Government take short-term action to deal with the cost of living crisis and energy crisis, but there needs to be a change in long-term planning, for a fair and equitable energy policy. Perhaps that is why Scotland needs independence, so that we can do things differently.

3.39 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing the debate. I think the best way to sum up this afternoon's debate is to call it a united front. I was going to say a cross-party united front, but the party that was going to be in that united front is now no longer in that party—the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) had the Whip removed for daring to say that there should be a VAT reduction on bills as a result of the energy crisis. I commiserate greatly with her. It is shameful that she has had the Whip withdrawn under these circumstances. I would have expected hundreds of her colleagues to vote with her on that occasion, because we all know that we have to do something urgently about the perfect storm in energy prices that is coming towards us. It is a perfect storm because it will be added to the ending of the universal credit uplift and other cost of living increases.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) eloquently put it, millions of people in this country are spinning plates every day to keep their bills, rent and other costs under control. To have a £600 increase in their bills coming their way very shortly—the decision may well be made within a couple of weeks—will inevitably cause those plates to come crashing down across millions of households. This is a crisis emergency that we absolutely have to tackle with equal emergency and resolution as the crisis unfolds.

Hon. Members have talked about both the causes of the crisis and the things that could be done about it. I acknowledge that one of the key bases of the crisis is the unprecedented increase in wholesale gas prices coming into the country, which has had a knock-on effect for

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

electricity prices and bills. Of course, the crisis does not involve a spike in price; it is likely to be a price dome rather than a spike, and it will probably last a couple of years.

The Government are not responsible for that, but they are substantially responsible for making the crisis much worse, as a number of hon. Members have talked about. The Government have managed the retail markets with extraordinary negligence over recent years, allowing a large number of companies to come in and sell us gas and electricity, with no hedging and no serious support behind them. Some 28 of those companies have now gone bust, leaving the customer to pick up the bill, and not just for the transfers that they had to undertake.

About 4 million people have lost their supply and are having to transfer to other companies at the price cap, rather than at the prices they were previously charged, so there is an additional increase on their bills. The companies are potentially having to bear the costs, at about £100 per customer, for the carnage that has taken place with the energy companies that have gone bust and the cost of putting those companies into “supplier of last resort” arrangements.

The Government have also been negligent by allowing gas storage effectively to disappear in this country in 2016, putting us at risk, to a much greater extent, of volatility in the markets, as we have seen recently. There are a number of things that can be laid directly at the Government’s door for their stewardship of the energy economy over the last few years, in addition to what we know are the problems of world prices. That is a double reason why the Government have to act now to put right a number of the things that they have so negligently allowed to happen.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the idea of reducing VAT for an extended period while the crisis in gas prices runs through. That could easily be afforded because of the increase in VAT that the Government have received recently. A windfall tax on companies that have been supplying the gas is an important idea. After all, whether it is supplied to the UK from the UK sector, from the Norwegian sector or from liquefied natural gas, the price that it is sold for is the same in the end. International spot prices are the same, whatever the origin of the gas. That is why a number of companies supplying within the UK sector have made super-profits from this episode, and it is right that they should be subject to a windfall tax that can be clawed back for customers to reduce the level of prices that they are likely to pay.

Hon. Members mentioned increasing the level and extent of the warm home discount, which would be a particularly targeted way of ensuring that those who can least afford it—the real plate-spinners in our society—have an additional plate to spin in the shape of a much more generous warm home discount, and one that expands its range.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Member pick up on a point that I made? Customers who wanted to do the right thing and bought their energy from renewables only should not be subject to energy price rises when renewable prices are falling because energy supply companies can lump the prices together.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Lady has anticipated exactly what I will say in a moment. One of the wider issues about the energy crisis is how, regardless of where someone gets their energy from, what sources they get it from and who makes the energy, it is all delineated in gas prices eventually, so they pay what they would have done had they been a gas-to-electricity customer, even if they are not. Essentially, the whole market is now delineated—the wholesale market and the balancing market—around gas prices being the price-maker.

Hon. Members mentioned that the long-term issue is that we need to get off gas and go further on renewables, but—I put this straight at the Government’s door—we need urgently to reform the wholesale energy market and balancing market so that the market is not delineated in gas and it works in a way that properly reflects the increasingly dominant form of energy production that is renewables. Had we done that, although the gas price issue would have been considerable, it would not have been as damaging and as universal as it has been under the present circumstances.

I call on the Government to undertake measures that will take that terrible burden off the back of customers in the short term, ensuring that they are not subject, as they look to be at present, to the £600 or so increase that is likely to come their way in April, and indeed further increases that are likely to come their way as the price cap reflects the current price dome in gas.

I ask the Government to look seriously in the longer term at how the market has become so dependent on gas, how we have become so vulnerable to it, and how we can take measures to protect our industry and country from such volatility in the future by reorganising our market so that customers are substantially protected from it. This is an issue not just for domestic customers; it is a substantial issue for industry as well, which is groaning under the current price increases and, among other things, needs protection. I personally think that we need a price cap measure on volatile prices from outside the UK coming into the UK for industrial purposes, so that industry can have some certainty ahead of it regarding what prices it will pay for gas.

I hope that the Minister will have answers on all those issues. I know that the Government have been holding discussions with the industry about measures that might be taken, but the concern mentioned by hon. Members this afternoon is that nothing whatsoever has come out of that so far, and time is running out. The longer we do not know what we are going to do, the worse the crisis becomes. I hope the Minister can tell us what is to be done about this energy crisis.

3.50 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this important debate. We have heard from across the United Kingdom, from all nations, of constituents’ concerns about this issue, and rightly so, because this is of huge concern to all our constituents.

The recent rise in energy prices has been driven by the global increase in the price of wholesale gas, and the demand for gas that has grown as we and other nations recover from the covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, higher wholesale gas prices have been observed internationally throughout 2021 and into this year. In addition, greater

liquefied natural gas demand in Asia, upstream gas production, maintenance affecting supply and capacity during last summer, and increased demand for gas in electricity generation, as we phase out coal, particularly in Europe, have also contributed to rising prices.

The first point I want to make is that that has not had an impact on our energy security, a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and others. The Government continue to work closely with Ofgem, the National Grid and other key industry organisations to monitor energy supply and demand. We remain confident that Great Britain's energy security will be maintained. National Grid's gas and electricity winter outlooks, published in October, indicate that there will be sufficient gas and electricity supply in all of its modelled supply and demand scenarios.

The first part is all about delivering renewables—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On the point about domestic security, the Minister will be aware that 5.6 % of the UK's energy need, according to the GridCarbon app, comes from overseas. Does the Minister not think that, in the next round of CfDs, it should be paramount that the projects that could have happened over the past number of years, particularly in the Scottish islands, actually get under way, so that there is less reliance on the continent and Scandinavia for some of that energy?

Greg Hands: That is exactly what we are doing. The new contract for difference auction that was launched in September is as big as the previous three auctions, when it comes to renewables. Our dependence on foreign gas is less than 20%. Our dependence on gas from Russia within that is less than 3% or 4%. That is action that we have already taken.

Our long-term strategy is about finding effective replacements for fossil fuels, which are reliable and do not expose us to the volatility of international commodity markets. We already have the world's largest capacity in offshore wind, but we are not resting on our laurels, because we are going to quadruple that over the course of the next decade. That is all a major step towards delivering the Government's increased ambition on renewables.

In answer to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on new technology, it is both renewables and nuclear, to which I will turn briefly, which is a key plank in the Prime Minister's 10-point plan in the energy White Paper and the legislation that is passing through the House of Commons. I will return in a moment to the comments from the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

In the brief time of six minutes available to me, I will answer some of the points raised. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross referred to his constituent, the businessman Andrew Mackay. I am happy to engage with the hon. Member on behalf of his constituent. Business bills tend to be set on long-term contracts, which give a certain insulation from volatile prices, at least until the point where the contract comes up for renewal.

On rural support, 15% of the energy company obligation—ECO3—must be delivered to households in rural areas. We consulted in the summer of last year on its successor scheme—ECO4—for delivering energy

efficiency heating measures in off-grid homes in Scotland and Wales. We are already extending the warm home discount from about 2 million to 3 million households, from £140 to £150. It is worth pointing out, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun knows well, that the warm home discount is not a zero-cost option. There are people who have to pay additional money on their bills to support recipients of the warm home discount, so it is not something that we can just take action on with the stroke of a pen, like the Labour motion last week—the trebling—without considering the consequences.

The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) is absolutely right on cost-of-living issues, but let us look at a lot of what is happening in this country. We have record figures for those in employment. We have the national living wage increase. We have beneficial changes in the universal credit taper rate and so on. All these things are providing support for people facing cost of living issues. I totally appreciate and am totally with the hon. Lady on the impact that energy bills may be having and will be having later this year. On levies and on the heat and buildings strategy, we said that we would publish a fairness and affordability call for evidence, which will set out the options to help rebalance electricity and gas prices and to support green choices, with a view to taking decisions in this year—2022.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said that we are scrapping the ECO scheme. No—as I have already pointed out, we are moving from the ECO3 scheme to the ECO4 scheme. I guess, Sir Edward, technically you may describe that as scrapping it, but we see it as improving it and building on it. The hon. Lady called for a windfall tax. She praised German energy company E.ON for doing a great job, and it does do a great job, but she and other Members have to be careful when they call for a windfall tax while also praising those investing in the energy sector. She has to be mindful of what impact any windfall tax would have on those investment rates.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) made a very moving speech about the situation for low-income households and prepayment customers. There are 4 million prepayment customers. Ofgem obviously put in place licensing conditions to protect prepayment customers at risk—particularly of self-disconnection—including dedicated helplines for prepayment meter customers. There is a lot of support in place, but the issue of PPM customers is something that we keep a very, very close eye on in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I know Ofgem does as well.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) wanted an indication of what the Government are doing to help. We are doing a lot. We have in place winter fuel payments of between £100 and £300. I have already discussed the warm home discount. There are the cold weather payments. There is the £421 million household support fund. There is a lot of support. I say that while recognising Northern Ireland's particular status as regards electricity. Obviously, a lot of that is devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) called for a VAT reduction. That is obviously, as she rightly pointed out, a matter for Her Majesty's Treasury. It is not a very targeted way of

[Greg Hands]

supporting vulnerable customers. We heard from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I do not think this is really the right place for a Brexit debate, but she said that leaving the EU allows us to cut VAT on domestic fuel. Her policy of rejoining the EU would surely negate that policy.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No. I have only two minutes left. The hon. Lady asked a question about storage, and I repeat that the current issue is not a question of supply. Storage helps if there are supply issues, but we have an issue relating to price. Storage does not protect, generally, from price shocks if the supply is secure, and I have already said that our supply is secure.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) made an extraordinary speech, in which she said, I think, a windfall tax would be a powerful message to Moscow. I thought the intervention by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun slightly exposed that. If the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon can show me how to design a windfall tax that would clobber Gazprom, I am all ears. Bearing in mind that our imports of gas from Russia are almost entirely liquefied natural gas and only less than a handful of percentage points, if the hon. Lady can show me how her Robin Hood tax would have an impact on Gazprom, I am all ears. We are not dependent on—she said “rogue states”. More than half of our gas imports come from Norway. I do not think anything she is proposing is going to protect us from rogue states.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun made a number of familiar points on supplier of last resort costs. SoLR is there to protect customers when their energy supplier ceases to trade, so that they can transfer their account.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Minister, do you want to give Jamie a few seconds?

Greg Hands: Okay, I will give him a few seconds, Sir Edward. On oil and gas and nuclear, I am constantly baffled by the SNP's policy. It is anti-oil and gas. It is anti-nuclear. It is hard to know what it is actually in favour of in Scotland when it comes to supporting Scotland's energy customers and energy suppliers. Finally, I note that we have not heard anything about Labour energy policy in the week since the party's disastrous four-page, convoluted student union motion in the main Chamber last Tuesday. I thank everyone for participating in the debate, and I look forward to further engagement.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We have to move to the next debate, I am afraid. There is a strict time limit.

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

Taxation: Silage Film

4.1 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered taxation of silage film.

I am grateful for the chance to raise these issues in debate. Before we begin, I am not seeking to question or doubt the merits of the plastic packaging tax, which I fully support, along with all efforts to make sure that as much plastic as possible that we use is recycled. My concern is shared by many colleagues, plastic manufacturers and farming industries: guidance was—I could say sneaked out—released by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs just before Christmas, and unexpectedly added silage film to the list of items caught by that tax. That was not a position that anyone expected. Industries had not prepared for that, and the costs will fall directly on farmers at a very difficult time for them.

My interest in this stems both from the fact that there is a collection of farmers in Amber Valley who use silage film and from the fact that I have a large employer who uses recycled plastic pellet to make, among other things, refuse sacks for the NHS and damp-proof membrane for construction products. The irony of the situation is that, in the years in which I have been an MP, the main problem that that business has had is securing enough plastic to wash at a different plant and recycle so that it can use it in its production process. The best source of plastic that it can get is silage film, which is being exported illegally as clean waste around the world, rather than being washed and recycled at home. Our enforcement bodies were not enforcing the law that was in place, so we are in a rather strange situation. The industry has been investing, and has been keen to recycle the film for years, and if we ended up by accident with a new tax that the Government introduced to try to encourage more plastic recycling it would stop the recycling of that film so we would end up in a worse position. I am sure that that is not what the Government intended.

I have four arguments for the Minister as to why the HMRC guidance should be corrected or withdrawn before 1 April. First, the primary purpose of silage film is not packaging—it is to ensure that harvested grass can be fermented into silage. Secondly, the purpose of the plastic packaging tax is to encourage the use of recycled material and increase the recycling of plastic material. Extending the charge to silage film will not generate more use of recycled material in the film, and will lead to less recycling of the film that is used. Thirdly, I am not sure that silage film falls within the definition of the measures that were introduced in the Finance Act 2021, so the guidance is incorrect and inconsistent with the law. Fourthly, I contend that this is seriously damaging for our farming industry at a difficult time, and would reduce its competitiveness against international rivals. All of those cases are strong reasons why the guidance, which appears to be out of sync with what had been planned, should be withdrawn.

The first case I should like to make is about the primary purpose of the silage film. I would not claim to be an expert on silage or its creation, but the information that I have had from the National Farmers Union, for which I am grateful, and from other farming bodies, is that the film is very specialised. It is very thin. Generally,

contractors go on to farms and, in simple terms, mow the grass and wrap it in film so that is airtight and watertight, so that fermentation can take place and produce silage to feed animals through the winter. If that film is not airtight and watertight, the grass will rot and cannot be fed to animals. That is quite a technical process and the film is an expensive and highly specialised product. It cannot be any old plastic: it has to be a very thin film that is air and watertight, and that can survive being used to wrap on a farm in those conditions, rather than in a nice, safe factory setting.

The main aim of using that film is not simple wrapping or packaging to store the grass; there is a much greater purpose of converting the grass into something that can be used to feed animals through the winter. If that plastic does not fulfil that purpose, there will be no food for animals and we will have to import soya or other foods from around the world to get them through the winter.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I should declare that while I am not one, my family are farmers and have a plastic recycling business. I want to pick up on the point that my hon. Friend is eloquently making about the nub of the issue: silage wrap should not be classed as packaging but is integral to the grass fermentation process to make silage. Does he agree that our colleagues at the Treasury need to realise this very fine point so that legislation and taxation can be addressed accordingly?

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, with which I entirely agree. It is not a point that the Government have ever challenged in the past. Only last year, the Environment Agency published a paper on the positions and technical interpretations in respect of responsibility for packaging. On page 31, the document accepts that the primary function of silage wrap is producing the product. I accept that it is a different Government Department, but it has accepted that the primary function of silage wrap is to produce silage, not to package, store or protect it. The Minister may argue that that is a different Department and that it is not Treasury policy, but we are trying, on a cross-Government basis, to reduce the amount of plastic that is used and encourage the use of recycled plastic and of recycling. We have measures coming in to make the producer pay for the collection and recycling of their packaging material through the whole system. It seems bizarre that the Treasury, HMRC and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have different definitions of what counts as packaging in that situation. People come under one set of rules but not the other, even though they are charging for similar sorts of things. I hope that we can achieve consistency across Government.

If the Minister is not convinced by that compelling argument for consistency across Government, I refer her to a 2018 HM Treasury consultation on tackling the plastic problem that concluded that silage film came into the category of non-packaging plastics. Even the Treasury has, in the past, accepted that silage film is not a packaging plastic. I therefore hope that there is no doubt that the primary purpose here is not simple packaging. Looking through the list of items that fall inside and outside this tax, one of the general themes is the primary purpose of the plastic. It is hard to see from that list why silage film has been treated inconsistently with other plastics that are excluded.

My second contention is that what has been done here is contrary to the policy intent. The guidance notes set out that the plastic packaging tax was designed to encourage to the use of recycled plastic instead of new plastic material in plastic packaging. In turn, the tax would create demand for recycled plastic and stimulate increased recycling and collection of plastic waste, diverting it from landfill or incineration. That is the Government's own stated intent. Because of the very specialised nature of the film—which has to be incredibly thin, light-proof and waterproof, and capable of achieving those things when being used for wrapping in a farm setting—the industry and farming lobbying bodies are absolutely clear that there is no way any level of recycled plastic can be used in that film with current technology and achieve the effect needed for the fermentation of grass. No matter what this tax is from 1 April, there will not be any quantity of recycled plastic incorporated in the film, as that is not technologically possible at the moment. Therefore, including silage film in this tax will not generate increased use of recycled plastic; it will simply be a tax on farmers that they can barely afford to pay, given their current situation.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and for his well-researched and detailed speech. I should also declare an interest; although I am no longer a farmer, before I came to this place I was involved in farming, and silage is an integral part of farming across the United Kingdom.

I am here today to express the views of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, which has made many of the points that my hon. Friend has made today. On recycling, does he accept that agriculture accounts for only 3% of plastic use across the United Kingdom, that silage film is just a small proportion of that, and therefore that we are seemingly taking a sledgehammer to crack a very small nut here?

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I agree with him.

I was trying to establish that levying this tax would not actually increase recycling, because silage film cannot include any recycled components. In fact, the tax may make the recycling situation worse, because there have long been efforts to get a collection scheme in place for this waste. It is obviously expensive to go and collect the film from every single farm; it becomes hugely dirty, and collecting it is not cheap.

In recent years, a voluntary scheme has been put in place to collect this plastic so that it can be recycled. That has a cost to farmers of about £60 a tonne. The impact of charging farmers £200 a tonne to get the plastic in the first place will be that they will not be able to afford the £60 a tonne for collection, so we will end up with lower levels of recycling; the farmers just will not pay for collection, so there will not be a collection and the plastic will not be recycled. Consequently, as a result of the tax, we will end up with less recycling of plastic than we have now.

I am sure that the Government's sincere aim is to have more recycling of plastic. However, by far the best approach would be not to include this film in the taxation regime but instead to try to support the voluntary scheme, to get as much of this stuff collected as we can. It is actually very recyclable, making it very valuable; it can be recycled and reused in other products, including those made in my constituency.

[Nigel Mills]

My third argument was that silage film would not fall within the definitions set out in section 48 of the Finance Act 2021, which defines a “packaging component” as

“a product that is designed to be suitable for use...in the containment, protection, handling, delivery or presentation of goods at any stage in the supply chain of the goods from the producer of the goods to the user or consumer.”

What happens with silage film is that the grass and so on is mown and harvested in the field, and it is then wrapped in the field, stored on the farm and subsequently fed to the farmer’s animals in the winter season.

I am not sure whether it is possible to call grass that has been stored and fermented “goods”. It is not sold to anybody, it does not leave the farm, and there is no “supply chain” for it at all. It is not packaged to be moved, presented or anything else; it is basically just there to be fermented. Once it has fermented, the plastic is taken off and the silage, as it is now, is fed to the animals on that farm. I am not sure how it can be said that there is a “supply chain” for silage when the grass never leaves the farm. It therefore looks to me, on first principles, that the published guidance of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is not consistent with the law that Parliament passed last year.

The irony, of course, is that the Government have had to introduce a statutory instrument—I think that it is S.I. 2021, No. 1417—to modify the law that we have introduced but that has not yet come into force, in order to try to be clear about what we intended to catch in this situation. I do not have any criticism of that. This is a whole new tax; we want to get it right, and it is more important for us to get it right than to be precious about not correcting our own law. I therefore fully support those changes.

However, the guidance note for the changes sets out, in paragraph 7.4:

“This is to ensure that the tax applies to products which are primarily packaging rather than products whose function as packaging is incidental to their main purpose”.

So the Government are introducing changes to section 48 of the Finance Act 2021 to exclude products whose primary purpose is not packaging; indeed, the packaging is “incidental to their main purpose”.

Therefore, it seems entirely clear to me that what the Government have been trying to do in clarifying the law in that statutory instrument is exactly what I am arguing for silage film; I argue that it meets the definition in the guidance note of the sort of product that should not be caught by this tax.

It would be far better for all concerned if we clarified that now and had HMRC guidance that was, in my view, consistent with the law, rather than having to resort to litigation and tribunals to establish whether this tax should be collected. If that happened, we might end up with some manufacturers thinking that the tax was not due and not charging it, and some manufacturers taking the other view, and it might have to be resolved by the courts in a few years’ time. I would hope that we could get that clarified now, just over two months before the tax comes into force, so that we have certainty.

My final contention is about the impact of the tax on farmers at a difficult time for them. According to estimates, I think from the National Farmers Union or its Northern Irish counterpart, the £200 per tonne would increase the cost of silage film by roughly 10%—a cost that

farmers’ rivals around the world, from where we import much meat, do not have to bear. That would be a blow to our farmers’ competitiveness against their international rivals. It would increase their cost base when they are already struggling, as many businesses are in the current economic climate. As I said, that is just a straight-through cost. There is no way of changing the formulation of silage film to avoid the cost by making it 30% recycled components. That cannot be done. It is just a straight cost for farmers, which is not what this tax was intended to achieve.

I therefore hope, on the basis of all of those arguments, that the Minister can give us some encouraging noises. It was never raised that silage film would be in the scope of the tax in any of the consultations, previous lists of products or discussions with the industry. I hope that the Minister can accept that adding it at a late stage was incorrect and was not appropriate. Its inclusion is inconsistent with the law, will not achieve the purpose of the tax and will be an unnecessary burden on farmers. I look forward to hearing her remarks.

4.16 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing the debate and on his comments. I have listened carefully to what he has said. I share his expressed aim of ensuring that we get this tax right, and I very much appreciate the tone that he took.

As context to this debate and to the plastic packaging tax overall, I think that we can all agree that plastic waste is a significant and serious environmental threat, because plastics do not decompose. They can last centuries in landfill sites. With our commitment to reach net zero while driving jobs and growth, and our pledge, through the Environment Act 2021, to leave a better world for future generations and build back greener, the Government are determined to use our battle against pollution and climate change to make a positive difference to people’s lives and the wider economy. That is why we have been focused for some years on developing the right incentives, so that businesses can play their part in supporting us in the green economic transition.

That includes our introduction, back in 2015, of a 5p levy on single-use plastic bags, which led to a more than 95% drop in plastic carrier bag sales in England’s main supermarkets. Last year, we went even further, doubling the levy to 10p. As part of DEFRA’s 2018 resources and waste strategy and our 2019 manifesto, we said that we would introduce the tax on plastic packaging that we are discussing today. We estimate that the tax will lead to around 40% more recycled plastic being used in packaging in 2022-23, compared with current levels. Given that the use of new plastic in manufacturing generates more carbon than recycled plastic, we estimate the tax will save nearly 200,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide in the same year.

Turning specifically to how the tax relates to silage film, let me address the points that my hon. Friend made so logically. First, the design and structure of the plastic packaging tax reflects extensive stakeholder consultation, including two design consultations in 2019 and 2020 and three technical consultations on the legislation. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has also established an industry working group made up of trade bodies

and organisations, which was consulted on the finer detail of the policy, legislation and guidance. As part of that consultation work, Treasury and HMRC officials met Berry BPI, a plastic packaging manufacturer based in my hon. Friend's constituency. There has been substantial consultation and engagement, so I was surprised to hear my hon. Friend say that the guidance comes as a surprise.

My hon. Friend talked about DEFRA's producer responsibility obligations, which it is in the process of reforming. I am clear that, as he indicated, those obligations and the tax are different schemes with different sets of rules and objectives, and they use intentionally different definitions of packaging. The definition for the plastic packaging tax covers products designed to contain, protect, handle, deliver or present goods at any stage in the supply chain. Unlike DEFRA's responsibility obligations, the tax includes goods that meet that definition even if they are used by an end user. That is in order to better achieve the objective of the tax, which is to reduce the environmental harm caused by plastic.

During silage season, large amounts of silage film are used by farmers throughout the country. I am sure hon. Members are aware of the quantity of plastic used; I see it in my own area of the countryside. As we attempt to reduce the use of non-recycled plastic and the amount of plastic overall that ends up in landfill, it is right and it makes sense for the Government to include the use of plastic for silage in the tax. Like cling film and plastic wraps, silage film meets the definition I outlined because it is suitable for use in the supply chain for the containment of silage, but it can also be used by farmers—the main end users—to make their own silage.

Robbie Moore: I want to pick up on what I feel is the nub of the issue. Silage wrap is used as part of the process of fermentation to produce silage; it is not classified as packaging in isolation. Could the Minister explore that point specifically?

Helen Whately: I fully appreciate my hon. Friend's point, which I will come to in a second. There are two sides to this issue. On the one hand, silage film can be part of the supply chain; on the other, it can be used by farmers, as end users, to make their own silage by wrapping grass and other crops with the film. If the Government exempted silage wrap and similar items, such as pallet wrap and cling film, we would be shying away from dealing with the overall challenge posed by the use of plastic packaging. That would undermine the aim of this tax, which is to reduce the environmental harm caused by plastic. I do not for a moment dispute that the film is part of the process of turning grass into silage. However, that does not exempt it from falling within the definition for the tax.

That definition is targeted so that it does not include plastic packaging products that are essential for goods to be used, in contrast to products that are essential for goods to be manufactured. Therefore, products such as tea bags, coffee pods, inhalers and lighters are not taxable because the product contained by the packaging simply could not be used by the end user without the packaging. However, that is not the case for silage film.

Douglas Ross: The Minister has accepted that farmers cannot get silage without silage film. Grass cannot ferment without it. Should it therefore not fall under

the heading of plastic packaging that is an integral part of the good? Simply put, it is needed to produce silage. The Minister briefly said that there had been wide consultation. Did any farming unions across the United Kingdom contribute to the consultation? If not, does that not suggest that they did not think they were affected by the change?

Helen Whately: I am happy to get back to my hon. Friend on the conversations that have taken place with different sectors, including the agriculture sector, that were part of work done over the last couple of years on the introduction of the tax.

The definition is set such that it does not include plastic packaging products that are essential for goods to be used, such as coffee pods or asthma inhalers. However, where single-use plastic is required for something to be made, as is the case with silage, it does fall within the definition.

Nigel Mills: Will the Minister give way?

Helen Whately: I am conscious that we are short of time, but I will.

Nigel Mills: We are getting to a perverse situation where things such as coffee pods or perforated bags for boiling rice, which there is no need to use as rice can be cooked without the plastic and coffee can be made without single-use plastic pods, are exempt from the tax, yet silage film, which is an integral part of the process and which there is no way around using, falls within the tax. That is not achieving the objectives. It will seem bizarre to people that we exempt plastic coffee pods but not silage film. Plastic coffee pods cannot be drunk.

Helen Whately: I gave examples of some specific products where the plastic is inherently part of the product—ink cartridges would be another. I recognise that there are some kinds of plastic that are harder to make using recycled plastics. One objective of the tax is to improve the rationale and incentives for the development of plastic packaging that uses more recycled plastic, and to make sure that more plastic is recycled and re-enters the supply chain. Although that will not necessarily happen immediately, it is part of shifting the incentives to encourage businesses to innovate and develop those products. We are already seeing that; as my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley knows, Berry BPI is already making great strides in producing high-quality recycled plastic that can be used for a variety of purposes, including agricultural purposes. I know that other businesses are working on this and, with the incentives, more will follow suit.

In conclusion, I reiterate that we have worked closely with manufacturers, importers, the devolved Administrations and others affected by this tax at every stage of its introduction. HMRC has been working closely with the industry, and that has informed the development of the categories of products that are in and out of scope of the tax. I assure hon. Members that HMRC and the Treasury are continuing those conversations and listening to industry. I am confident that by incentivising innovation and encouraging new ideas across our economy, including in agriculture, we will ultimately achieve huge benefits for the environment, nature and the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19: Forecasting and Modelling

4.30 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered forecasting and modelling during covid-19.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I speak not to bury science, but to praise it. During the covid pandemic, there has been some remarkable, wonderful science; I just question to what extent that includes the modelling and forecasts that have come from it. Thanks to some questionable modelling that was poorly presented and often misrepresented, never before has so much harm been done to so many by so few based on so little questionable and potentially flawed data.

I believe that the use of modelling is pretty much getting to be a national scandal. That is not just the fault of the modellers; it is how their work was interpreted by public health officials and the media—and yes, by politicians, including the Government, sadly. Modelling and forecasts were the ammunition that drove lockdown and created a climate of manipulated fear. I believe that that creation of fear was pretty despicable and unforgivable. I do not doubt that modelling is important or that there has been some good modelling, but too often it has been drowned out by hysterical forecasts. I am not, as Professor Ferguson implied, one of those with an “axe to grind”. I do, however, care about truth and believe that if someone influences policy, as the modellers and Imperial College London have done, they should be questioned. Frankly, they have not been questioned enough.

Above all, I want to understand why Government, parts of the media and the public health establishment became addicted to these doomsday scenarios, and then normalised them in our country with such depressing and upsetting consequences for many. I do not pretend to be an expert; I am not. I defended my own PhD at the end of last year, but it is not in epidemiology and I do not pretend to be particularly knowledgeable about that. But depending on time—I know others want to come in as well—I will quote from 13 academic papers and 22 articles authored by a total of approximately 100 academics.

This is a story of three scandals, and the first one took place 21 years ago. In 2001, we faced the foot and mouth emergency. We reacted drastically by slaughtering and burning millions of animals, and farmer suicides and bankruptcies followed. That policy was allegedly heavily influenced by Imperial College modelling and Professor Ferguson. Since foot and mouth, two peer-reviewed studies examined the method behind that particular madness. I quote from them now to show there are practical and ethical questions over modelling going back two decades.

In a 2006 paper, and I apologise for these wordy, long titles, titled “Use and abuse of mathematical models: an illustration from the 2001 foot and mouth disease epidemic in the United Kingdom”—they are not that catchy—the authors confirmed that Ferguson’s model

“probably had the most influence on early policy decisions”

and

“specifically, the introduction of the pre-emptive contiguous culling policy”.

That is the mass slaughter of animals near infected farms. The authors said that the consequences were “severe” and

“the models were not fit for the purpose of predicting the course of the epidemic”

—not a good start. They remain “unvalidated”. Their use was “imprudent” and amounted to

“the abuse of predictive models”.

Devastatingly, the authors wrote

“The UK experience provides a salutary warning of how models can be abused in the interests of scientific opportunism.”

It is difficult to find a more damning criticism of one group of scientists by another.

A 2011 paper, “Destructive tension: mathematics versus experience—the progress and control of the 2001 foot and mouth disease epidemic in Great Britain”—bit of a mouthful—by four academics said the models that supported the culling policy were “severely flawed” and based on flawed data with “highly improbable biological assumptions”. The models were

“at best, crude estimations that could not differentiate risk”.

That is not a very good “at best”. At worst, they were “inaccurate representations”.

Sadly, the paper said, impatience for results

“provided the opportunity for self-styled ‘experts’, including some veterinarians, biologists and mathematicians, to publicise unproven novel options.”

Some of the scientific work—some of it modelling, some of it not, with some modelling by Ferguson and some not—was cited as “unvalidated” and “severely flawed”, with inaccurate data on “highly improbable assumptions” leading to “scientific opportunism”. Is anybody reminded of anything more recent that would suggest the same?

I scroll forward 20 years. As with foot and mouth, with covid we had a nervous Government presented with doomsday scenarios by Imperial—the 500,000 dead prediction—that panicked them into a course of profound action with shocking outcomes. After the lockdown had gone ahead, Imperial publicised on 8 June a study by, I think, seven of them arguing the justification for lockdown. It claimed that non-pharmaceutical interventions saved more than 3 million lives in Europe. Effectively, Imperial marked its own homework and gave itself a big slap on the back.

That work is now being challenged. Because of time, I will quote only a small selection. In a paper entitled, “The effect of interventions on COVID-19”, 13 Swedish academics—Ferguson ain’t popular in Sweden, I can tell Members that much—said that the conclusions of the Imperial study were not justified and went beyond the data. Regensburg and Leibniz university academics directly refuted Imperial College in a paper entitled “The illusory effects of non-pharmaceutical interventions on COVID-19 in Europe”, which said that the authors of the Imperial study

“allege that non-pharmaceutical interventions imposed by 11 European countries saved millions of lives. We show that their methods involve circular reasoning. The purported effects are pure artefacts, which contradict the data. Moreover, we demonstrate that the United Kingdom’s lockdown was both superfluous and ineffective.”

I am not saying that this stuff is right; I am just saying that there is a growing body of work that is, frankly, taking apart Imperial’s. Remember, we spent £370 billion on lockdown that we will never get back. I could continue with other quotes, but I think Members get the flavour.

Moreover, a substantial number of other papers now question not Imperial per se but the worth generally of lockdowns. A pre-print article by four authors, “Effects of non-pharmaceutical interventions on COVID-19: A Tale of Three Models”, said:

“Claimed benefits of lockdown appear grossly exaggerated.”

In another paper, three authors found no clear, significant benefit of lockdowns on case growth in any country. Other papers continue that theme. I will quote one more, on adults living with kids. Remember: we shut schools because we were scared that kids would come home and infect older people, who would then die. This paper, in *The BMJ*, found

“no evidence of an increased risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes.”

We shut down society and schools just in case, doing extraordinary harm to people’s lives, especially young people. I am not a lockdown sceptic, as Ferguson casually describes some of his critics, but I am becoming so. Do you know why, Sir Edward? Because I read the evidence, and there is a growing body of it. In fact, there is one quote that I did not read out. There was a study of lots of countries that had lockdowns and lots that did not, and the data was inconclusive.

The third element of the scandal is the recent modelling. Swedish epidemiologists looked at Imperial’s work and compared it with their own experience. Chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell said of Imperial’s work that

“the variables...were quite extreme...We were always quite doubtful”.

Former chief epidemiologist Johan Giesecke said Ferguson’s model was “almost hysterical”. In the House of Lords, Viscount Ridley talked of a huge discrepancy and flaws in the model and the modelling. John Ioannidis from Stanford University said that the “assumptions and estimates” seemed “substantially inflated”.

There was a second example last summer. In July 2021, the good Professor Ferguson predicted that hitting 100,000 cases was “almost inevitable”. He told the BBC that the real question was whether we got to double that or even higher. That is where the crystal ball starts to fail: we got nowhere near 200,000, and we got nowhere near 100,000. There was nothing inevitable about Professor Ferguson’s inevitability, and his crystal ball must have gone missing from the start. In *The Times*, he blamed the Euros for messing up his modelling because—shock horror—people went to pubs a lot to watch the games during the competition. When the tournament finished—shock horror—they did not. That seems to be the fundamental problem: where reality comes up against models, reality steamrollers them because models cannot cope with the complexity of real life. To pretend that they can and even that they are useful, when so many of them have proved not to be, is concerning.

Ferguson is only one of many people in Independent SAGE especially, but also SAGE, who did not cover themselves in glory. Raghieb Ali—a friend of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who I am delighted is present—is one of the heroes of covid. He noted that many left-wing SAGE members

“repeatedly made inaccurate forecasts overestimating infections”.

Very often, they were falsely described on the BBC.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning my friend and constituent Raghieb Ali, who has indeed been one of the absolute heroes of this pandemic—not only in his advice to us

all, including online, but through his service in hospitals. I hope my hon. Friend will not mind my saying that I do not think any of us can speak for Raghieb about his opinion of modelling, and I know my hon. Friend is not trying to.

Bob Seely: I quite agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for that, but I am deeply grateful to Raghieb and other people for speaking out. Just for the record, the communist Susan Michie, who is quoted quite often by the BBC, is not a medical doctor, a virologist or an epidemiologist. She is a health psychologist, so why on earth is she talking about epidemiology?

The third scandal took place this winter. Imperial, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and others—I think they included Warwick—predicted 5,000 daily covid deaths, with 3,000 daily deaths as the best-case scenario. They were hopelessly inaccurate, and at this point the tide really begins to turn. Dr Clive Dix, a former vaccine taskforce head, said:

“It’s bad science, and I think they’re being irresponsible. They have a duty to reflect the true risks, but this just headline grabbing.”

As I say, the tide is turning. Oncology professor Angus Dalglish describes Ferguson’s modelling as “lurid predictions” and “spectacularly wrong”. The great Carl Heneghan, another scientist who has emerged with great credit for his honesty and fairness of comment, says:

“it’s becoming clearer all that ministers see is the worst-case scenario”.

Professor Brendan Wren says:

“Dodgy data and flawed forecasts have become the hallmarks of much of the scientific establishment 2”—

what a damning quote!—

“which has traded almost exclusively in worst-case scenarios...this must stop now.”

I agree.

I will wind up in the next two to three minutes—I will speak for no longer than 15 minutes because other people wish to get in, and I am always mindful of that. What is the result of all this? The result, as UCL’s Professor Francois Balloux notes, is a

“loss of trust in government and public institutions for crying wolf.”

That is just it. We have had hysterical forecasts, models taken out of context, and worst-case scenarios normalised.

In the Army, there is something called the most dangerous course of action, and there is something called the most likely course of action. To sum up in one sentence how we got this wrong, we have effectively taken the most dangerous course of action and collectively—the politicians, media, scientists and health professionals—presented that as the most likely course of action, but it was not. Why did politicians say, “Follow the science” as a way of shutting down debate, when we know that science is complex and that our outputs are dependent on our inputs? It was down to public-health types, whose defensive decision making would only ever cost other people’s jobs, other people’s health, other people’s sanity, other people’s education and other people’s life chances.

We know that the Opposition supported lockdown from the word go, but a little more opposing might have been helpful. The BBC and the *Guardian* have been salivating at state control and doomsday scenarios. Against this tsunami of hysteria and fear, thank God for *The Spectator*, *The Telegraph* and, yes, the *Daily Mail*

[Bob Seely]

for keeping alive freedom of speech and putting forward an alternative, which is now being increasingly scientifically vindicated. I accept that lockdown was understandable at first—I get that—but I believe the continuation of lockdown after that first summer was an increasingly flawed decision.

In wrapping up, I have some questions. To Professor Ferguson and the doomsday modellers: why are so many of your fellow academics disputing your work and your findings? To the BBC, as our state broadcaster: why did you so rarely challenge Ferguson, SAGE or Independent SAGE? Why did we misrepresent experts, and why did the BBC allow itself to become the propaganda arm of the lockdown state? To the Government: how could we have been so blinkered that we thought that following the science meant shutting down scientific debate? Why did we never use other datasets in context with the British people, or even in context when it came to making these profound and enormous decisions? Why did we think that it was in our nation's interests to create a grotesque sense of fear to manipulate behaviour? SAGE and Independent SAGE kept on getting it wrong. To the public health types, I quote from Professor Angus Dalgleish again:

“Flailing around, wallowing in hysteria, adopting impractical policies and subverting democracy, the Chief Medical Officer is out of his depth. He has to go if we are ever to escape this nightmare.”

He is not a journalist; he is an oncologist—a senior oncologist.

Twice in 20 years, we have made some pretty profound and significant errors of judgment, using modelling as a sort of glorified guesswork. I suggest respectfully to the Government that, after foot and mouth and covid, never again should they rely on dubious modelling, regardless of the source and regardless of the best intent. I am sure that Imperial and all these other people do the best that they can, and am very happy to state that publicly. However, why has so much of their work been described—and I will use the words of other academics—as “unvalidated”, “flawed”, “not fit for purpose”, “improbable”, “almost hysterical”, “overconfident”, “lurid”, “inflated”, “pessimistic”, “spectacularly wrong”, “fraudulent” and as “scientific opportunism”?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. To get everybody in, I will now have to ask for a five-minute limit for speeches.

4.46 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Thank you very much, Sir Edward. I begin by referring to the declarations that I have made in connection to the Covid Recovery Group.

I am a professional aerospace and software engineer—at least I was in my former life. I have an MSc in computer science, and am very interested in models. However, there is an old joke among engineers, which derives from a “Dilbert” cartoon, that the career goal of every engineer is not to be blamed for a major catastrophe. I wonder whether that spirit infuses not only expert advice but modelling in particular. We are all indebted to *The Spectator* for its data hub, which shows how data has

worked out against models. As anyone can see by going to data.spectator.co.uk, it is the same story again and again: enormous great molehills of death projections, and underneath them the reality of much lower lines. I will leave it to people to look for themselves at the data, rather than trying to characterise the curves for *Hansard*.

There is a great deal to be done in terms of institutional reform of the way in which modelling is done and informs public policy. That is a very old problem; I found a great article in *Foreign Affairs* that goes back a long time, to the post-war era, about this problem. It is time we did something about it, through institutional reform. The situation is now perfectly plain: under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, even our most basic liberties can be taken away with a stroke of a pen if a Minister has been shown sufficiently persuasive modelling—not even data—that tells them that there is trouble ahead.

I have put this on the record before, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will not mind. Before we went into the 2020 lockdown, he called me; I was amazed to be at home and to have the Prime Minister of the UK call me. “Steve, I have been shown death projections—4,500 people a day and the hospitals overwhelmed.” I gave him two pieces of advice: “First, if you really believe that we are going to have 4,500 people a day die, you’d better do whatever it takes to prevent that from happening,” which is not advice that anyone would have expected me to give, but that is what I said, and, “Secondly, for goodness’ sake, go and challenge the advice—the data.”

That is why Carl Heneghan, Raghil Ali, Tim Spector and I, whether in person or virtually, were seen in Downing Street, and were there to challenge the data. By Monday, Carl Heneghan had taken the wheels off those death projections, by which the Prime Minister had, disgracefully, been bounced, using a leak, into the lockdown. That is absolutely no way to conduct public policy. However, the reason someone—we will not speculate who—bounced the Prime Minister is that they had been shown those terrifying death projections, which could not possibly be tolerated. Those projections were wrong.

It is monstrous that millions of people have been locked down—effectively under house arrest—have had their businesses destroyed and have had their children prevented from getting an education. Any of us who visit nursery schools meet children, two-year-olds, who have barely socialised. We cannot even begin to understand the effects on the rest of their lives. It is not the modellers’ fault, and I do not wish to condemn modellers. They are technical people, doing a job they are asked to do. We have to ask them to do a different and better job—one which does not leave them, like the old joke about engineers, afraid of being responsible for a major catastrophe.

As my friend Professor Roger Koppl said in his book “Expert Failure”, experts have all the incentives to be pessimistic because if they are pessimistic and events turn out better, they are not blamed. I am sorry: I am not blaming them personally, but I am blaming the whole system for allowing this to arise. The extraordinarily pessimistic models plus the bouncing of a Prime Minister did so much harm.

We need to conduct institutional reform. In relation to models, Mike Hearn, a very senior software engineer, has published a paper available on my website. It is a

summary of methodological issues in epidemiology. There are about seven points—an extraordinary set of arguments: things such as poor characterisation, statistical uncertainty and so on, which I have no time to get into. The fundamental point is that we must now have an office of research integrity. The job of that office would be to demand—to insist—that the assumptions going into models and the nature of the models themselves were of a far higher quality.

Finally, to go back to an area of my own expertise, I encourage any software engineer to look at the model code that was released.

Bob Seely: Where does my hon. Friend believe that body should sit: within BEIS or a separate scientific institution?

Mr Baker: I think it should be in the Cabinet Office, because we see that scientific advice applies right across Government.

The code quality of the model that was released was really not fit for a hobbyist. The irony is that the universities that do modelling will overwhelmingly have computer science departments. For goodness' sake, I say to modellers, go and talk to software engineers and produce good quality code. For goodness' sake, stop using C++. People are using, as they so often do, the fastest computer programming language, but also the most sophisticated and dangerous. As a professional software engineer, the first thing I would say is, "Don't use C++ if you don't have to. Models don't need to; they can run a bit slower. Use something where you can't make the desperately poor quality coding errors that were in that released model code". That is really inexcusable and fulfils all the prejudices of software engineers against scientists hacking out poor quality code not fit for hobbyists. As I think people can tell, I feel quite strongly about that, precisely because these poor modellers have had unacceptable burdens placed on them. All the incentives for them to be pessimistic can now be seen in the data. This all has to be changed with an office of research integrity.

4.52 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): I will try to be brief, Sir Edward. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) has raised a first-class, crucial issue. Clearly we cannot predict the future, but we can prepare for it. Traditional crisis management and risk management list the possible things that might happen and look at the severity and the likelihood, and based on that we produce a number of models. That is the old way of doing it.

The modern way of doing it, instead of creating models, is to create a playbook—a mechanism by which we can look at all the challenges that might face a country and at least put in place a mechanism for dealing with the crisis, whatever it is. Bizarrely, the US have taken that approach but, perhaps rather sadly and tragically, never used the playbook model that might have saved them.

We very much went down the model route and took out of our kit bag the one we had for flu. It was too rigid, did not fit and was too slow. The assumptions were not challenged; the real world evidence was not incorporated; and, worse, we limited how we looked at modelling absolutely to covid. We looked at the mortality

of covid and the impact; we looked at the morbidity of covid and the impact, but we should have looked instead and as well at the impact of the crisis as a whole and the proposed solutions, including the lockdown and other restrictive measures, across the country, across society and across the economy.

We were told at the time—the Government were challenged on this—that it was too hard: we could not possibly do any modelling with regard to the mortality of lockdown and restrictions, the morbidity of lockdown and restrictions, or the economic impact. That was sadly relegated to second order, but we should never forget that there is a huge interaction between wealth and health.

The interconnectedness of the impacts of the steps that were taken was totally ignored. They were unexplored and unexplained for a good 12 months. So only today, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight has articulated so clearly and eloquently, are we looking retrospectively at what happened. At last we are looking at the impact, not just on covid patients and those vulnerable to covid, but on those patients not subject to high risk for covid. We are looking at the impact on children's life chances—not just on their education—as it is far more serious than just their education. We are beginning to look at the impact on society and communities and—at last—the economy. As my hon. Friend said, never again must we be faced with the question, "Did we unknowingly and unintentionally do more harm than good?"

Forecasting and modelling have a valuable place, but we must never forget that they are tools. Advisers advise; Ministers must ask for the right advice, the right variety of advice, and then decide. Never again should we hear, "We will just follow the science."

4.56 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this very important debate and making an excellent speech. I have no wish to repeat the brilliant research that he recited, but he did highlight the repeated failures of modelling throughout the pandemic, not just the modelling but how it is being used. The models have not been out by just a few per cent, as he said, but often by orders of magnitude. The way that the models have been used has had life-changing impacts on people across the country.

Before I was a politician, I was a science teacher. One of the joys of teaching science to teenagers is conducting practical experiments in the lab. Once the teacher has ensured that they are not going to burn down the lab, it is important to teach them how to conduct an experiment properly and write it up. The first thing is to create a hypothesis. They must write a statement of what they think will happen and why, using the scientific knowledge they have and some assumptions, then carry out the experiment, write up the research and, crucially, evaluate. They must look at the hypothesis and at what they have observed, and decide whether they match. If they do match, they go back to their assumptions and see why they were correct. If they do not match, if what has happened in the lab and been recorded does not match the hypothesis, they need to ask why—"What assumptions did I make that did not bear out in real life, that did not happen in the lab?"

[Miriam Cates]

It seems to me that those are the questions that have not been asked throughout this crisis. Perhaps we can understand why assumptions had to be made quickly the first time, for the first lockdown—assumptions that turned out not to be true. My hon. Friend said that perhaps we are repeating history of 20 years ago, and that there is not that excuse. However, during subsequent waves and restrictions, why were those assumptions not questioned? There were assumptions about how likely the different scenarios were, about people's behaviour and fatality rates.

Even in December, when plan B was voted through, some of the assumptions could have been declared wrong in real time—the assumption that omicron was as severe as delta, and that the disease would escape the vaccine. Some of the figures were almost plucked out of the air and given no likelihood. Those assumptions should have been challenged earlier and we need to ask why.

I picked up on one assumption following an interview with Dr Pieter Streicher, a South African doctor. He suggested that SAGE models have always assumed that infection rates do not reach a peak until about 70% of the population have had the disease, whereas the real-world data suggest that the infection rates start to slow at around 30% of the population. That makes more sense from a social science point of view, because we know that people are not equally sociable.

Studies by sociologists such as Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote the best-selling “The Tipping Point”, describe the law of the few, where very few people are extremely sociable and pass on a virus, idea or whatever, to many people. Many more people do not socialise as much and are not as good at transmitting. Perhaps we should have looked a lot more at social science, at behaviour and people's interactions, rather than pure virology and what might happen in a lab. Of course, we do not exist in labs and cannot model the interactions of human beings that easily.

The tragedy is that this was not a paper exercise. This is not an experiment that happened in a lab where one can go back and repeat until valid results are achieved. These models, and particularly the weight they have been given, have caused serious destruction of lives and livelihoods. Who was modelling the outcomes for education, child abuse and poverty? Who was modelling the impact on loneliness, despair and fear? We have to ask why those assumptions were not interrogated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has made some excellent points about the need for institutional reform. I completely agree with him, but we also need to look at the impact on free speech. At the beginning of this crisis, the mainstream media took on the idea that lockdown was the only strategy.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend spoke earlier about the repeatability of scientific experiments with hypotheses. One of the reasons I talked about C++ is that by using multithreading, it is possible to end up with code that does not produce repeatable outputs. Does she agree that it is very important that when models are run, they produce consistent and coherent outputs that can be repeated?

Miriam Cates: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I would have said to my students, “It is not a valid experiment if you cannot follow the same method, repeat the experiment and produce the same results. It is completely invalid if you cannot do that.” I am not a software engineer, so I take my hon. Friend's word for it when it comes to the use of programming languages, but he is absolutely correct that the whole experiment is not valid if the results cannot be repeated.

Over just the past few months, there has been an opening up of debate that has moved from *The Spectator* into mainstream media, where people such as my hon. Friends present have been able to speak more freely about the problems and costs of lockdown, and have not suffered so much criticism—I hesitate to say “abuse”—in the media and on social media. To avoid this happening again, we need institutional change, but we also need to understand that these are not black-and-white issues. It is good, right and wise to question the data and the science, and to put just as much weight on people's quality of life—the things that make life living—as on the number of people in hospital at one time for a particular disease.

5.2 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward, and to follow all my hon. Friends, who I note have usually been in a different Lobby from me on most coronavirus measures. I am sure the Minister will be grateful to have somebody speaking from the Government Benches who has been supporting the Government on coronavirus throughout.

However, I too have issues with modelling, which is why I chose to speak in today's debate. I have more sympathy with modelling, and I will be offering some sort of partial defence and explanation of it in my remarks, because before I was an MP, I was a modeller myself—a software engineer. I wrote in Visual Basic.NET, which is nice and simple: engineers can see what the code does. I worked for bet365, and I used to write models that worked out the chance of somebody winning a tennis match, a team winning a baseball game, or whatever. I had some advantages that Neil Ferguson and these models do not have, in that there are many tennis matches, and I could repeat the model again and again and calibrate it. If I got my model wrong, there were people out there who would tell me that it was wrong by beating me and winning money off me, so my models got better and better.

The problem we have with covid is that we cannot repeat that exercise—there is no counterfactual. We have heard the phrase “marking your own homework”.

Bob Seely: I am deeply impressed by all this stuff—I do not quite understand what my hon. Friends are talking about, but it sounds fantastic. However, there is a counterfactual. The counterfactual is when people say, “We are not going to follow the lockdown,” and hey presto! we do not get 3,000 or 5,000 deaths a day and all the people who predicted that are proved wrong. There is a counterfactual called real life.

Aaron Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for his point, and I accept it, but the problem is that none of these models model changes in human behaviour. We discussed this

issue during our debate on the measures that we brought in before Christmas, and as I said at the time, the reality was that people were not going to the pub, the supermarket or anything because they were changing their behaviour in the face of the virus. If the models do not take that into account, they cannot know where the peak will be. The models show what would happen if nobody changed their behaviour at all, but of course, the reality is that people do. We have not got good enough at modelling that, because we do not know exactly how people change their behaviour.

As a tangential point, behavioural science has had a really bad pandemic. We were told that people would not stand for lockdowns, but—to the chagrin, I am sure, of many of my hon. Friends—people did stand for them. Looking at the polling, they were incredibly popular: they were incredibly damaging, as colleagues have said, but people were prepared to live with lockdowns for longer than the scientists thought they would. There was initially an attempt to time the lockdown, because people would not last for that long. In reality, that is not what happened, so behavioural science also has a lot to answer for as a result of the pandemic.

I think that models still have value. My biggest concern arising from the experience of the pandemic is the bad parameters that have gone into those models at times—I will refer to two particular examples.

The time when I was nearest to following my colleagues into the Lobby was the extension to freedom day in June, because on that day we had a session of the Science and Technology Committee, which has taken excellent evidence throughout; it has a session on reproducibility in science tomorrow, where we will also look at this sort of thing. On the day of that vote, I was questioning Susan Hopkins and we were considering vaccine effectiveness. Public Health England had just produced figures showing that the actual effectiveness against hospitalisation of the Pfizer vaccine was 96%, yet the model that we were being asked to rely on for the vote that day said it was 89%. Now, 89 to 96 may not sound like a huge difference, but it is the difference between 4% of people going to hospital and 11%, which is three times higher. It was ludicrous that that data was available on that day but had not yet been plugged into the models. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), that was one of the reasons that I said in the Chamber that the case was getting weaker and weaker, and that if the Government tried to push it back any further, I would join my colleagues in the Lobby on the next occasion.

The other case is with omicron. Just before Christmas, we had these models that basically assumed that omicron was as severe as delta. We already had some evidence from South Africa that it was not, and since then we have discovered that it was even better than we thought. That feeds into what my hon. Friend was saying about the total number of people who are susceptible. The fact that omicron has peaked early is not because people have changed their behaviour but because the susceptible population was not as big as we thought: more people had been exposed, more people have had asymptomatic disease. There are all those sorts of problems there.

More philosophically, my models when I worked for a bookmaker were about probabilities. Too often we focus on a single line and too often that has been the so-called worst-case scenario. Well, the worst-case scenario

is very black indeed at all times, but Governments cannot work purely on a worst-case scenario; they have to come up with a reasonable percentile to work with, whether it is 95% or 90%. Obviously, it must be tempered by how bad the scenario would be for the country. The precautionary principle is important and we should take measures to protect against scenarios that have only a 5% chance of happening or indeed a 2% chance, but we should do that only if the insurance price that we pay—the premium for doing that—is worth paying. That comes down to the fact that not many economic models have been plugged in, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) has repeatedly said in the Chamber and elsewhere throughout.

Any Government must try to predict the course of a pandemic to make sensible plans and I believe that the best tool for that is still modelling, but we must learn the lessons of this pandemic. We must learn from shortcomings such as the failure to understand human behaviour properly, the failure to make code open source so that other people can interrogate a model and change the parameters, and the failure to enter the right parameters and update the model at the moment politicians are being asked to vote on it. For all those reasons, I am grateful for today's debate and look forward to hearing the Opposition spokespeople and the Minister. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe for today's debate.

5.8 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Sir Edward. My first thought is, thank goodness that health is devolved. It will surprise no one to learn that I will not be joining the libertarian pile-on against scientists led by people who, even in these circumstances in a Chamber this small, still do not use face coverings.

Mr Baker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will not. The libertarian right have had enough of a kick at the ball in this debate. *[Interruption.]* No, I will not give way. At least half of those who have spoken today are not wearing face coverings.

I know that it is customary at this point to thank the Member who secured the debate but, in a break from tradition, I will start by thanking the scientists—the analysts, the medical professionals, the health experts, the clinicians and everyone else who stopped what they were doing two years ago and dedicated their lives to trying to work out and predict where the global pandemic might go and the impact that it could have on us. Two years ago, when tasked with working out this brand-new virus, every step that they took was a step into the unknown. There was no textbook to chart the route of this pandemic and every decision that they took was a new decision. They knew that every piece of advice they gave could have serious consequences for the population. The pressure of doing real-time covid-19 analysis must have been enormous. I, for one, really appreciate that scientists erred on the side of caution in the midst of a global pandemic in which tens of thousands of people were dying when there were no vaccines or booster protection. To all the SAGE officials, scientists, medical staff and public health experts who have done a remarkable job in keeping us safe, I say a huge and unequivocal thank you.

[Brendan O'Hara]

We know and can accept that forecasting and modelling during a pandemic are not an exact science but based on the best available evidence and a series of scenarios, presented from the best to the worst case. As Professor Adam Kucharski of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said,

"a model is a structured way of thinking about the dynamics of an epidemic. It allows us to take the knowledge we have, make some plausible assumptions based on that knowledge, then look at the logical implications of those assumptions."

As the much-maligned Professor Ferguson told the Science and Technology Committee,

"Models can only be as reliable as the data that is feeding into them."

Of course such models have their limitations. They are not forecasting modelling but mathematical projections based on the data available to modellers. If the tests are not being done, or tests are not being registered as positive, for example, the data modelling and forecasting can be affected. It is important to remember, however, that while the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) was telling anyone who would listen that modelling predictions were a national scandal, Professor Chris Whitty was telling the Science and Technology Committee that

"a lot of the advice that I have given is not based on significant forward modelling. It is based on what has happened and what is observable."

Advice on lockdown and other public health measures was given by SAGE and others on the basis of observable data, not on forecasting modelling alone. I put it to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight that he was quite wrong when he told GB News that

"So much of what's happened since with...inhuman conditions that many of us struggled with"

was

"built on some really questionable science."

Professor Whitty said clearly that he did not base his advice on that; rather, he based it on what he could see around him.

The primary purpose of modelling is simply to offer a sense of the impact of different restrictions. A report by researchers for the journal *Nature* found that the first lockdown saved up to 3 million lives in Europe, including 470,000 in the UK. The success of disease modelling was in predicting how many deaths there would have been if lockdown had not happened. SAGE officials, scientists and medical staff have done a remarkable job to keep us all safe, and many people across these islands owe their lives to them. I believe that the work that those people have done under enormous pressure should be applauded and appreciated, not undermined by the far-right libertarian Tories we have today.

Bob Seely: Shame!

Brendan O'Hara: Oh, I am glad that you shout, "Shame!"

Bob Seely *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Bob, will you calm down, please? Will everybody calm down?

Bob Seely: I do not appreciate being called "far right".

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I want no more shouting; we are wasting time.

Brendan O'Hara: On a point of order, Sir Edward. I think that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight has twice called me a fool. Can you clarify whether that is parliamentary language?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): It is much easier as Chairman not to hear a lot of what goes on here. I am sure that nobody is foolish. [*Interruption.*] I respect the hon. Gentleman; all I know is that he is not a fool. I call Fleur Anderson.

5.13 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Edward; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate—I think—the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate, because I welcome impartial and honest interrogation of the science, as well as decisions made over the last two years that have been important for our country. I also welcome extreme scepticism about some of the decisions made by the Government. This debate has not been an honest and independent inquiry into the science, however. It clearly comes with an ideological bent, so it has to be taken in that light.

I also begin by paying tribute to our public servants and Government scientists.

Mr Baker: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fleur Anderson: I think I will make some progress first.

Mr Baker: I am not being rude; I just want to ask a question about what the hon. Lady has said.

Fleur Anderson: The hon. Gentleman has not even heard what I have to say yet.

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady said that we have made points that require an ideological bent. I invite her to look at what I said and identify at least three points that required any kind of ideological justification. Contrary to the point made by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), nothing that I said required libertarian political philosophy.

Fleur Anderson: That was another speech. I have never been in a room with so many software engineers who are also MPs. I begin by paying tribute to our public servants, our Government scientists, epidemiologists, and the scientific community who have worked tirelessly and put everything on the line to keep the public safe. That is what they have been trying to do over the past two years: keep people safe and save lives—and they have. They have shouldered the fear, anguish and hope of an entire nation that was experiencing deep trauma. They have, magnificently, been prepared to put their head on the block, if needs be. I hope the Minister will agree with me that it is very disappointing to hear them come under attack today from certain colleagues, despite everything that they have done.

I would remind those who seek to attack SAGE and our Government scientists that, while they were looking forward, planning and working hard on the evidence of what the virus might throw at us next, it was freshers

week in Downing Street. They are not the enemy here. In fact, had a bit more attention been paid to their models, had there been more modelling before the start of the pandemic and had more action been taken in February and March 2020, thousands of lives could have been saved. It is not modelling that is the intrinsic problem here—it is decision making.

Modelling is a hugely important tool for managing epidemics that is tried and tested, with constant efforts to improve it. I agree with earlier comments that there should be more models; there should be models about the impact on mental health, education, poverty and models to learn from other countries in order to inform our decisions. As Graham Medley, one member of SAGE, explains very clearly, models are not predictions and are not meant to be seen as such; they are the “what ifs” that can be used by Governments to inform decisions and guide them as to what they might need to prepare for, which should include the worst-case scenarios—that is a crucial distinction. Accurate predictions cannot be made with such an unpredictable virus, when individual behaviour is also unpredictable, so models and scenarios are the best tools to give us the parameters for the decisions that will be made. As Graham Medley said, SPI-M—the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling—the sub-committee of SAGE that he chairs, produced

“scenarios to inform government decisions, not to inform public understanding directly. They are not meant to be predictions of what will actually happen and a range of scenarios are presented to policymakers with numerous caveats and uncertainties emphasised.”

Who would want it any other way?

My question to the sceptical Members present here today is: what is the alternative? We need to have those parameters. The alternative is guessing without parameters and knowledge.

Mr Baker: I am very happy to answer that question.

Fleur Anderson: I am going to move on. I do not want another speech from the hon. Member, given the time constraints. I am waiting for the Minister to answer my questions.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee also had problems with the communication of the modelling. It is there that I might have some common ground with the hon. Members who have spoken earlier. The Committee said in its report last March that communication has not always been transparent enough, and accountabilities have been unclear. I agree with this. If the time is not taken carefully to explain what modelling actually is to the public and media, and instead room is allowed for scenarios to be interpreted as predictions, inevitably the practice of modelling and forecasting will be rubbished and scoffed at and Government scientists blamed as doom-mongers. Not communicating the data and models properly creates more uncertainty and misery for small businesses, who have been asked enough as it is, as we saw over the Christmas period.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Fleur Anderson: No. The PACAC report makes it clear that no one in Government has taken responsibility for communicating the data. The report states:

“Ministerial accountability for ensuring decisions are underpinned by data has not been clear. Ministers have passed responsibility between the Cabinet Office and Department of Health and Social Care.”

That is why, as a member of the shadow Cabinet, I am responding to this debate. There are questions about the use and communication of the data.

I want to come to why we needed to rely on modelling and forecasting. Significant mistakes made throughout the last 10 years of Conservative government are the problem. There could have been much better information, and we could have been much better informed, if there had been better pandemic and emergency preparedness.

Bob Seely: Will the hon. Member give way?

Greg Smith: Will the hon. Member give way?

Fleur Anderson: I will give way—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I think we need to move on.

Fleur Anderson: I agree, Sir Edward. Labour invested in pandemic planning in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, but the Tory Government did not continue that investment. Operation Winter Willow in 2007 involved 5,000 people from all walks of life simulating a pandemic. The need for PPE, PPE training and wide-ranging social and economic disruption was identified. The Labour Government, then led by Gordon Brown, made heavy investments in pandemic planning.

Cut to 2016, Operation Cygnus made 26 key recommendations about PPE, urgent and drastic improvements to the NHS, and the likely impact on care homes. Most of that was ignored. PPE training stopped, stocks were run down—much of it left to go out of date—and there were no gowns, visors, swabs or body bags at all. The UK pandemic plan was mothballed and we were unready for the pandemic. No wonder we had to rely so much on modelling and forecasting.

We could have been much more ready. The Cabinet Office should have stepped up to enable cross-departmental organisation, and organisation with the devolved authorities based on plans, informed by the results of exercises and earlier modelling, but it did not. I hope that the Minister will echo that, distance herself from some of the earlier comments and criticism of our scientific community and respond to the points about pandemic planning and what we can learn.

Finally, I know that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) has asked for an inquiry into modelling. I welcome the inclusion of that in the covid inquiry. I hope that the Government will launch that inquiry. They have appointed a chair, but that chair is waiting for the powers she needs to begin getting evidence from scientists, software engineers and everyone she needs to hear from.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Will the Minister allow a short time for closing remarks?

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for introducing today's debate, and all hon. Members for their thoughtful and wide-ranging contributions.

[Maggie Throup]

Throughout the pandemic, we have been supported by world-leading scientists, epidemiologists and modellers, many of whom have worked around the clock, often without being paid for their contributions. During the fast-moving and uncertain pandemic, that support has been critical to ensuring that the Government have access to the latest and most reliable scientific advice.

The UK is very fortunate to have such strong academic expertise to draw upon. Without the tireless work of our country's scientists both within and outside SAGE, the UK would have been left in the dark at many key moments over the past two years. Scientific advice from disciplines ranging from immunology through to behavioural science have all played a role. Virologists have helped us to understand how different variants behave in the body, while clinicians have advised on higher risks to different patient groups. Similarly, epidemiology and infectious disease modelling help us to understand the spread of covid-19 across the population, and the impact it might have.

It is important, however, to remember that such modelling is a tool to enable Ministers to make evidence-based decisions. Modelling provides a good way of understanding the range of possible futures that the pandemic might have in store for us; a good way of identifying what will determine which of those futures we could face; and a good way of exploring how different policies, rules and guidance could determine which of those futures we could face.

Greg Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Maggie Throup: I am conscious that I need to leave time at the end, but I will endeavour to get through my speech and take interventions.

It is not, however, and never can be, a crystal ball, regardless of who is doing the modelling. Models cannot perfectly predict the future, and modellers would not claim they do so. Contrary to how they may be presented in the media, modelling outputs are not forecasts, nor do they focus only on the most pessimistic outcomes. Model advice to Government is not simply a single line on a graph.

There is always uncertainty when looking into the future: uncertainty from potential policy changes, the emergence of new variants, or people's behaviour and mixing and the changes that that brings. Central to modelling advice is an assessment of this uncertainty, what factors drive the uncertainty and how the results might change if the model's inputs and assumptions change as new evidence emerges. As such, the modellers look at a wide range of possibilities and assumptions in order to advise policy makers on principles, not to attempt to say exactly what will happen..

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. She heard what I said about my conversation with the Prime Minister—it is, of course, a true account of what happened. The reality is that the Prime Minister was shown a terrifying model that subsequently proved to be wildly incorrect, but he took away freedoms from tens of millions of people on that basis. The Minister must surely agree that that does not accord with the very sensible words that she is saying. That is not what actually happened. The Prime Minister was bounced on the basis of profoundly wrong models.

Maggie Throup: I appreciate the point my hon. Friend is making, and I will come to a point that shows that models are just models; they are not predictions. Yes, they are sometimes proved wrong, but that is for different reasons. It could be that people change their behaviour as a result of the information that they get.

One example that I was about to come on to is a model in December that considered a range of assumptions for omicron's intrinsic severity, ranging from between 10% and 100% of delta's, in addition to the additional reductions in severity that vaccines and prior infection provide. Fortunately, we now know that severity is not at the upper end of this range, and models have been updated to reflect the evidence as it emerges. It is quite right that as new evidence emerges, models are adjusted to take that into consideration.

My hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) raised concerns about the Government's reliance on modelling advice, both more generally and from individual modelling groups. I want to reassure hon. Members that encouraging a diverse range of opinions, views and interpretations of the data is all part of the process. SPI-M-O and SAGE do not rely on just one model or group but look at advice from a number of independent and world-leading institutions. Robust scientific challenge has been vital to the quality of SAGE advice, with modelling papers regularly released online and the methodology and underlying assumptions clearly laid out for everyone to challenge and bring forward other evidence—it is all out in the open. Sir Patrick Vallance has said:

"No scientist would ever claim, in this fast-changing and unpredictable pandemic, to have a monopoly of wisdom on what happens next."

As the chief medical officer has emphasised, hard data on what is actually happening to patients and to the population as a whole is an essential part of the advice given.

Modelling is a helpful tool, but it must be considered alongside what is happening to real people at home, in schools or in hospital beds. As SAGE has been so visible and transparent in its advice, some people may think that it is the only form of advice to the Government, but this is not the case. Modelling and other advice from SAGE has been invaluable during the Government's response to covid-19, but it is only one of the many issues we consider. Modelling helps us to understand the possible risks from the spread of covid-19 but, ultimately, this needs to be balanced against other health, economic and societal impacts.

A number of hon. Members questioned the accuracy of modelling forecasts from SAGE. I would like to reiterate that such modelling outputs are scenarios, not predictions and forecasts. As such, comparisons between past scenarios and what happened in reality should be made with caution. Comparisons must be made on a like-for-like basis, and often they are not.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Can you leave a minute at the end, Minister?

Maggie Throup: Yes, I will.

To be frank, what we are doing in many cases is comparing apples and pears. Nevertheless, past modelling has proved remarkably accurate in many cases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) said that lessons must be learned, and lessons will be learned. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) mentioned that as well.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to emphasise just how appreciative we should be, and are, to the scientists, academics and Government advisers for all their hard work over the last two years. It was fitting to see this rewarded in the new year's honours list. Finally, I would like to thank hon. Members again for their participation in today's debate and the opportunity to discuss the matter further.

5.29 pm

Bob Seely: I think with one exception that was a very good debate. We all agree that we need good science, and we all agree that scientists have power, like politicians.

We have the right, in the public interest, to question these people. It was fascinating listening to some of my hon. Friends—I am not quite sure what they were saying, but it sounded amazing. I am also delighted to agree with the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) that, as part of the inquiry, we need to look into the use of modelling, so that if mistakes have been made—with great respect to those who try to say it—we can learn from that experience, we do not make those mistakes again, and the modelling works for the public good, as all good science and all good policy should do.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 18 January 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): All Members will recognise the crucial role that local councils play as the frontline of our democracy and the contribution they make to our levelling-up agenda. That is why the situation at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council is of such concern.

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council has struggled for many years to resolve a variety of governance issues, including allegations of serious misconduct by both members and officers. The council has had six different leaders in six years and three chief executives over the past three years. This instability has led to a breakdown in trust, respect and confidence between those holding governance roles at the council.

In August 2021, the council's external auditors, Grant Thornton, initiated a value for money governance review into the council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. In their view, until the council is able to resolve various persistent challenges, it is at risk of not having adequate governance arrangements in place to ensure the effective discharge of its statutory responsibilities and to maintain financial sustainability. This comprehensive governance review—"the report"—based on evidence gathered from 75 interviews over a period of three months, was issued to the council on 3 December 2021. It makes 45 wide-ranging recommendations, three of which are statutory recommendations, and in my view provides evidence of significant and systemic best value failure. I would like to thank the team at Grant Thornton for their work, and to recognise the critical importance of external audit in protecting and enhancing local accountability as we level up across the country. Copies of the report will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The report paints a deeply troubling picture of mismanagement, a significant breakdown in trust across the authority, and of ineffective scrutiny and accountability arrangements at the authority. This includes, but is not limited to:

On governance, a lack of a clear performance management framework and agreed key corporate indicators has impacted on the ability of the leadership team and cabinet to take an effective grip of the key issues. The effectiveness of the scrutiny boards and the audit and risk assurance committee need improvement.

On culture and leadership, poor behaviour and a lack of trust across the wider organisation continues to exist. Insularity, along with poor engagement with local residents, businesses, external partners, the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Black Country local enterprise partnership, has resulted in a lack of clarity on the authority's key strategic priorities.

On financial governance, there has been an ineffective approach to budget monitoring and budget setting, and there remains no visible consultation on the council's budget setting priorities.

On services, the time the authority has spent responding to internal allegations and complaints has impacted on its ability to focus on service improvement. Inadequate procurement and contract management arrangements have led to poor decision making and has impacted negatively on key services. While a recent Ofsted rating of fostering services demonstrates some positive progress with children's social care services, which were removed from council control and have been run by Sandwell Children's Trust since April 2018, some areas of significant improvement are still required.

On capacity and capability to improve, while progress under the interim chief executive officer, Kim Bromley-Derry CBE DL, is recognised, historically senior officers and members have been unable to make the changes required to move away from the past. Recruitment of a permanent chief executive officer has not yet been achieved.

In light of the evidence in the report, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations is minded to implement the intervention package set out below. While the Secretary of State is encouraged by the "green shoots" of progress described in the report, his view is that the risk of progress stalling or slowing is significant. He believes the proposed intervention is necessary and expedient to secure compliance with the best value duty.

I acknowledge that that is not the conclusion of the report, which states that the "green shoots" identified mitigate the risk that the council is unable to manage and govern itself. However, I believe that on balance and in these particular circumstances the risk of Government inaction in the face of evidence of best value failure is too great. Historically, the council has been slow to improve. Furthermore, the report is clear that it is the interim chief executive officer who is now driving change, and a recent recruitment round has failed to find a new permanent chief executive officer. The council's recovery is fragile and needs consistent leadership capacity. This should not be taken as a criticism of those who have been working hard to generate "green shoots" of recovery, in particular the interim chief executive officer, and I acknowledge the good recent work of the council to take steps in the right direction. I would also like to thank Mr Bromley-Derry's employers, McLaren Construction Group, for enabling his appointment.

I recognise that it is unprecedented to propose an intervention without a best value inspection or a Government review. However, I have considered this report carefully and the evidence contained within it satisfies me that there is no need for an additional best value inspection. Instead, I believe what is needed now is support for a council at the beginning of a fragile journey of recovery.

Expressed in formal terms, the Secretary of State is satisfied that Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council is failing to comply with its best value duty and he is considering exercising his powers of intervention to secure compliance with that duty. To that end, and in line with procedures laid down in the Local Government Act 1999, officials in my Department have today written to the council asking for representations on the report and on the proposed intervention package. That letter emphasises the importance of ensuring that the proposed intervention does not distract the council from the improvements that are starting to be made, and that the

council should engage with the Local Government Association's corporate peer challenge at the end of the month.

The proposed package is centred on the appointment of commissioners to exercise certain and limited functions as required, for two years—it is envisaged this will be a shorter and narrower intervention than has been seen previously. The proposal is for the council, under the oversight of the commissioners, to prepare and implement an improvement plan, and to report on the delivery of that plan to the Secretary of State every six months; and for the commissioners to appoint a permanent chief executive officer within 18 months and then step back from the council.

I expect the council to continue to take the lead on its recovery. Given the gravity of the report's findings, the Secretary of State must consider what would happen if the council failed to deliver the necessary changes, at the necessary speed.

The Secretary of State is, consequently, proposing to direct the transfer to the commissioners of all functions associated with:

The governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making by the authority.

The appointment and dismissal of persons to positions the holders of which are to be designated as statutory officers, and the designation of those persons as statutory officers.

The new leadership team is putting in place the necessary foundations and the Secretary of State envisages that the commissioners will work closely with them to build on the work they have begun. I hope it will not be necessary for the commissioners to use these powers, but they must be empowered to do so if they consider that required improvement and reforms are not being delivered.

The commissioners will work closely with Emma Taylor, chief executive of Sandwell Children's Trust, and Mark Gurrey, the Department for Education's children's services adviser and chair of the council's improvement board for children's services. This will ensure that the improvements that he has overseen to date through the Department for Education's statutory intervention continue to be made, and that services for Sandwell's vulnerable children and families are delivered to an acceptable standard.

We are inviting representations from the council on the report and the Secretary of State's proposals by 11 February. We are also seeking its views on moving to a four yearly election cycle at the earliest opportunity and how best to achieve this.

We want to provide the opportunity for members and officers of the council and any other interested parties, especially the residents of Sandwell, to make their views on the Secretary of State's proposals known. Should the Secretary of State decide to intervene along the lines described here, he will make the necessary statutory directions under the 1999 Act and appoint commissioners. I will update the House in due course

The Government do not take these steps lightly and recognise and respect the role of local councils in our communities and our democracy. The Government also recognise the importance of councils having an effective relationship with their local auditor. I urge all councils to consider whether they could be doing more to ensure that they are delivering the good governance that residents deserve, including considering the governance risk and resilience toolkit developed by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. Despite the rare cases like Sandwell, as a whole, local authorities in England have a good record of service delivery, transparency, probity, scrutiny, and accountability. It is a reputation worth protecting. Local people deserve better than this from their local councils.

[HCWS540]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 18 January 2022

WORK AND PENSIONS

Underpayment of Benefits: Compensation

The following is an extract from the response to the urgent question on Underpayment of Benefits: Compensation on 13 January 2022.

David Rutley: I remind the House that the exercise to correct past ESA payments and pay arrears, following conversion from the previous incapacity benefits, was completed last year, and the then Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), made a statement to the House in July 2021. All cases have been considered and reviews completed, where the information has been provided, and arrears due were paid. As of 1 June 2021,

we have reviewed approximately 600,000 cases and made 118,000 arrears payments to those who are eligible, totalling £613 million. The Department published an update on the exercise **last Thursday** on gov.uk, which sets out further detail on the progress that it has made on processing the cases.

[Official Report, 13 January 2022, Vol. 706, c. 647.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth).

The correct response should have been:

David Rutley: As of 1 June 2021, we have reviewed approximately 600,000 cases and made 118,000 arrears payments to those who are eligible, totalling £613 million. The Department published an update on the exercise **last July** on gov.uk, which sets out further detail on the progress that it has made on processing the cases.

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Tuesday 18 January 2022

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