Monday
24 January 2022

Volume 707
No. 106

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 24 January 2022

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

House of Commons

Monday 24 January 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Standards in Public Life: Local Authorities

2. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure standards in public life are upheld at local authority level. [905175]

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government champion high ethical standards in local government. On 14 January, I supported the important Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) to disqualify sex offenders from local office and, before Christmas, I met the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to reaffirm that we will shortly be responding to the Committee's report on this important issue and will set out further steps to improve the system.

Mark Garnier: I am sure that you of all people, Mr Speaker, would agree that standards of politicians at every level are not always observed. On Wyre Forest District Council, a local councillor has been sanctioned for not the first, but the fourth time, for standards breaches. In this case, it was the leader of the Liberal Democrat group, but I think that we would all agree that frequent offenders who see sanctions as an occupational hazard of being a controversial councillor come from every political party. It is three years since the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on local government ethical standards were published. Can the Minister confirm if and when the Government will legislate to implement their recommendations and that any legislation will equip councils with more robust sanctions for serious or repeated breaches of the code of conduct, an example of which could be a ban for six months?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and for his recent letter on the matter, which I shall respond to shortly. I am actively considering the recommendations set out in the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and will respond shortly. It is of the utmost importance that local authorities have the right tools to make the system work.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Last summer, the senior Conservative councillor in my Angus constituency was unmasked as being behind an anonymous anti-SNP Twitter troll account, and for peddling misogynistic commentary on the appearance of female politicians, with flagrant attacks also on local councillors and parliamentarians. Conservative bosses in Scotland have mandated that he goes on a social media course, thereby paving the way for him to stand again in the May Scottish council elections. Does the Minister think that this is an acceptable way for Scottish Conservative councillors to behave?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I do not know the details of that case specifically. Although I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is raising a very important issue, what I would say is that he should look at the recommendations in the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I think that he will find some things there that will address the situation to which he refers.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Standards, such as openness and honesty, are indeed important, and I do hope that the Prime Minister will soon agree to that. Despite the language and rhetoric of levelling up, the reality is somewhat different in our communities. How can we have local authority funding in the north of £413 per person over 10 years and spending of just £32 per person and it be classed as levelling up? The Secretary of State is quickly getting a reputation for himself in the Wirral as the Minister for closing down, laying off, and hollowing out, with libraries, leisure centres and public sector workers facing the chop? At what stage does he intend to get a grip and level up local government finances?

Kemi Badenoch: I am not sure whether that is a question specifically on the Committee on Standards in Public Life. The hon. Gentleman will know that the provisional local government settlement was published and that he and I have had discussions about that, which show that there is a significant increase in core spending power.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I start by agreeing with the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) about openness and transparency. Last week, the energy company in which Warrington Borough Council bought a 50% stake collapsed. My constituents are rightly concerned that £50 million of public money was invested in a loss-making company. Will the Minister meet me to look at what steps we can take to protect local services and what lessons we can learn from governance in local authorities.

Kemi Badenoch: Yes.

New Homes for Social Rent

3. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of new homes provided for social rent since 2010. [905176]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Since affordable housing delivery is a devolved matter, I can speak only to the figures in England. The Government

are determined to deliver social housing to help vulnerable families and tackle homelessness. Since 2010, we have delivered over 154,600 homes for social rent across England.

Beth Winter: In Wales, the Welsh Government are delivering new social housing at an accelerated rate, year on year, with an 18% increase in the last year. There were 20,000 new affordable houses built in the last five years, 65% of which were social rented, and another 20,000 will be built in the next five years, all of which will be social rented and at a low carbon specification. Unfortunately, in England the opposite is the case, with affordable house delivery falling, so will the Minister say what conversations he has had with the Welsh Government Minister, and what lessons he can learn on delivering the much needed increase in the affordable and low carbon social housing required?

Eddie Hughes: It is a fine invite for more conversation, but I do not think we need to learn any lessons from other devolved Assemblies. We are doing a fine job in England—not just building more houses for social rent but building more affordable homes, with £11.5 billion invested, and also making a significant amount of progress when it comes to decarbonising new homes.

Support for Town Centres and High Streets

4. **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support town centres and high streets. [905177]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): Reviving our high streets and town centres is an absolutely essential part of levelling up. Our £3.6 billion towns fund includes support for 101 town deals and 72 future high streets fund projects. We are also providing support to local leaders through the high street taskforce and by introducing new planning flexibilities.

Jonathan Gullis: History, heritage and high streets—these things mean so much to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Tears were flowing in the mother town this weekend after a fire ripped through the Leopard in Burslem. The Leopard pub has been standing since the 18th century and is where Josiah Wedgwood and James Brindley met to discuss building the Trent and Mersey canal.

In Tunstall we have empty high street shops, which are in a desperate state of neglect, with landlords all too happy to let them sit empty and uncared for. Will my hon. Friend outline to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke how the levelling-up White Paper can empower local councils and people to hold absent or rogue owners accountable for damaging the hearts of our community?

Neil O'Brien: I know that many of my hon. Friend's constituents will be desperately sad about the fire at the Leopard; I was also sad to see the footage of it burning.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his leadership and hard work on regeneration. His ten-minute rule Bill on rogue owners is being closely studied in the Department; Kidsgrove is benefiting from a town deal; Tunstall library and baths are being regenerated through the levelling-up fund, and the local council is refurbishing the town hall. However, there is a lot more to do, and I am keen to continue my conversations with him on this important issue as we look to future legislation.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Secretary of State has not really proved very successful so far. Since the Secretary of State took office, the Chancellor has blocked any new money for levelling up, the Transport Secretary has halved bus funding and scrapped our trains, and while the Secretary of State is moving 500 civil servants into smaller cities and towns, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is taking 65,000 of them away. In April our nations and regions stand to lose billions unless he does his job. South Yorkshire alone will be short-changed by £900 million if money that once reached us via Europe is now blocked in Whitehall. That is money for skills, new infrastructure, apprenticeships and science.

"It could be deployed in our NHS, schools and social care"—

those are not my words but those used by the right hon. Gentleman in the referendum. Will he keep his promise that no part of this country will be worse off? Or should I ask the Chancellor?

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for drawing attention to the fact that we are moving DLUHC staff to the great city of Wolverhampton. As I walk to my office in the morning, I walk past previous Labour Ministers looking radiant and John Prescott looking something, and I remember that they could have done this, but we are the party that is actually doing it and getting on with moving civil servants out of London. As for the hon. Lady's wider points, she will have to wait for the contents of the White Paper. As well as the UK shared prosperity fund, matching those funds from Europe for each nation, we have the levelling-up fund, the community ownership fund and the high streets fund. Other than that, we are barely doing anything.

Lisa Nandy: Thanks for that—I will ask the Chancellor.

That is not actually what I asked. I asked the Minister to guarantee that no part of this country will see its funding collapse in just 10 weeks' time. It is absolutely great to see investment going into Newark, but what use is that for someone living in Barnsley or Bolton? Can he not see the problem? Money has been flowing to Cabinet Ministers' constituencies and to key marginals, and still he refuses to come clean on how those decisions are being made. This weekend it became clear that the only way to get money out of his Department is to be at the beck and call of the Chief Whip. How can any community have confidence that they have a fair shot at getting some of their money back from his Department if he will not release, in full, the information he holds about how these decisions are being made?

Neil O'Brien: It is true that levelling-up funds have been going to the constituencies of Cabinet Ministers—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I mean shadow Cabinet Ministers. Levelling-up funds have been flowing to—*[Interruption.]* I will admit at this Dispatch Box that money is going to the shadow Leader of the House, the shadow Education Secretary, the shadow Health Secretary, the shadow Culture Secretary: guilty as charged of levelling up those places, and on that we do agree.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I have been urging Bradford Council to prepare a levelling-up fund bid for the town of Bingley in my constituency which I very much hope will be looked on favourably by the Government. When will the deadline for the next round of bids for the levelling-up fund be, and what will the criteria be?

Neil O'Brien: The next round of bidding for levelling-up funding will open in spring and we will set out the conditions for funding in due course.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The towns fund is a limited beauty contest. All town centres, such as Crownpoint in Denton and Houldsworth Square in Reddish, matter. Twelve years ago, those town centres had hanging baskets and planters, the street furniture was beautifully painted, and our main town centre park, Victoria park, had bedding plants. All those things have gone as the councils have faced 60% cuts. How are we going to get some civic pride back in communities such as Denton and Reddish?

Neil O'Brien: That is a serious point, so let me address it in the consensual and serious way that it deserves. The rise of online shopping is posing major challenges to our town centres. That is why we are bringing forward the future high streets fund and the billions of pounds of funding that I mentioned. I also draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to things such as the community ownership fund, which helps to save these vital local assets. But of course we recognise that there is more to do, and more to think about in terms of how we change these town centres to help them adjust to a new world in which people will continue to spend more money online. We need to make them places where people work and live as well as just shop.

Increasing Home Ownership

5. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase home ownership. [905178]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): As a Government we are determined to level up opportunities across our country, and that starts with building the homes that our people need. That is why we are helping millions of people into home ownership. Since 2010, Government-backed schemes have helped over 756,000 households to purchase their own dream home. Last June, we launched our new flagship First Homes scheme, providing homes discounted by at least 30% for first-time buyers, with a priority for local residents and key workers.

Kevin Hollinrake: First Homes is an excellent initiative that could deliver homes in my constituency for local first-time buyers at even below half price. Will the Minister accelerate their delivery through section 106 agreements, pilot their delivery on public sector land in my constituency, and rename the policy from First Homes to "Half-Price Homes", because then people would understand it much more clearly?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend, who is a doughty campaigner for home ownership, teases me. He wishes me to call First Homes "Half-Price Homes". Perhaps that will become the shorthand name for this project. Perhaps even, in time, they will be known as Hollinrake homes. As to his other questions, we are already commissioning First Homes properties on both public and private sector land through our two early delivery programmes. We are aiming to deliver 1,500 of them before April 2023, and we certainly want to accelerate the programme so that more people are able to achieve the dream home that they want and deserve.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The whole nation breathed a sigh of relief when the Government's planning-by-algorithm so-called reforms were ditched, so when will the son of planning-by-algorithm come out? My constituent Heidi has kept a small hairdressing business going throughout the pandemic, but she is not eligible for Help to Buy, so will the Minister look at introducing more schemes that would help people like her? We also want things that will preserve suburban character, because all the build-to-let things going up locally, up to 60 storeys high, are destroying everything that people liked about Ealing and Acton.

Christopher Pincher: We certainly want people such as Heidi to achieve the home that they want. Through Help to Buy, right to buy, right to acquire, help to build and a variety of mechanisms, including our 95% fixed-term mortgage guarantee, there is a multiplicity of ways in which we can get people on to the housing ladder. The hon. Lady also asks about our planning reforms, and I can tell her that she will be hearing more about those in due course.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure that the Minister would agree that by far the best people to decide how many homes we want and where they should be are local people. Would he therefore agree with me and the town of Malmesbury in my constituency, which raised the point that the neighbourhood plan, which this Conservative Government brought in, is currently being trumped by the so-called five-year housing land supply figures, which are handed down by central Government? Will he give me a hint as to whether greater importance will be given in the forthcoming housing White Paper to neighbourhood planning, thereby allowing local people to decide how many houses they want and where?

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, because it gives me the opportunity to make it clear that it is for local communities to determine how many homes they want and need in their vicinity. Local housing need numbers are not an end point; they are a starting point. It is for local authorities to determine what constraints they may face to determine the numbers of homes that they need in their area. They then agree those numbers with the Planning Inspectorate to set a sound plan, and that is then the number that the local authorities build toward. Local authorities that fail to set an up-to-date plan leave their constituents at risk of speculative development, so it is for local authorities to set the numbers and make their plans.

Levelling-up Fund

7. **Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that levelling-up funding is allocated equitably and transparently. [905180]

14. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking through the levelling-up fund to improve transport infrastructure in the north of England. [905187]

22. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to level up Rother Valley constituency. [905195]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for the brief, tantalising preview of what is to come. The levelling-up fund is allocated according to objective criteria, including value for money, strategic fit, deliverability and the characteristics of place. I am therefore delighted that places such as Rotherham, Liverpool and Newcastle upon Tyne have already secured funding through our levelling-up funds, which include the towns fund, the levelling-up fund itself and the previous local growth fund.

Peter Dowd: A bit more tantalisation here: how can the Government's levelling-up allocations possibly be equitable and transparent when the Government's own index of multiple deprivation indicates that the constituencies of the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—numbers 254 and 268 of the 310 on the index—received £27 million and £14.5 million respectively, while an area in the top 0.5% of the index, which includes my constituency, where my constituency office is based, received nothing? The question is: is that equitable, transparent and fair? Will the Secretary of State or a Minister meet me and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), to discuss our concerns?

Michael Gove: It is certainly equitable, transparent and fair, and should the hon. Member wish, there is an explanatory memorandum on gov.uk, which would take him, as it would any hon. Member, through the process by which funds have been allocated. I should say that the whole Liverpool city region received £37.5 million through the levelling-up fund, but I would be delighted to talk to him and the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) to ensure that future bids can land carefully, safely and successfully.

Chi Onwurah: In Newcastle, we have been waiting seven years—seven years—for real-time integrated bus information of the type that Londoners take for granted. Now we hear that the £3 billion bus improvement funding is less than half that, and much of that is going on zero-emission buses, meaning even less money for our bus improvement plan, which includes real-time information. Will the Secretary of State commit to levelling up bus transport in the north so that we are no longer under-served, overcharged and underinformed?

Michael Gove: Having spent some of the happiest months of my twenties on buses in Newcastle, I can absolutely sympathise with the hon. Member. It is the case that her constituency received £20 million from the levelling-up fund, but I look forward to working with her, the North of Tyne Mayor and Newcastle City Council to see what more we can do to improve public transport.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I welcome the £11 million from the levelling-up fund that has already gone to Rother Valley, including £4.5 million to transform Maltby, and I am glad that Rotherham Council is again putting in another bid for Rother Valley to get another £9 million for Dinnington High Street. Can the Secretary of State tell me what future funding pots will be available for other parts of Rother Valley, so that the whole of the constituency can be levelled up, especially the likes of Thurcroft, Swallownest and Kiveton Park?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right that there has already been significant investment in Rotherham. Of course, one of the beneficiaries of that is the shadow Defence Secretary, whose impassioned advocacy on behalf of his constituents has not gone unheard; however, there are a number of communities in Rother Valley. The community ownership fund, which we will be expanding, is just one route, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be able to take it with me to ensure that the villages and communities that he serves get the services they deserve.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that smaller and rural local authorities often do not have the capacity to deal with complex application processes? What steps will he take to address that concern?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is right. He represents, I think, the largest, and certainly the second-most attractive constituency in Scotland, which covers three excellent local authority areas. There are excellent local councillors in all of them but, essentially because they lack the economies of scale, we need to work with those local authorities to ensure that, from Lockerbie to Moffat, the communities that deserve investment secure it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that the success of levelling up will depend in large part on how much money is available and how it is distributed. I do not know whether he has had a chance to look at the recent research by Teesside University, which shows that over the past seven years the amount of money coming through EU funding and the local growth fund has been £2.1 billion a year, while the amount for the next few years from the shared prosperity and levelling-up funds is projected to be only £1.5 billion a year—a significant cut. In addition, the cuts in his own Department's funding have hit the poorest local authorities the hardest, so when he produces his levelling-up White Paper, will he produce a comprehensive list of spending per head by region for each Department and show how the policies he is advocating will change those funding levels for the benefit of the poorest areas, which have suffered most in the past 10 years?

Michael Gove: I would gently contest the argument that the poorest areas have suffered most in the past 10 years, but the Chairman of the Select Committee makes an important point about transparency in the allocation of funding, and I look forward to working with him to ensure just that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given current media speculation about the allocation of levelling-up funding, and given that I am a Member of this House who has unfortunately had to vote against the Government on several occasions recently, will the Secretary of State reassure me on whether there is any point in North West Leicestershire reapplying for levelling-up funding? Does he agree that, were Coalville to be successful in the next round of bidding, it would demonstrate that the Government are not engaging in pork barrel politics?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend, like me, abjures the whole idea of pork barrels. What we both believe in is allocating funding on the basis of merit and need. I can assure him that he has been in the same Division Lobby as me more often, I believe—although I stand to be corrected by the Whips—than the deputy leader of the Labour party, the shadow Defence Secretary, the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, the shadow Culture Secretary or the shadow Social Care Secretary, all of whom have benefited from levelling-up funds. If a requirement for Government funding were voting with the Government, I fear that the deputy leader of the Labour party, my dear friend, would have lost out. However, I am delighted that her constituents in Ashton-under-Lyne have benefited from our funding, because we are committed to levelling up and uniting the country, irrespective of political colour.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Analysis of levelling-up funding published recently by NPC—New Philanthropy Capital—found that, despite strong public support, homelessness is not being properly addressed. It found that communities with the highest concentrations of black, African and Caribbean communities fared poorly, and that four of the most deprived communities missed out entirely. Both the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) have sought to make a supposed joke of this, but I do not think it is laughing matter that while poorer communities have missed out, the constituencies of at least three Cabinet Ministers, which are considerably more affluent, were successful in their bids. Beyond the jokes and the spin, does the Secretary of State honestly expect the House to believe that the Government have acted equitably rather than defaulting to the usual approach of pursuing narrow self-interest?

Michael Gove: I cannot see how it would be in the narrow self-interest of the Government, if operating on partisan lines, to have given the hon. Gentleman's constituency £18 million for transport improvements from the levelling-up fund. These are not jokes; these are serious matters. We work with people across this House, including and especially in the Labour party, to ensure that funding goes where it is required. Lying behind the allegations made by him and others is a suggestion that somehow civil servants would conspire with Ministers deliberately to favour constituencies on the basis of political colouration.

My new opposite number, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy)—I offer her my congratulations on her elevation—recently wrote to me to ask whether we would make transparent the basis on which we allocate that funding. We have: it is published on a website called gov.uk. Google can sometimes be helpful to all of us.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Notwithstanding the Secretary of State's earlier comments, I am sure that he would never accuse a fellow Tory MP of misleading the House. Will he therefore comment on the veracity of the specific remarks made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) about threats made to Tory MPs to withdraw investment from their constituencies and release negative press stories as punishment for supporting a no-confidence vote in the Prime Minister? Will he outline what investigations he intends to undertake to look into the abuse, or possible abuse, of levelling-up funds?

Michael Gove: There is no evidence of any abuse of levelling-up funding. If anyone has it, I hope that they will bring it to the House's attention. As for any suggestion that someone may be on the receiving end of lots of negative press stories for voting against the Government, as someone who is solid, 100%, totally behind the Prime Minister and yet also on the receiving end of a plethora of negative press stories, I can tell the hon. Member that there is no correlation between the two.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): On every single criterion, my Gosport constituency should qualify for levelling-up funding, but our recent bid for funds was unsuccessful. Quite simply, we have a small council that lacks the resources to compete with the big guys for the funding, and there is also a strong feeling that our south coast location could disadvantage us. If, as the Secretary of State said, impassioned advocacy is a recipe for attracting funding, can he please give me a glimmer of hope for the future? Will he tell me that the levelling-up White Paper will also offer us hope, and when it will be published?

Michael Gove: Few people put more passion into their advocacy than my hon. Friend. While in levelling up we must have a proper focus on the midlands and the north, other parts of the United Kingdom, including the area around the Solent—Gosport, Portsmouth and Southampton—also require investment. I will work with her to ensure that that investment is forthcoming.

Increasing Devolution Across the UK

8. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What plans his Department has to increase devolution across the UK. [905181]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): The Government are committed to ensuring that devolution works across the United Kingdom. We hope to deepen and extend devolution within England.

Dr Whitford: Unfortunately, the levelling-up fund is already being used to bypass the devolved Governments, and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 could enable UK Ministers to overrule the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments' policy decisions. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that riding roughshod over devolution will force the people of Scotland and Wales to choose between a return to direct rule by Westminster and controlling their own future through independence?

Michael Gove: I appreciate the point and the way in which the hon. Lady makes it, but it is the case that a number of constituencies in Scotland received money from the levelling-up fund, and that money was allocated on the basis of bids supported by Scottish National party MPs and championed by Scottish National party-led councils. I enjoy working with the Scottish Government to ensure that we can work collectively together. Whatever our views on constitutional questions, the fact that we can work together on such issues is a credit to those Ministers in the Scottish Government who want to take that pragmatic approach and to her parliamentary colleagues who champion funding for their constituencies.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Freeports are one of the ways this Government are levelling up across the devolved Administrations, and I am delighted that there is to be at least one freeport in Wales. Can the Secretary of State update the House about ongoing discussions with the Welsh Government and when we can expect the Welsh freeport bidding prospectus to be published?

Michael Gove: I can confirm that we have had very fruitful negotiations not just with the Scottish Government, but with the Welsh Government. I want to place on record my thanks to Vaughan Gething and other Ministers in the Welsh Government, and I hope that we will be able to make an announcement shortly about the process by which we will allocate freeports in Wales. At the moment the proposal is for one freeport in Wales, but I recognise that both south Wales and north Wales have significant potential for freeports in the future, and there are few better advocates, in particular for Anglesey, than my great hon. Friend.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The current Tory leader in Scotland and two former Tory leaders in Scotland, alongside every single Tory MSP, are calling for the Prime Minister to resign after their Scottish branch office leader was sneered at by the Secretary of State as just a man "in Elgin" and the Leader of the House decried him as a "lightweight". In view of this, can the Secretary of State clarify how the self-declared Prime Minister of the Union will increase devolution while Scots calling for his resignation believe he is actively harming the Union?

Michael Gove: I am terribly sorry but I did not realise or appreciate that saying someone came from Elgin was an insult as far as the SNP is concerned; in my view, it is a compliment.

Increasing Housing Supply: Local Communities

9. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that housing supply increases in line with the needs and wishes of local communities. [905182]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): As I said in a previous answer, building homes is key to levelling up, and that is why we announced an additional £1.8 billion for housing supply at the last spending review, delivering £10 billion-worth of investment since the start of this Parliament and unlocking over 1 million new homes. However, it is important that local communities have input to the planning process, and we recognise that as part of our planning reforms the planning system must be more engaging and much more democratic.

Mr Holden: Many people in social housing have been able to exercise the voluntary right to buy scheme for tenants of social landlords. However, in so-called rural locations, many are excluded, including many thousands of my own constituents. Would the Minister or the Secretary of State meet me and other MPs with constituents in similar situations to find a way forward that both enables people to own their own homes and ensures that the level of housing stock for rent from social landlords is maintained?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my hon. Friend. We are committed to enabling tenants in social housing to acquire their own home through right to buy or right to acquire, and we have helped nearly 2 million tenants to become homeowners—dream-home owners. I am aware that there are some particular issues in some particular rural areas, and I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues to discuss how we can ensure that those people have the opportunity of home ownership, too.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know—and you will know, Mr Speaker—that I am a fan of One Direction, and Harry Styles in particular. If it is true that Harry Styles is looking to buy a £10 million property in the west country, he will join the thousands of people who have been hoovering up our homes to make them second homes. The pandemic has turbocharged the housing crisis in the west country, so will the Minister look seriously at ensuring every west country family can have a first home, not just have a region full of second homes for those who can afford one?

Christopher Pincher: We are determined to make sure that there are homes available to buy for the people who want them around our United Kingdom, including in holiday hotspots such as the west country. That is why we have brought forward new policies such as First Homes, why we are closing the loophole which allows some people to abuse their second home and holiday let properties, and why we want to build more homes in those places to ensure people have the opportunity to own and enjoy them.

Infrastructure for New Homes: Sittingbourne and Sheppey

10. **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to deliver the education, health and transport infrastructure necessary to support the homes built in Sittingbourne and Sheppey constituency over the last three decades. [905183]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The Government support local authorities through both central funding and developer contributions to deliver the infrastructure that new development demands. In 2020-21, Swale Borough Council secured over £3.7 million of developer contributions and we are providing Kent County Council with £38 million from the housing infrastructure fund to support road improvements, which will unlock 8,500 homes in Swale.

Gordon Henderson: I am always grateful for any money that Swale Borough Council gets, but of course those particular funds are designed to ensure even more homes can be built, and that would do nothing to reduce congestion on roads in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, or to increase the number of secondary school places available to local people, or to make it easier for those people to get an appointment with a GP. What Swale needs is fewer houses, not more; so would my right hon. Friend consider placing a moratorium on housing targets for Swale Borough Council and local authorities in Kent generally until the problems I have highlighted are resolved?

Christopher Pincher: As I said in a previous answer, it is for local authorities to determine the number of homes they need and to set those numbers accordingly. We want to make sure that where development takes place infrastructure is available to support it. That is why we have the HIF—housing infrastructure fund—to which I have referred and the new home building fund, with a significant amount of money for infrastructure. It is also why we want through our planning reforms to look carefully at how infrastructure funding can be provided, so that it is provided up front and new developments benefit from the schools and clinics and kids' playgrounds that they need, and new communities get bang for their buck.

West Midlands Combined Authority: Further Devolution

11. **Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of the West Midlands Combined Authority's proposals for a further devolution deal. [905184]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): We commend the West Midlands Combined Authority under the leadership of Andy Street for its ambition to secure further powers for the region and will be saying more about our plans to strengthen local leadership in the forthcoming White Paper.

Liam Byrne: The Mayor of the West Midlands and I disagree on much, but I think he buys into my argument that we should be the green workshop of the world, and I agree with him that delivering on that requires radical devolution of resources and powers in at least 12 different areas, from skills to energy regulation. Has the Minister read the submission from the combined authorities—the Mayor and the seven mighty authorities of the west midlands—and, crucially, when the levelling-up White Paper is delivered, will he deliver on it?

Neil O'Brien: I am glad to see this wonderful outbreak of consensus. I have read the exciting proposals put forward to us but I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait until the White Paper; however, I will say that Andy Street has continued to bring forward very exciting and interesting ideas.

Church of England: Real Estate

12. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Church of England on the potential role of its real estate in helping to meet housing demand. [905185]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): We welcome and encourage the steps the Church is taking to make more of its land available for affordable housing. Since the Archbishops' debate in March 2021 and the publication of the report from the Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community, my officials have engaged with representatives to consider how we can provide support for that, and that is expected to continue.

Richard Graham: The Secretary of State will know that the Diocese of Gloucester has been doing a lot to help implement the important report from the Archbishops, "Coming Home". I particularly want to thank Bishop Rachel and all involved for their work in funding the national housing executive and delivering projects such as St Aldate's and Hardwicke. The Secretary of State will however also know that housing is a complicated issue for the Church and the draft legal reforms on ownership are stuck with the Church Commissioners and the Archbishops' Council, so what more can my right hon. Friend do, perhaps in conjunction with the Second Church Estates Commissioner, to make sure that the Church of England lives up to its leaders' social mission and helps provide more space for homes for some of those most in need?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to quote from the Gospel, John 14:2:

"In my Father's house are many mansions",

and it is certainly the case that we want to work with the Church of England to unlock more land and support its drive to secure greater access to affordable housing. I have recently been in touch in particular with the Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin, and I know he will be taking forward further conversations in order to achieve the goals he and I and the Second Church Estates Commissioner share.

Levelling Up: Active Travel

13. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What role active travel will have in the forthcoming levelling-up White Paper. [905186]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): Active travel is central to levelling up the nation's health, air quality, social connectedness and prosperity. The Government committed £710 million of new active travel funding at the spending review and are establishing active travelling to support places. The White Paper will discuss transport's contributions to levelling up, including of course active travel.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. He knows of course that travel accounts for nearly a third of the UK's carbon dioxide emissions, with the majority coming from petrol and diesel vehicles. In my constituency of Bath the council is working very hard to get to net zero by 2030, and active travel is a key part of that. So in the upcoming planning reforms will the Secretary of State include the 20-minute neighbourhood principle, which ensures that people can access services and goods within a 20-minute return walk?

Michael Gove: That is a very good principle—I completely agree with it. For those who do not follow our proceedings with the same intensity as top political commentators and all the rest of it, active travel refers to walking and cycling. I completely agree with hon. Lady. What we want to do is create communities where people can walk or cycle to all the facilities and amenities that they need. That is one reason why I am such a great fan of the work of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the developments for which he has been responsible, as they embody that principle more effectively than the work of almost anyone I know.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Grassroots sports clubs and facilities are crucial to levelling up in some of the most deprived parts of Ipswich, whether it is a BMX club in Gainsborough, a boxing club in Nacton or Ipswich Vale Exiles FC: Maidenhall and Chantry. Will the Secretary of State confirm today that that is something that will be acknowledged in the White Paper and that when it comes to the second tranche of the levelling-up fund there is a possibility for it to be a grassroots clubs and facilities fund to back levelling up in such an important way?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is the case that the levelling-up fund and the community ownership fund are oriented towards ensuring that cultural and sporting activities can be supported. I should remark that just over a week ago I had the pleasure of visiting Bury where, through the community ownership fund, we could give the fan-led consortium the resources needed to take Gigg Lane back into its ownership. Only a few days later, the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) defected to the Labour party. Once a Shaker, always a Shaker, I was told in Bury, but there are some people who are steady on parade and there are some people who shake it all about. I think in Bury we prefer those who are steady on parade, rather than those who wobble under pressure.

Mr Speaker: And Gigg Lane has the finest playing surface. We now go to topicals, with Paul Blomfield.

Topical Questions

T1. [905198] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): On Thursday this week, it is, as the House knows, Holocaust Memorial Day. My hon. Friend the Minister for Levelling Up Communities will lead a debate on that day. It is important that we all recognise that the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust are absolutely invaluable, not just in challenging the unique evil of the holocaust and the poison of antisemitism but in reminding us that we need to be vigilant against prejudice of all kinds: anti-Muslim hatred, the persecution of Christians and any prejudice that is based on religion, ethnicity or any of our protected characteristics.

Paul Blomfield: I certainly endorse the comments by the Secretary of State in relation to Holocaust Memorial Day.

The latest figures for Sheffield from February 2020 to April 2021 show a 46% increase in the number of private renters claiming housing benefit, because wages are simply not keeping up with rising rents. Some 28% of private rentals in the city contain category 1 hazards, which involve serious risk of harm, compared with just 4% of social housing. As the cost of living crisis deepens and energy bills rise, what are the Government doing to alleviate pressure on private renters and when this year will the Secretary of State publish the rental reform White Paper?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is the case that there are a number of people in the private rented sector who are not getting the deal that they deserve, both regarding the level of rent and the decency of their homes. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on that.

T2. [905199] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Minister consider changing building regulations to require all new buildings to be self-sufficient in energy, which would have the triple benefit of securing supply, helping us towards net zero and reducing fuel poverty?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): The building regulations set out the minimum energy performance standards. They do not prescribe the technology that is required—they just set the goal—which allows builders and homeowners the flexibility to innovate and select the most practical and cost-effective solutions appropriate to any development. Obviously, our intention is to go further. We have had the part L uplift, and building regs will move towards the future homes standard for 2025.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Would the Secretary of State give the House a clear and categorical assurance that if he cannot ultimately extract enough money from industry finally to fix the building safety crisis he will not allow the Chancellor to raid his Department's budgets, including funding already allocated for new affordable homes, to make up the shortfall?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me an opportunity to update the House on the conversations we had with developers last Thursday. Those conversations were cordial and constructive, but we were also clear about the obligation developers have. I am confident that they will meet it.

T5. [905204] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): There are currently no statutory requirements for a planning authority to consult immediate neighbours in another planning authority, nor are there any in relation to the issuing of certificates of lawful use. As a result, green belt development by the back door is happening right now between my constituency and neighbouring South Staffordshire. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss those complexities in more detail?

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I am obliged to my hon. Friend. As he will know, protecting the green belt is a firm manifesto commitment. Certificates of lawful use are intended to confirm that an existing

use of land is lawful from a planning perspective. If there is any doubt about the lawfulness of the existing use, local authorities should reject the application and consider other ways of ensuring that progress is made. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The latest figures from Shelter show that women are 36% more likely than men to be in a constant struggle to afford housing costs or be in arrears and that under this Government nearly two thirds of people in temporary accommodation are women. Can the Secretary of State not see that the Conservative cost of living crisis, the damaging cuts to universal credit, and the failure to give renters security in their homes are forcing even more women into homelessness?

Eddie Hughes: What we do see is that Government funding during the covid pandemic has meant that, as the English housing survey tells us, 93% of people are up to date with their rent. With regard to helping people, our renters White Paper is coming forward. We will be doing things like banning no-fault evictions and they will help renters regardless of gender.

T6. [905205] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): I warmly welcome the Future Homes Standard, but in the meantime many homes are being built to the environmental standard of several years ago purely because of when their planning permission was granted. They will need to be retrofitted. Will my right hon. Friend consider requiring companies to build to the latest environmental standard, rather than the one in place when permission was granted, after a certain time has elapsed?

Michael Gove: We absolutely will consider that. I know there are innovators in my hon. Friend's constituency who are leading work in that precise area, so I look forward to working with him and those in his constituency to achieve just that goal.

T4. [905203] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Do Ministers agree that the western gateway partnership, of which Newport is a part, deserves the same level of recognition and visibility in Government as other pan-regional partnerships, such as the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine? If so, will Ministers appoint a ministerial champion?

Michael Gove: Yes, and let me consider it.

T7. [905206] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Barton upon Humber, a market town in my constituency, is, like many up and down the country, having to contend with many residential planning applications. Public services such as school places and dentistry are unable to cope with existing pressures. Will Ministers consider strengthening the guidance to planning authorities and to planning inspectors to ensure that the availability of public services is paramount in dealing with those applications?

Christopher Pincher: Again, I am obliged to my hon. Friend for his question. I will certainly consider the specific points he makes, but that is exactly what we want to do. Through the planning reforms we envisage, we want to ensure that developer contributions are made much more quickly in the process so that the sort of infrastructure he talks about is provided, and to ensure that greater land capture value is collected to ensure that those services can be provided to a greater extent.

T8. [905207] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will have read the latest report from the all-party parliamentary group on left behind neighbourhoods, which highlighted that there is a cost to the economy of £30 billion due to health inequalities in our poorest areas. Would the Secretary of State be willing to hold a meeting with the authors of the report and the officers of the group to discuss what more needs to be in the White Paper on levelling up around health inequalities?

Michael Gove: I absolutely will do that. Although the White Paper will include a number of proposals to help to reduce health inequalities, as Professor Michael Marmot's report and work—alongside the all-party group's work—have demonstrated, significant work is required to be done on everything from obesity to cramped housing in order to deal with those issues.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Almost a year ago, the Minister for Housing, who has responsibility for planning, wrote to Liberal Democrat-run Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council to say that it does not have an up-to-date local plan and to ask it to do more to get it updated. In his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), the Minister said that part of the problem is that areas become open to speculative developments. One way to strengthen the position is by having a neighbourhood plan, as in vanguard places such as Market Bosworth. The problem is that they are being ridden roughshod over. Will he look to strengthen the role of neighbourhood plans in future, and failing that, in the meantime, will he encourage Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council to get its plan sorted and up to date?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my hon. Friend. We certainly want to extend and expand the use of neighbourhood plans in constituencies such as his—in Hinckley and Bosworth—and he is right that I have written to the council to encourage it to get on and update its local plan. It is nice to see that there are a couple of Lib Dems on duty here, because they ought to hear that there is nothing liberal or democratic about exposing a local community to speculative development. That is what the people in Hinckley and Bosworth face and I am very keen to make sure that my officials work with Hinckley and Bosworth to get that plan in place.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Under the Conservatives, home insulation rates have plummeted, emissions from homes are higher now than they were in 2015 and UK homes are the least energy-efficient in the whole of Europe. To help struggling families with the spiralling cost of energy bills, will the Minister finally copy and paste Labour's plan to retrofit every single home with a special scheme to help low-income households?

Eddie Hughes: The Government have a number of plans to help with the decarbonisation of homes for people with low incomes. A good example would be our social housing decarbonisation fund, which already has £1 billion committed to it from this year.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take steps to make sure that when we build very large new housing developments, it is easy for new residents to get into their local surgery or new health centre?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We absolutely need to make sure that easy access to infrastructure and public services is part of significant housing developments, and I look forward to working with him to ensure that that is true in South West Bedfordshire and elsewhere.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): In my city of Norwich, we have had less levelling up and more vital services simply levelled. Will the Secretary of State stop fobbing us off with insufficient, ad hoc pots of money and ensure that sustainable, long-term funding is given to my city and county councils, the real engines of any levelling-up agenda?

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): We do provide sustainable funding. The hon. Gentleman will know that the provisional local government finance settlement made available an additional £3.5 billion to councils. Norwich City Council had an increase in cash terms of up to 4.8% compared with last year, giving it a total core spending power of up to £18.6 million. Norfolk County Council got an increase of up to £55.5 million and the core spending power of South Norfolk District Council was at £15.7 million. If there are further conversations that he would like to have, I am very happy for him to write to me.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Compared with communities across the country, Basingstoke has built 50% more new homes over the past two decades. Local residents want to make sure that we have homes for our children and grandchildren, but we believe that Basingstoke has been doing far more than that. What advice can my right hon. Friend give my local council on how we can make sure that future projected house-building levels reflect the very special circumstances in my constituency?

Christopher Pincher: I commend my right hon. Friend and her council for all the sterling work they have done to build the homes in Basingstoke that people need. The important thing is for people to make sure that their local plan is up to date and that they agree a sound plan with the Planning Inspectorate, based on the constraints that there are, to get the number of houses they need. I am very happy to work with her to make sure that that is so.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Secretary of State cannot fail to have noticed the number of questions in this session that have centred on the White Paper. Councils around the UK want to know what the timetable is, what the criteria are and when it will be published. Inverclyde wants to apply for this levelling-up funding. Will he help me? Does he want to visit Greenock, so I can show him the projects?

Michael Gove: I have spent many happy hours in Greenock and am looking forward to many more. I imagine that time there can only be enhanced, whether in Cappielow or anywhere else, with the hon. Gentleman. The key thing about the levelling-up fund is that constituencies across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland, have benefited. I look forward to working with him and others to ensure that—*[Interruption.]* As a Morton fan, he will appreciate that patience is a virtue.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The forthcoming levelling-up White Paper is an opportunity to undo the imbalance in investment in active travel networks between towns and urban areas, which get the lot, and villages, which get very little to connect them. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a meeting between me and one of his Ministers, together with members of Potton Town Council and Sandy Town Council, to talk about their active travel network?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that Warwickshire County Council is keen to have some sort of county unitary deal, but he will also be aware that Warwick District Council and Stratford-on-Avon District Council recently voted for a combined council—probably with the intent of a unitary one as well. Should it not be down to not the councillors or the Secretary of State, but the public to decide the future of local government across our country?

Michael Gove: I welcome the moves across Warwickshire to consider how services can be delivered even more efficiently as part of the economic success story that is the greater west midlands. In particular, I commend the leadership of Izzi Seccombe, the leader of Warwickshire County Council. The fact that she and her group continue to be re-elected with ever greater levels of support indicates that she is in a strong position to help bring people together across the constituency.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Volunteers who serve on our parish councils do an amazing job. In rural communities such as mine, there are significant challenges to attending meetings, such as transport, adverse weather, work and caring responsibilities. In the pandemic, we have seen that the virtual or hybrid format works well. Moving forward, will the Secretary of State look to allow parish councils to sit in virtual or hybrid format to increase and widen access and to help them work to the best of their ability?

Michael Gove: If during the pandemic we had not allowed councils to meet virtually, not only would we have impaired the effective working of local government, but we would never have known about Jackie Weaver and the country would have been the poorer for it. I commend the work of parish councils and others. I am strongly in sympathy with the view that hybrid meetings should continue in order to ensure the maximum amount of efficiency. There is a case for saying that certain significant local authority meetings should occur with all councillors present, but I want to proceed with the maximum amount of consensus to reflect the maximum level of efficiency and in particular of sensitivity to those who serve in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's, where the rurality and dispersed nature of representation are important.

Tonga: Volcano Eruption and Tsunami

3.33 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, if she will make a statement on the eruption of Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano and subsequent tsunami in Tonga.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): I am saddened and shocked by the situation in Tonga, and my thoughts are with all those caught up in the appalling devastation caused by the volcanic eruption and tsunami. My thoughts are also with the family of the British woman, Angela Glover, who died following the tsunami. We are supporting her family and are in contact with the local authorities.

On 15 January, a series of eruptions from the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai underwater volcano were heard and felt across Tonga. Shortly afterwards, a tsunami hit the islands, including the main island of Tongatapu and the capital Nuku'alofa. There were reports of waves between 5 metres and 10 metres high, and the eruption caused waves as far away as Peru. The explosions have left Tonga covered in a layer of thick volcanic ash. New Zealand and Australian defence forces conducted surveillance flights, which reported catastrophic damage on Atata island, Mango island and Niniva island. Full details of the humanitarian impact are still unknown, but there are estimates that up to 80,000 people will have been affected.

The UK is providing vital humanitarian support: working closely with our Australian and New Zealand partners, we have provided 17 pallets of supplies, including 90 family tents, eight community tents and wheelbarrows, specifically requested by the Tongan Government. That support is en route to Tonga on Australia's HMAS Adelaide and is expected to arrive the day after tomorrow. The Royal Navy ship HMS Spey should arrive in Tonga on 25 January. Supplies to be delivered by HMS Spey will include bottled water, sets of personal protective equipment and first aid kits, and we are looking at further support.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies disaster relief emergency fund has released £345,000 to the Red Cross Society of Tonga to support its response in assisting the affected communities. The UK is a significant donor to the DREF. More generally, since 2015 Tonga has received more than £25 million of UK aid through our core funding to multilateral institutions. The UN is deploying a crisis expert to co-ordinate the response, and the UK is funding that deployment.

Layla Moran: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. The Tongan Government have called the eruption an "unprecedented disaster". A volcanic blast visible from space, more powerful than an atomic bomb, it has affected 85% of Tongans through not just the eruption itself, but ash, which now poses a threat to drinking supplies and public health, and the tsunami that swept away their homes and washed Lisala Folau out to sea. He said:

"When I was in the water I remember going under eight times. My legs are disabled and don't function as well".

He clung to a log for 27 hours and, miraculously, survived.

Tonga may be a long way away, but it is a Commonwealth partner and ally and a long-standing friend. The Tongan high commissioner has asked me to convey their thanks to the British people for their support. I hear what the Minister says, but she will know that none of the money going to Tonga is new. Why have we not promised any new bilateral aid, since we have not given them a penny this year? Does she regret the decision to cut aid to our Commonwealth partners more generally by £500 million, and does she accept that the aid cut leaves us responding to disasters such as this with one hand tied behind our back? Under our presidency of COP26, attention was rightly given to the vulnerability of small island developing states such as Tonga. Does she agree that unless we help Tonga to recover fully from this crisis, it will struggle to put in place the necessary mitigations for the even greater climate crisis?

Will the Minister also answer the following questions? What conversations has she personally had with Tongan counterparts? She mentioned supporting one family, but are there other UK nationals needing support in Tonga? Can she clarify the role of HMS Spey in further operations, especially given Tonga's zero-covid approach? Finally, I note the drift and delay in the Government's response to the crisis. It took nearly a week for any kind of an announcement—an announcement made by press release. I tabled named day questions that were due last Friday, but I have yet to hear back. Is that indicative of what happens when development is relegated from its seat at the Cabinet table?

Vicky Ford: Tonga and the UK have deep historical ties and are both Commonwealth members. Tonga is a low-lying state, extremely vulnerable to climate change impacts, as the hon. Lady points out, and to natural disasters. We are working with other Commonwealth members, including Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, to support Tonga as it recovers from this damage. It is absolutely right that we should work hand in hand with our partners.

The hon. Lady asked about communications. As she knows, connectivity has been affected throughout Tonga, including the undersea cable. Repairs to that cable are due to start towards the end of this week, but I am told it will take up to two weeks to restore it. In the meantime, the satellite telecommunications have been invaluable. As the hon. Lady will know, our high commission in Tonga reopened just last year, and our high commissioner has been using her satellite phone not only to communicate with the crisis centre in Wellington but to give support to British nationals. As for our ongoing support, the 17 pallets requested by the Tongan Government have been sent, and, as I have said, HMS Spey is on its way and due to arrive shortly with, for example, water and urgently needed health supplies.

I cannot comment any further, because we are continuing to monitor the situation and work with partners to assess the full need—which is also why the United Nations crisis management is so important, and that is what we are funding.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): No one could fail to be moved by the pictures of the devastation in Tonga that has followed the tsunami, but there are good links between Tonga and our country, not least through some of the fantastic Tongan rugby players who are playing

[Mark Pawsey]

here—including Malakai Fekitoa, who has set up a relief fund that has already raised £50,000. Malakai plays for the Wasps in Warwickshire, and the club has said that it will donate 20% of its ticket revenues from the match that will take place this weekend. Will the Minister join me in applauding the rugby community for coming together and supporting Tonga in the way that it always would?

Vicky Ford: I absolutely do pay tribute to those rugby players for all they are doing to raise funds for this urgent situation, and wish the Warwickshire Wasps well in all their matches. I do not know how they intend the money they are raising to be distributed, but I should be more than happy to make contact with my hon. Friend and perhaps put him in touch with the DREF so it can ensure that the money reaches those who need it on the ground.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Catherine West.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Like many others, Opposition Members have been shocked by the scenes and personal stories coming from Tonga, and, with communications difficult, I fear that there is still bad news to come. I know the whole House will join me in expressing our complete solidarity with the people of Tonga, and passing our condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the tsunami and the volcanic eruption.

Tonga and the United Kingdom have deep and abiding relationships, not just in respect of education, culture and the armed forces, but across both codes of rugby—including rugby league, which I know you will appreciate, Mr Speaker; it is not just rugby union that has the civic society reach. I understand that it is at Coventry that the Wasps play, but let us leave that one there. It is fantastic to hear that clubs are joining together across civic society to help out with the crowd funding for this terrible disaster.

It is right that the UK is stepping up to the plate to offer support. I commend the high commission for the work that it has already undertaken to support the people of Tonga, working closely with the Australian and New Zealand defence forces to deliver aid speedily. It is so important for things to be done speedily in the Pacific. That support will clearly need to be maintained to ensure that Tonga can rebuild and recover in the short to medium term, and, given our close links, we should continue to do that. Our support should not be just a knee-jerk reaction now; it should be sustained.

I have four asks of the Minister. First, which additional assets, if any, are being deployed to Tonga or are under consideration for deployment once the Spey effort has concluded? Secondly, may I press the Minister on the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) about the need for rebuilding in the context of the cuts in development aid? Thirdly, what is the medium to long-term strategy for the region? What conversations has the Minister had with regional partners to ensure that there is a co-ordinated and sustained approach? Finally, what specific assessment has been made of the impact that the eruption and tsunami will have on the covid effort specifically, and of how the UK can assist in health protection?

These are difficult days for the people of Tonga, and our response in the House has the potential to be of great relief and comfort to them in their hour of need.

Vicky Ford: I absolutely recognise the rugby league contribution in Tonga. In fact, I have fond memories of attending an international rugby league tournament in Hawaii in the 1990s, when I first saw the Tongans play—but let us return to more serious matters.

HMS Spey will arrive in Tonga tomorrow, 25 January, but we are considering further support. The deployment of the UN crisis expert will help to co-ordinate that response, which is why we are funding it.

On official development assistance budgets, we maintained our rapid response capabilities in close coordination with the Australian Government, and that means that the support we are providing is tailored to the needs of those affected. Since 2015, Tonga has received more than £26.9 million of aid, as I mentioned, through multilateral organisations. That includes the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and others. Indeed, more than £300 million in aid has been provided to other, similar Pacific island states.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): With reference to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), can we go one step further and consider whether Six Nations rugby games could hold a special collection for Tonga that could then be match-funded by the British Government, so that everyone would have the chance to contribute in a sport to which Tonga has contributed so much itself, and the Government can play their part too?

Vicky Ford: I would be more than happy to discuss with my hon. Friend how rugby fans can help the people of Tonga.

Mr Speaker: And this year we have the rugby league world cup, which Tonga is meant to be playing in, so we need to give it what support we can.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on asking the urgent question. The House is united in our sadness for the people of Tonga, and we want to see what we can do to assist the efforts that have been outlined today. I am very struck by the suggestion that the Six Nations could make a contribution or hold some sort of fundraiser. I told the Scottish Rugby Union that we would be very strongly behind that to help the Tongans in their time of need.

I acknowledge what the Minister has outlined about the aid that has been requested and is on its way to Tonga, but we really must reassess the cuts that have been made, particularly to the emergency disaster relief fund—from £500 million to £35.4 million. We cannot do more with less, and under this Administration we have seen a deliberate and wilful cutting of capacity to deal with climate change, international development and emergency responses. I urge that we continue our long-term engagement with Tonga and the wider world, and get those budgets back up to the levels they need to be at for the challenges ahead.

Vicky Ford: We remain a world leader in international development. In 2020, we were the world's third largest donor. We have rightly been looking at how that aid is best used, which is why during the conference of the parties and in the run up to it, we announced that more funding from the UK would go towards international climate change. That is particularly important for supporting small island developing states in their adaptation and resilience programmes. It is also why it is so important that we work towards delivery of the $100 billion climate finance goal. In Glasgow we also announced the global goal on adaptation and the Glasgow dialogue on loss and damage, and that will help better coordinate financial support when there are extreme impacts such as this. We are leading in our work on climate change through COP and through our ODA.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I am reassured by what the Government are doing in sending aid to Tonga. It is one of the longest-serving members of the Commonwealth and a real friend of the UK. The islands are largely covid-free and there are some concerns that aid workers are isolating on arrival and food is being quarantined, and that is delaying the relief operation somewhat. What discussions has my hon. Friend had on urgently speeding up the process so that the people of Tonga can be helped as fast as possible?

Vicky Ford: That is an excellent question. Covid-19 has had little effect on Tonga directly, because strict border controls have meant no cases in the community, although there was one case in quarantine on 27 October, which was contained. However, the border closures have deeply affected the tourism industry and impacted the economy. That will be something for ongoing discussions between Tonga and those who are seeking to provide support with humanitarian aid.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is all well and good to talk about how much money is being given to Tonga, whether in aid or through climate adaptation finance, but the fact is that Tonga is expected to pay more than $18.5 million in debt repayments this year, with a lot of it going to China, and the International Monetary Fund lists Tonga as being at high risk of debt distress. In my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on small island developing states, I met the Jubilee Debt Campaign earlier today to talk about how SIDS struggle to access comprehensive debt relief. The existing G20 schemes fall well short of helping SIDS. What can the Minister do to ensure that we do not give to Tonga with one hand and take away with the other?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady rightly raises the impact of Chinese debt. China increasingly seeks long-term strategic influence in Pacific island countries. As the Foreign Secretary stated last week, Russia and China are working together more and more to assert their dominance over the western Pacific. It is estimated that no fewer than 44 low to middle-income countries have debts to Beijing that represent in excess of 10% of their GDP. The UK is working and will continue to work with international partners, including to help countries avoid loading their balance sheets with debt that they cannot afford.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and echo the words from throughout the Chamber about our solidarity and support for the people of Tonga. I welcome the fact that we are working closely with our close allies in Australia and New Zealand to support the people of Tonga and very much welcome the Minister's statement that the UK is redeploying military assets to provide humanitarian support for Tonga. Does my hon. Friend agree that this situation shows the importance and strength of the Commonwealth? We pull together and really help out when partners are in need.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Commonwealth is an incredibly important partnership. In fact, the Foreign Secretary was in Australia only last week. In this instance, there has been great support from Australia and New Zealand and from the Fijian authorities, who intend to send a cargo vessel with items requested by the Tongan authorities, which is expected to arrive on the 28th of this month.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How can the Minister possibly claim that the UK is leading in this kind of response when the severity and frequency of natural and climate disasters is only increasing yet the UK budget for response is falling significantly and dramatically? Will she confirm whether the costs of the HMS Spey will also be counted—we might say double-counted—towards NATO's 2% target for military spending?

Vicky Ford: We should be praising our Royal Navy for its very swift action. It is remarkable that HMS Spey is due to arrive the day after tomorrow. We should be deeply grateful to members of the Royal Navy for all they do to support people in trouble around the globe.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Tonga is a long-standing friend and partner to the UK, not least through its membership of the Commonwealth, and the UK has a long and proud tradition in respect of disaster relief. Will my hon. Friend confirm that those involved in the delivery of relief, including our excellent Royal Navy, are working to deliver it as quickly as possible?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend asks a good question. We are endeavouring not only to deliver relief as quickly as possible but to deliver the supplies that the Tongans themselves have identified that they need. That is what will happen with the first pallets, which are due to arrive the day after tomorrow, and then with HMS Spey when she arrives.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My heart goes out to the Tongan people. Many of us were saddened by the shocking scenes and the devastation brought about by the eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano and the ensuing tsunami. Our international development budget cuts and the cuts to emergency and disaster relief are widely documented, and the poorest communities around the world lament them. Will the Minister ensure that we give the maximum possible support to our friends in Tonga and that that support is sustained into the medium to long term and does not cease immediately after the current crisis has ended?

Vicky Ford: As I have said, we remain one of the largest donors—in fact, the third largest donor—of international development aid in the world. We are giving the support to the Tongan people that they are requesting at the moment, and it is right that, right now, we focus on the emergent needs. Sadly, we know that full recovery from incidents such as this can take some time, but that is why we are working with the UN, and with our friends in Australia and New Zealand and others in the region.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The tsunami and the effects of the volcano eruption brought back painful memories for many of us who lost friends and relatives in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, so we know the pain that many are suffering. We wish Commander Proudman and his crew on HMS Spey the very best for their mission there, but will the Minister look seriously at the long-term consequences of this? The UN estimates that 60% to 70% of livestock-owning households have seen animals perish on the islands. The agricultural sector in Tonga accounts for 65% of the country's exports. When the Minister is looking at what medium and long-term support we can offer, can we also include ensuring that some of the poorest farmers in the world—the poorest farmers in Tonga—are getting the support that they need to get back on their feet?

Vicky Ford: As I have said, in addition to the immediate needs, we are also looking at further support. However, we do already give significant funding to Tonga and other Pacific island countries. We tend to do that through our core funding to multilateral organisations, including the World Bank, the Green Climate Fund and the Asian Development Bank. Indeed, we estimate that, since 2015, the Pacific island countries have received more than £357 million of UK funding through those organisations. It is often best to work with partners through that type of organisation to make sure that the best long-term support is given.

Covid-19: International Travel

3.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on international travel.

It is less than two months since the first cases of omicron—the most infectious variant to emerge since the start of the pandemic—were confirmed in the UK. Thanks once again to the nationwide army of medical staff and volunteers and the huge public response to our booster programme, today, with more than 137 million jabs administered, including nearly 37 million boosters, Britain is one of the most vaccinated countries in the world, and omicron is in retreat. Thanks also to the decisions taken by the Prime Minister, we have managed to turn the tide on the virus in remarkable time, while keeping our domestic society one of the most open in the world. Today, I can confirm to the House that our international travel regime will also now be liberalised, as part of our efforts to ensure that 2022 is the year in which restrictions on travel, lockdowns and limits on people's lives are firmly placed firmly in the past.

From 4am on 11 February, and in time for the half-term break, eligible, fully vaccinated passengers arriving in the UK will no longer have to take a post-arrival lateral flow test. That means that, after months of pre-departure testing, post-arrival testing, self-isolation and additional expense, all that fully vaccinated people will now have to do when they travel to the UK is to verify their status via a passenger locator form.

We promised that we would not keep these measures in place a day longer than was necessary. It is obvious to me now that border testing for vaccinated travellers has outlived its usefulness, and we are therefore scrapping all travel tests for vaccinated people, not only making travel much easier, but saving around £100 per family on visits abroad, providing certainty to passengers, carriers and our vital tourism sectors for the spring and summer seasons.

Let me explain to the House how this will work in practice. For now, we will maintain our current definition of "fully vaccinated" for the purpose of inbound travel to the UK. That means two doses of an approved vaccine, or one dose of a Janssen vaccine. We will go further. The measures for those arriving in the UK who do not qualify as fully vaccinated have not changed since last March, so the time has come to review that position, too. Today, I can announce that passengers who do not qualify as fully vaccinated will no longer be required to do a day 8 test after arrival or to self-isolate. They will still need to fill out a passenger locator form to demonstrate proof of a negative covid test taken two days before they travel, and they must still take a post-arrival PCR test. This is a proportionate system that moves us a step closer to normality while maintaining vital public health protections.

For kids travelling to the UK, under-18s will continue to be treated as eligible fully vaccinated passengers, which means that they will not face any tests at the UK border. Today I am pleased to confirm that from 3 February, 12 to 15-year-olds in England will be able to prove their vaccination status via the digital NHS pass for international outbound travel. Again, this should help families to plan holidays for February half-term.

Reconnecting with key markets not only boosts the UK economy but will help the hard-hit aviation sector to take back to the skies, so I can also confirm that from 4 am on 11 February we will recognise, at the UK border, vaccine certificates from 16 further nations, including countries such as China and Mexico, bringing the vaccine recognition total to more than 180 countries and territories worldwide.

One consequence of covid and of rapidly changing infection patterns across the world has been a border regime that, while necessary, has at times been complex, confusing and very difficult to navigate. That has been a challenge for many people who have been travelling over the past two years, so we will also simplify the passenger locator form, making it quicker and easier to complete, and from the end of February we will also make it more convenient by giving people an extra day to fill it out before they travel. Although the option for a red list of countries will remain in place to provide a first line of defence against future covid variants of concern arriving from other countries, we are looking to replace the managed quarantine system with other contingency measures, including home isolation, provided that we can develop new ways to ensure high levels of compliance. In the meantime, our contingency measures remain available. As the House knows, there are currently no countries on the red list. However, I must make it clear that those contingency measures will be applied only if we are particularly concerned about a variant of concern that poses a substantial risk—one that is even greater than omicron.

The UK Health Security Agency will continue to monitor threats and will maintain a highly effective surveillance capacity, monitoring covid infections overseas. But I can announce that, over time, we intend to move away from blanket border measures to a more sophisticated and targeted global surveillance system. I also commit us to developing a full toolbox of contingency options to provide more certainty on how we will respond against future variants. The Government will set out our strategy, including how we will deal with any future new strains of the virus, next month. We will continue to work with international partners, including the World Health Organisation, to help all countries to achieve a level of genomic sequencing to monitor variants that is much closer to our own world-leading capacity.

We are moving into a new phase of the fight against covid. Instead of protecting the UK from a pandemic, our future depends on our living with endemic covid, just as we live with flu, for example. We will set out our strategy for that transition in the spring. But as we navigate our recovery, and as we return to more normal travel next month, our advice to all eligible adults who have not been vaccinated stays the same: please get jabbed as soon as possible, and if you have had two jabs, please get boosted. I have recently been speaking to many of my opposite numbers around the world, and they have made it clear to me that regardless of what we do, they are very likely, by this summer, to require that people have had the booster jab. So my advice to anyone who wishes to travel this year, including during the summer, is: do not leave it too late to get your booster as you are very likely to be required to have had it by the third country that you are flying to.

We already have one of the most open economies and societies in Europe, with the result that our GDP has outpaced that of other G7 countries. With the changes announced today, we have one of the most open travel sectors in the world. Of course we know that covid can spring surprises, but everybody should now feel confident about booking holidays, business trips, and visits to families and friends abroad. Be in no doubt: it is only because the Government got the big calls right—on vaccination, on boosters and on dealing with omicron—that we can now open up travel and declare that Britain is open for business. Today we are setting Britain free. I commend this statement to the House.

4.4 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. The aviation industry is a critical part of the economy, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs across the UK, but the Government's haphazard approach and their refusal to grant it sector-specific support have caused it real damage. The UK's aviation sector has experienced a slower recovery than any of our European counterparts and had more than 60,000 job losses by summer last year. It is baffling that the Government did not do more to support it as a strategic sector and potentially attach conditions for transition to net zero, as countries such as France and Germany did.

Too often, the Government's indecisive and chaotic approach to each wave of covid infections has failed to keep the country safe while causing uncertainty for the travelling public and for business. Each time a new variant has emerged, the Government have taken a different approach to border controls and restrictions. We all want to see safe international travel and the protection of public health, and that is precisely why the public finally deserve to hear in full how Ministers intend to develop a comprehensive, easily understandable plan to ensure that that can happen in the months ahead. We must avoid the sheer absurdity of the Secretary of State announcing one set of restrictions before promptly scrapping it and announcing a completely different regime. Businesses and the public should have clarity about what changes the Government will likely make in the event of a new variant and not have to wait until 5 pm on a Saturday night for new measures required on a Monday morning. That is why it is welcome that the Government will finally produce a plan to allow the travel industry and the public the certainty that they need. Labour recently outlined its plan on the action needed to learn to live well with covid and protect lives and livelihoods and help avoid harsh restrictions in future waves. That is critical when it comes to the travel industry.

As the Secretary of State said, it is inevitable that another variant of concern will emerge. With omicron, the Government's plan was upended, proving that it was simply not fit for purpose. They must learn lessons and outline a framework to guide future decision making and detect future variants. Therefore, when the Secretary of State publishes his plan, will he include the data that will guide the approach to future variants and detail the economic, wellbeing and equality impact of each scenario? Given that only last week the Health Secretary said that testing will remain part of our walls of surveillance, does he agree that we should build up the UK's sovereign capability to ensure that we always have a supply of tests when we need them? Has he considered the merits of a surveillance system to detect possible future variants?

[Louise Haigh]

Last month, the Secretary of State confirmed to me that he would raise my concerns and those of the Competition and Markets Authority about the PCR market with the Health Secretary. Will he update the House on what progress he has made in cleaning up that market for future travellers? I would also be grateful for his confirmation of whether the passenger locator form will be available in other languages in the future.

The announcement is also a visible reminder of another stark truth: in an era of global international travel, no one is safe until everyone is safe. In the UK, we have learnt that lesson the hard way. If we are to break the endless cycle of new variants, we must vaccinate the world, yet Ministers simply have not met the commitments made last summer at the G7 to get the vaccine rolled out to other parts of the globe; instead they cut the overseas aid budget. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps the Government are taking to deliver on those measures committed to at the G7?

Living with covid cannot be just an empty slogan with no plan. That is why we need to properly prepare and protect our lives and livelihoods in the future. It is time that Ministers finally gave passengers, industry and communities the security and stability that they deserve.

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Lady very much for—I think—welcoming the statement. I understand that she has not been in post for very long, but she will be aware of how her predecessors simultaneously called for us to tighten up and close the borders while relaxing and opening them, often on the same day or a few days apart. I understand that she has recently come to the post, but, if she does not mind my suggestion, there is one thing that she can do current day. She may be able to speak to her Welsh Labour governmental counterparts, who are a constant drag on opening up aviation. I hear that she is very keen that we move ahead with today's plan; I hope she will be able to assist by persuading them to move a little more promptly.

The hon. Member quite rightly says that we need a toolbox to respond, as I mentioned in the statement. She is absolutely right about that; we do need a toolbox going forward, which is a question not just for the UK. This morning I was talking to the chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, who co-chairs a World Health Organisation body working exactly on the global response. One of the most important things to stress in my statement, which might have been missed, is that we believe the time is right to move from individuals being checked as they come over our border—as we know, whatever the variant, eventually it gets in, as every country has found—to a global system of surveillance that is every bit as good as what we have here. "World leading" is applied often in the UK, but we genuinely have a world-leading version of surveillance, through the amount of coronavirus testing we can do with genome sequencing, and we are helping other countries through practical applications to catch up.

The hon. Member also asked what the Government are doing to honour the bid we made at the G7 and elsewhere on coronavirus. I gently point out that the AstraZeneca vaccine, developed by Oxford, has been used in more arms than any other vaccine in the world—I think I am right in saying that about 2.5 billion people have been vaccinated with it. That is a huge contribution, in addition to COVAX and all the other donations that we have made and will continue to make.

I am pleased to hear, I think, that the whole House welcomes the plan to unlock and to set Britain free.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Not only is today's announcement another example of our living with covid; this is also a landmark day for international travel, a sector that has been absolutely decimated over the last couple of years. Today's news is surely the evidence it needs to show that people should now feel confident to book with certainty. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State ensure a culture across Whitehall so that if there are bumps in the road, international travel will not be the sector that has to be made an example of, and so that we continue to support international travel and all the fantastic people who work in it?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As we have learned more about the pandemic, as it becomes endemic, it is quite right that our response should be different—a moment ago I mentioned shifting from individual testing at the border to a global system of testing—so I do give him that commitment. We are now looking to work with a new toolbox that will help to set out a framework. We will of course always act quickly if we have to, but I believe that the days of having to go back to big lockdowns at the borders are past.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Once again, though, we have an announcement on coronavirus restrictions being made to the press before Parliament. While the Government, and particularly this Secretary of State, are desperately trying to save the Prime Minister's skin with announcements such as this or the removal of plan B restrictions generally, Parliament is repeatedly cut out of the loop, as the Government throw out policies to placate their base.

However, we have reached the omicron peak a little earlier than projected. Indeed, today in Scotland nightclubs can reopen, while the caps on indoor events, table service requirements for venues selling alcohol and social distancing have also been removed. However, as the Secretary of State acknowledged, the revised requirements that he has announced will apply to England only. What discussions has he had with colleagues in the devolved Administrations about the measures in his statement, and how did they factor into his decision? The devolved Administrations were consulted very late on previous changes to travel regulations and not given adequate time to look over the data and announce a decision simultaneously.

The Secretary of State proposes to remove the requirement to test on arrival, but he will surely accept that regular lateral flow testing is still imperative in identifying and tracing cases more generally, and allowing everyone to travel safely. What representations has he made to his colleagues to ensure that LFTs remain free on request for everyone, regardless of income? Can he also tell us a bit more—it has been asked about and I do not think he answered—about what mechanism will be put in place to monitor possible new variants, now that testing is no longer in place?

Finally, the aviation industry is still in the same position on the sector-specific support promised by the Government nearly two years ago. The impact of covid on travelling patterns and customer behaviour will not end with today's statement, so what plan does the Transport Secretary have to fulfil the promises made to the sector at the start of the pandemic for real, targeted Government support? The job retention scheme was not enough for the 3,000 people in my constituency who lost their jobs, or for those who faced fire and rehire by companies such as Menzies Aviation and British Airways.

Grant Shapps: I just want the hon. Gentleman to know that, through the UK Health Security Agency, the four chief medical officers were involved in studying the data and reaching this conclusion. I also spoke this morning to a member of the Scottish National party Government, Michael Matheson, about these measures, so there has been that communication.

The hon. Gentleman asked, as he often does, about the support. It has now reached £8 billion for the aviation sector. We have had not just the job retention programme but loans, in addition to assistance to those on the ground. I ask him to look a little closer to home, because both Edinburgh and Glasgow airports have criticised the SNP Government for refusing even to meet them. They have said that that is in stark contrast to the proactive approach of the UK Government, and the Scottish Passenger Agents' Association has said that the industry has been "sacrificed" by the SNP, so I do not think we want to be taking too many lectures about support. Support comes from getting airlines back in the sky.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): There has been nothing particularly unusual about the constantly changing rules in England—that has been replicated all around the world—but one thing that has been consistent throughout is the World Health Organisation's advice that travel restrictions and border closures are not necessary because they do not prevent the spread of this virus or variants, so I welcome today's statement. Of course, many of our popular holiday destinations in North America and in Europe will continue to require testing of people from third countries, so what discussions is the Transport Secretary having with other countries to encourage them to take the sensible approach that we are taking here in England?

Grant Shapps: I am in constant contact with my equivalent numbers around the world. We are having frequent conversations, in particular with G7 countries—we are, of course, chairing the presidency of the G7—with which I speak regularly. The biggest thing that could happen elsewhere is for them to reach our level of booster protection in particular. Our 37 million booster jabs have provided us with a wall of protection. Once that is available elsewhere, that will help to get international travel moving even faster.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's announcement. As the Secretary of State knows, the Transport Committee has been unanimous in calling for this for some time. Could he explain, though, why he is keeping the passenger locator form? It is a massive irritant to people. It is much longer than the EU form and is very complicated. I hope he is not keeping it because he is relaxing the rules for the unvaccinated. That would be very unfair on the vaccinated. Will he reassure this House that, given what the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) has said—namely, that compared with domestic health measures, these onerous testing requirements and draconian travel restrictions have been shown to have absolutely zero impact on the spread of covid and omicron over the past two years in this country—the Government will never resort to this policy again?

Grant Shapps: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's comments. I also heard him making approving noises while I made my statement. He will want to speak to his Front-Bench colleagues, who, unlike Government Members, have consistently wanted us to go further and faster on closing the borders. We have tried to balance it against the critical nature of our island status as a nation.

The right hon. Gentleman asks a very good question about the passenger locator form and why we are keeping it. Members may not be aware that it is our only way of distinguishing between those who are vaccinated and those who are unvaccinated when they use e-gates to come into this country. A lot of work has been done to automate the e-gate so that it reads the passport number, refers back to the passenger locator form and knows whether that individual has had to take a pre-departure test—which people who have not been vaccinated have to take—and, indeed, whether they have to take a day 2 test. It is there for a critical reason. I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the complexity of the passenger locator form, and I committed in my statement to going back through it and simplifying it, which is much easier to do now that we have the status of fully vaccinated people not requiring any tests at all.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My sincere thanks to the Government for these measures to reduce significantly the testing requirements for international travel during covid-19. As the Secretary of State has correctly mentioned, other jurisdictions around the world will require British travellers entering those countries and territories to do testing. Will he continue to monitor those testing companies in this country that, frankly, have been ripping off many customers and providing appalling service? One example affecting a number of my constituents is Chronomics. People have paid a lot of money to it and have waited in many cases more than a week to get test results back.

Grant Shapps: I absolutely commit to doing that. The system of testing is run by our colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care, and I share the frustration that the public have, as I know do colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care, that on occasions these companies have in some cases not behaved appropriately. The vast majority of the time, it should be said, they have provided excellent private sector provision, without which we would not have had capacity within the NHS, but I share my hon. Friend's concern, and I know that colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care are on the case.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is right that the Secretary of State said in his statement that the border at times, while necessary, has been

"complex, confusing and very difficult to navigate".

That is fair. I highlight that, on a visit to Heathrow airport with the Home Affairs Committee last year, we heard about the frustration and the lack of engagement with the industry and trade unions by the Government

[Dame Diana Johnson]

on the regimes they were bringing in. Will the Secretary of State comment on the long-term plans to fully engage with unions and the industry to keep the border safe?

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Lady is clearly right to say that it was complex, confusing and difficult, as I mentioned in my statement. That was by necessity in many cases: we had to act over a weekend, and we had to change the law in a matter of four hours with the mink variant, I recall. That has necessitated a lot of discussions. I want to let her know that I have been in constant contact with, for example, Heathrow and the airlines. The aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), is doing that day in, day out, and we commit to redouble our efforts with them. Today is a watershed moment. Those are not my words, but those of Airlines UK, which has said that this is a real opportunity for the industry to get back on its feet and back into the air.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): When it comes to international travel, Her Majesty's Government can obviously control only so much. I warmly welcome the excellent Secretary of State's announcement today, which puts inbound international travel in the best place it has been for two years. I am especially grateful—as he knows, I raised this issue in the House last week with the Prime Minister—as are many of my constituents with half term and Easter plans, that 12 to 15-year-olds will be able to prove their vaccination status via the digital NHS pass from 3 February, as the Secretary of State said in his statement. Can I ask him how practically that will happen, given that under-16s are currently barred from accessing the NHS app at all? What about young people who have had one jab and a recent infection? How will they be able to prove that status? Some practical examples, please.

Grant Shapps: On the NHS pass, my hon. Friend is right that 12 to 15-year-olds have not been able to access it up to now. They will be able to access that in time for half term. So they will be able to show their status or, indeed print it out in advance. Up to now, they have had to call 119 and order it. That system will change, which I know he will be pleased about.

The situation of people who have had a jab and then caught coronavirus and are then potentially in a position of natural immunity will continue in the short term to be looked at on a case-by-case basis, but we recognise that is an issue. I have spoken to the chief medical officer and the chief exec of the UK Health Security Agency as recently as today on that issue, and the ideal will be in a February review to move more towards a system of being able to accept natural immunisation. There is more work to be done on a technical level before that can happen.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Secretary of State is totally right that covid can spring surprises—in new variants, more often than not. There is one way we can ensure fewer new variants, and that is to vaccinate the world, but we are a long way away from that. In low-income countries, just 10% of people have had two doses. What discussions has he had with Cabinet colleagues to ensure we live up to the 100 million doses that we have pledged to COVAX? Only 30 million have actually been deployed, and we have only six months left.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we are not safe until everyone has been vaccinated and boosted, as well. I do not think any country in the world can claim a better record on this, not least because, as I mentioned, we have invented the Oxford jab, in part thanks to money that the taxpayer and this Government put in. That has gone on to vaccinate 2.5 billion people, many of them in developing nations, with the huge advantage of not having to cold-freeze the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine at minus 70°. We are also committed to providing those vaccinations to the COVAX programme. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady on progress towards that target, so that she can have more detail.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend's statement is welcome and is likely to encourage more families to book trips abroad and the like. What assurance can he give me, following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) about the resilience to be guaranteed by the Department of Health and Social Care and others, that, as families take up the opportunities to make bookings, families with children—I declare an interest—under 12 will not see their youngsters left behind at the gate because they have not been able to prove what it is that they need to prove?

Grant Shapps: Some pretty good reassurances is the answer. It is obviously the case that something worse than omicron could come along. We very much hope—and the chief medical officer and others suggest—that, over a period of time, although not necessarily in a linear fashion, this should become more and more endemic. As for what we accept when people come here, under-18s are exempt. As for flying out, we are making it easier, with 12 to 15 year-olds being added. The message to my hon. Friend, to his constituents and to the whole House is that I hope to expect no surprises between now and the February half term, and enjoy your holidays.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State, but he will know that other countries still have testing requirements for travellers from the UK. I know that that question has already been raised. He will know that, if testing is to be valid for international travel, tests must be conducted by private testing firms, which are often based in the UK. One of my constituents has written to me and said that she paid £150 for a single test. In response to a previous question, the Secretary of State said some empty words, which I have heard several times. Is there a concrete plan of action from the Government to crack down on this overcharging?

Grant Shapps: It is, as the hon. Lady knows, a competitive testing market, in which many different organisations offer to test people. The market, of course, ensures that prices are being driven down. In fact, we have an exact test on this, because for a while in Wales, under the Welsh Government, only NHS tests were allowed to be used, which meant that Welsh people had to pay more for their tests, rather than doing it privately. I do not think that she means to attack the private system, but she is right that it is wrong for people to be ripped off. The Competition and Markets Authority is looking into it and, as I have said, my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care who look after this side of things are also working to make sure that the system is not being abused. Removing the necessity to have tests removes a large part of the need for that marketplace as well.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Throughout the pandemic, Labour has flip-flopped, calling for a pause on international travel, then opposing all and any restrictions. May I thank my right hon. Friend for ignoring its game playing—*[Interruption]*—and for his unalloyed support for international travel and a truly connected global Britain?

Grant Shapps: Opposition Members do not like the question because it is true. Everyone has witnessed it. Their Front-Bench team has flip-flopped on one side, then the other side; one way, then the other. As it turns out, it is important to follow the evidence, and when the evidence says that we should unlock and do away with these tests that is exactly what we have done. *[Interruption.]* One would think that the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who is shouting from a sedentary position, would welcome the data-driven, spreadsheet-based approach to this issue.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. My former colleagues in the travel industry will certainly welcome it. But how did we get here? Billions of people are protected by the vaccine developed in Oxford; we have had a successful vaccine programme here; and so many people have now been boosted. We are now the freest state with travel restrictions and we are coming out of lockdown nationally. Does that not show that we have great leadership from our Prime Minister and our Government? But why can we not bring it forward a bit from 11 February?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend got a question in there at the end. He is absolutely right about everything he said before the question. I would add that we lead the league table not only in being unlocked as a nation, but in growing as an economy because of the difficult decisions we made at the right times to make sure that 37 million people got the booster in their arm and we are able to keep ourselves unlocked, and that of course includes setting Britain free so that people can travel. In answer to his question about timing, it takes a little bit of time to put these technical changes in place and, indeed, to bring all four nations with us in the process. The good news is that it will be ready for the half-term break.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): As someone who represents a very international constituency, where people regularly fly not just for holidays but for business and family reasons, I warmly welcome these changes. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this shows that we as a Government have made the right decisions when it comes to this virus, and that our country is fully open and ready for business?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is never going to be easy tackling a global pandemic—there is no rulebook or textbook that tells us what to do—and some things we will have got right, while other things we have had to learn along the way. Two years in, I think today is a momentous moment, as Airlines UK has said, because it is important that we are able to unlock the borders and that people are able to travel again to do business and, most importantly, to see family who many people will not have seen for a very long time because of the prohibitive costs, so I am sure the whole House will welcome today's statement.

Point of Order

4.31 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During this statement, Lord Agnew has resigned at the Dispatch Box in the other place for the Government's "woeful" and indefensible oversight of covid fraud. Have you had any indication of the Government's wish to make a statement on their woeful oversight of covid fraud, Lord Agnew's resignation and the dying days of this Government, who are currently in the cones hotline phase of their demise?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no, but in fairness, it is obviously not a point of order for me. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard that and will want to clarify the position—it is rather unusual for people to resign at the Dispatch Box—so we will leave it at that for now.

BILLS PRESENTED

High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Grant Shapps, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Priti Patel, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, and Secretary Alistair Jack, presented a Bill to make provision for a railway between a junction with Phase 2a of High Speed 2 south of Crewe in Cheshire and Manchester Piccadilly Station; for a railway between Hoo Green in Cheshire and a junction with the West Coast Main Line at Bamfurlong, south of Wigan; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 228) with explanatory notes (Bill 228-EN).

Fire Safety Remediation Charges (Recovery and Enforcement) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to introduce a moratorium on recovery and enforcement action by freeholders and managing agents relating to service charges increases, fees or demands for payment in respect of leaseholders' share of the costs of fire safety remediation work; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 234).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c)(i) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), business in the name of Ian Blackford may be entered upon at any hour and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours; proceedings shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply.—*(Steve Double.)*

Opposition Day

[9TH ALLOTTED DAY—SECOND PART]

Cost of Living Increases

4.33 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes there is a cost of living crisis hitting homes across the UK; regrets the UK Government's current plan of reductions in certain benefits and tax rises coupled with rising costs of the UK leaving the EU; is concerned that the UK has the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north west Europe and the highest levels of in-work poverty this century; and calls on the Government to take immediate action with a package of measures to boost incomes and reverse rising poverty, including reinstating the £20 universal credit uplift, introducing a Real Living Wage of at least £10 an hour, introducing an energy payment for low income households, and matching the Scottish Government's Scottish Child Payment for families across the UK.

Normally, during an Opposition day debate the Tories will berate Opposition parties for not dealing with the issue of the day, crying distraction and somehow suggesting that the discourse in this place of those on the Opposition Benches is focused solely on the interests of the SW1 chatterati, not what matters most to our constituents back home. However, today of all days, not least in the light of what Lord Agnew has just done along the corridor, that seems somewhat ironic, given that the Tories themselves are engaged in a civil war and are besieged by paralysis, with a Prime Minister who might be in office, but is certainly not in power. Let us be clear that we have a British Government and Prime Minister who are so focused on saving their own skins that they are neglecting to get on with the day job; indeed, they are overlooking the biggest issue of the day: the cost of living crisis.

The impact of the cost of living crisis is far-reaching, but as constituency MPs, we know that it is certainly impacting the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, and yet this British Government indulge in navel-gazing, while our constituents are stuck in the middle of an economic tornado. Simply, the Tories are more focused on saving "Big Dog" than on saving our constituents' money from spiralling energy bills, and more focused on Operation Red Meat when our constituents can hardly afford red meat, as inflation causes the average supermarket shop to skyrocket.

Like most Scots, I think that the Prime Minister is utterly unfit for office and should have resigned long ago.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman just spoke about the Government navel-gazing and having the wrong priority. Does he therefore agree that Nicola Sturgeon has absolutely the wrong priority? She was on TV again yesterday, saying that she is going to kick-start yet another campaign for independence, at a time when we should be focused on the economic crisis, the energy crisis, affecting all our constituents?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have great respect for him, and I only wish that that was extended to him by the Leader of the House, who I think said he was a "lightweight". The reality is that the people in Scotland have voted in successive elections to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands, to ensure that the likes of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, who are posted missing, do not have the economic levers that are causing such distress just now.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman made reference in his previous comments to the impact on constituents of the cost of living. I therefore ask him to take this opportunity to tell the Labour Front Bench that Andy Burnham's Greater Manchester clean air zone, a tax on business and jobs in my constituency emanating from the Labour party, should not come into place—it should be scrapped. I would welcome the hon. Gentleman joining me in our joint campaign to improve the standard of living for constituents all across the country.

David Linden: Gosh, that could have been a career-ending one for me there. At the moment, it appears that the Labour party and the Conservatives are getting on quite well. The fact that a Tory MP can cross the Floor to the Labour party suggests that the back channels between both parties are relatively good at the moment. I am sure that those can convey whatever message to Andy Burnham that the hon. Gentleman wishes.

As I was saying, if Scotland were independent, we would not have the likes of Boris Johnson and his ilk anywhere near the levers of economic power. In many respects, however, revelations about Downing Street being turned into a frat house during a deadly pandemic are just the latest in a long litany of bad decisions by a Prime Minister Scotland did not vote for. So I must confess that I find myself somewhat baffled and wondering why being economical with the truth in this Chamber is the tipping point for Tory MPs on the Prime Minister.

Why did Tory MPs not see the Prime Minister for what he really is when he compared Muslim women wearing the hijab to looking "like letter boxes"? Why did they not see him for what he really is when, talking of the war-torn Libyan city of Sirte, he said it could be the "new Dubai" and that all that had to be done was

"to clear the dead bodies away"?

Why did Tory MPs not see him for what he really is when he unlawfully shut down Parliament, misled the Queen and tried to run the country like a tinpot dictator?

The fact is, this Prime Minister should resign because he is morally bankrupt—he always has been. But if we do not tackle the cost of living crisis now, frankly, it will be many of our constituents who are bankrupt. *[Interruption.]*

I see that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), who has managed to come to the Chamber rather than touting for a second job, wants to intervene. If he wants to intervene on the speech, he is welcome to do so, otherwise than chuntering from a sedentary position.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am wondering when the hon. Gentleman was going to get on to the subject of the debate, which is the cost of living crisis.

David Linden: I find it rather ironic to take lectures from the hon. Gentleman about getting on with the job. He was touting for plenty of jobs recently, so that is

rather a sticky wicket for him to be on. If he bears with me for a moment, we will get on to the substance of the matter. I look forward to seeing how he votes on the motion tonight and what he does for his constituents in Shrewsbury.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Chancellor of the Exchequer was everywhere; he was all over the airwaves. Indeed, if Rishi's slick Instagram graphics could be used as a currency, we would probably all be millionaires, just like the Chancellor himself. However, it is clear that the Chancellor does not have a plan for the biggest issue of the day: soaring costs. He talks endlessly about his plan for jobs, but it is clear that his only plan for a job is moving next door when the Prime Minster is forced from No. 10. But I guess we can all console ourselves that at least when he does take over Lord Brownlow will not have to worry about WhatsApp messages looking for a tap to pay for an expensive new wallpaper.

Spending £840 on a roll of wallpaper gets to the very heart of why this Government are so detached from the economic reality of the everyday lives of our constituents. Inflation is rising at a frighteningly rapid pace: this month it rose to 5.4%, the highest in almost 30 years, since March 1992, when it was 7.1%. But we have not reached the summit yet: Paul Dales of Capital Economics has said that inflation is now expected to hit 7% by April.

These abstract figures have a very real impact on people in difficult financial situations, and they often under-represent the true effect of rising inflation, as highlighted in an excellent Twitter thread by Jack Monroe, which I commend to the House. Monroe wrote:

> "This time last year, the cheapest pasta in my local supermarket…was 29p for 500g. Today it's 70p. That's a 141% price increase as it hits the poorest and most vulnerable households."

That rise becomes a pattern for many essential household items. The cheapest rice was 45p for a 1 kg bag; today it is £1 for 500 grams.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): May I ask a quick question? Can the hon. Gentleman recall which of the following schemes rolled out since March 2020 he did not approve of: the job coaches or kickstart schemes; the restart schemes; the lifetime skills guarantee; the holiday activity fund; the household support programme; or perhaps we should just remember the furlough schemes that protected the jobs and livelihoods of millions of people throughout the United Kingdom? Did any of those schemes not help the Scots?

David Linden: It is on the record that the SNP supported a number of those schemes. For example, the furlough scheme was hugely important, certainly at the beginning of the pandemic; about 13,000 of my constituents were involved in that scheme and it was something the SNP called for. However, we profoundly disagreed with the Government winding the scheme down too early, and there was such a lack of clarity on that; I know personally many constituents who lost their job in the intervening period from the Government saying it would be wound down to then extending it. The Government could have continued with a number of other schemes, too. We know fine well that as we come out of the teeth of this pandemic the economy is incredibly fragile, and my criticism, which I would reflect back to the hon. Gentleman, is that so many of these schemes were wound down far too early and that has led to the difficult financial pressures many of our constituents feel right now.

I was telling the House about some of the rising costs our constituents are facing in their average supermarket shop. Canned spaghetti was 13p and is now 35p, a price increase of 169%. These price changes will force more people towards food banks, and more people towards having to make that horrendous decision between heating and eating.

On top of the increasing price of food bills, energy prices are surging, delivering yet another devastating blow to families who are already struggling. Household energy bills were the biggest driver of inflation after Ofgem, the energy regulator, lifted the price cap on domestic gas and electricity. That meant that gas bills rose by 28.1% in the year to October, while electricity climbed by 18.8%. National Energy Action estimates that there are already 4.5 million fuel-poor households in the UK, which is nothing short of a disgrace, and if the cap rises, as is predicted, the number will rise to 6 million. Only two weeks ago there was an Opposition day debate in this Chamber and I was highlighting the rising cost of energy to Ministers, yet still, two weeks on, no action has been taken; indeed, if press reports are to be believed, a meeting between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister on this issue was cancelled last Wednesday because they were both so busy courting Tory Back Benchers. When I met with Age UK and Age Scotland after their snap survey, it was revealed that 96% of their respondents were worried about their energy bills.

Again, these statistics have real-life consequences. I have heard far too many stories of people in my constituency moving their beds into their sitting room so they will only have to heat or light one room over the winter months. That an image not of Victorian Britain but of 21st-century global Britain.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point about the poverty faced by people in this current cost of living crisis. The all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness last year produced a report that pointed out that the energy costs for people diagnosed as terminally ill double when they are at home. When people are struggling anyway, that is an absolutely damning statistic for people with a terminal illness, yet the Government have failed to move on bringing forward faster access to benefits to support them. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is just a disgrace from this Government?

David Linden: It is. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who very ably chairs the all-party group for terminal illness. It is one of the things that really sticks in the craw of many of us. My hon. Friend highlights some of the very real struggles facing people with a terminal illness. The idea that the biggest issue of the day—the cost of living crisis and spiralling energy bills, which people who are terminally ill are struggling with—is being overlooked at the expense of things like "Fizz with Liz", and the Chancellor and the Prime Minister courting the Tea Room really is an absolute disgrace.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way; he is being generous with his time. On energy bills and the cost of living, does he agree that one of the great losses to these islands is the fact that the Government prevented more land-based wind turbine arrays which would have brought

[Matt Western]

down the cost of energy significantly as the cheapest provider of electricity? That would have made a significant difference to energy costs.

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that it is important that we invest in renewable energy. That is why we on the SNP Benches are fully committed to that. It is only a shame that the official Opposition have such a bizarre fascination with investing in nuclear, but perhaps he will reflect on that.

The current Tory austerity policies do absolutely nothing to relieve the suffering of people who are impacted by the cost of living crisis. In the last year alone, the British Government cut the £20 a week uplift to universal credit. Indeed, they refused to extend the £20 uplift to the 2.5 million disabled people on legacy benefits. That is subject to proceedings in the High Court at the moment. The Government battled against extending free school meals to the poorest children in society. We learned only at the weekend about the allegations that the then Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) personally threatened Members of this House who dared to vote for that with the withdrawal of funding from their constituencies. The Government scrapped the triple lock for pensioners who already have one of the worst pensions in the OECD.

All of that is important, because those cuts only deepen and cement the inequalities in our society. They will impact the lives of the poorest people we represent for decades to come. The British Government must reflect on that. When people fall into destitution, it is other parts of the state, almost certainly councils, that have to bear those eye-watering costs. We know that destitution is bad for the economy. It is not good for the economy for people to be unable to afford their weekly food shop or heating bills. Let me be especially clear to the Government that a proliferation of food banks is not a sign of the big society; it is a sign of bad policy from people who think that spending £840 on a roll of wallpaper is somehow normal.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a number of excellent points about the damaging nature of UK Tory policy. Does he agree that the benefit cap is one of those problems as well? Is he happy today to put on record the SNP's support for the Poverty Alliance "Scrap the Cap" campaign?

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. Yes, absolutely. The SNP has stood on successive election manifestos with a commitment to scrap the cap: both the benefit cap and the welfare cap. I am only disappointed that the SNP had to lead the charge against the welfare cap in a vote only a couple of weeks ago. Perhaps when people in Scotland are considering who best serves them, whether it is Westminster or the Government they elect in Scotland, they will reflect on that. My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

It is imperative that the Government bring forward solutions to address the cost of living crisis and lift millions of people from experiencing poverty this year, just as we have set out in the motion. The Government must introduce an emergency package to boost household incomes and reverse rising poverty levels across these islands. We want the Chancellor to launch a multi-billion-pound Brexit recovery fund to mitigate the worst, and growing, costs of Brexit.

Those solutions should go hand in hand with other suggestions to tackle rising energy prices. We need a one-off payment to low-income households, which could be identified by way of the council tax reduction mechanism. We must increase and extend the warm homes discount, delivered through customers' bills and funded by the UK Government. We need the child payment, as seen in Scotland, to be rolled out right across these islands. We need the April benefits uprating to better reflect inflation rates and to reinstate the £20 a week uplift to universal credit which so many of our constituents described as a lifeline.

There is no shortage of suggestions to Ministers for how we can alleviate family income pressures, but there is, I am afraid, a shortage of urgency and energy on the part of a Government distracted by their own internal wrangling. I have a huge amount of respect for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but the fact that, on a day when we have another debate about the cost of living increase, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is nowhere to be seen raises a lot of questions about what he is doing.

In contrast to the cruel policies in Westminster, the Scottish National party Government have committed to relieving poverty wherever they have the power to do so. That is why we have doubled the Scottish child payment, rolled out 11 benefits—seven of them brand new—extended free school meals and are working actively to reduce poverty and inequality, and all the while Westminster undermines those efforts. However, the constitutional reality is that, with limited tax-raising powers, no borrowing powers and 85% of welfare spending still controlled in this place, those policies can only go so far when they are continually undermined by Tories and Tory Governments whom Scotland did not elect.

Since being elected four years ago, I have stood in this Chamber warning the Government about the impact of their policies that make life so much harder for my constituents in Garthamlock, Craigend and Easterhouse. When I make those pleas, it is not from a purely dogmatic or ideological point of view. I do so because every Friday morning at my surgeries I meet people who, because of the way life has panned out, rely on the safety net of the social security system, to which we all contribute and which is frankly no longer able to cope. I appreciate that a Tory MP in the home counties probably does not have much care for, or cause to interact with, the Department for Work and Pensions on a daily basis.

Duncan Baker: It is interesting listening to the number of fiscal policies mentioned that are so terrible and have led to the United Kingdom's recovery being so poor. Can the hon. Gentleman then explain why every economist predicts that the United Kingdom economy is expected to show the highest growth and bounce back of any nation within the G7?

David Linden: I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the fact that the UK was one of the worst hit by coronavirus, perhaps due to the bungling of this Government in the initial days in locking down far too slowly.

Daniel Kawczynski: One thing the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned in the course of his speech is the extent of the national debt. We have a debt-to-GDP ratio of over 100%, we have more than £2.4 trillion in debt and we are spending more on servicing the national debt than on the entire education budget—£55 billion. Will he not at least acknowledge that the extraordinary levels of debt incurred over the banking crisis and now the pandemic inevitably mean that the Treasury is unable to do straight away everything he seeks to have it do for our constituents?

David Linden: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's intervention is that he suggests that this is some issue the Government have just happened upon. His Government have been in power for 11 years, so the level of national debt is something they have a direct link to. He should reflect on that.

As I said, a Tory MP in the home counties—or indeed Shrewsbury—might not have much opportunity to interact with the DWP on a daily basis, but I do, and my constituents often tell me—*[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, the hon. Gentleman chunters somewhat. I know he might be quite excitable, and he is probably envisaging this as some sort of on-screen job interview, but if he will calm himself for a moment, I can perhaps make a little bit of progress with my speech—*[Interruption.]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Kawczynski, this is not a conversation; it is a debate.

David Linden: You are right, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is not a conversation, and I am not in a position to help the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham with his school fees, so if he just hangs on, I will deal with him a bit later.

I say to the Government that although the DWP does not often act very helpfully towards my constituents, it is clear from people back home in Glasgow East that the Government are out of touch and do not have the solutions for the big issues of the day. They say that a week is a long time in politics, and yes, for Westminster watchers and the chattering classes, defections, letters to the 1922 committee, Tea Room gossip and "fizz with Liz" are probably all very exciting, but for most of us, it just feels like groundhog day. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and this whole Tory Government are simply not listening. They are not listening to charities and non-profits, which have repeatedly highlighted the cost of inaction, with soaring prices. They are not listening to the voices of Opposition Members, even though we were told that Brexit meant that Parliament would take back control. Ultimately, and worst of all, they are not listening to the people of Scotland and they are not acting when people need help most.

Inflation is rising, costs are soaring and time is running out for hard-pressed families. The Tories need to stop navel gazing and start acting to head off the cost of living crisis. Frankly, anything less is only a further dereliction of duty on the part of a Government whose focus is elsewhere. Yes, we can debate this tonight, but in reality, the time for talking has passed. Talk alone will not pay our constituents' energy bills at the end of this month. We need to act now and the Government need to start getting on with the day job. I commend the motion to the House.

4.56 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): I am glad to have this opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government. The UK economy is roaring back to life following the unprecedented challenges that we faced during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. It may have escaped the attention of Scottish National party Members, but job vacancies have hit record highs while the unemployment rate has fallen sharply. Our GDP has rebounded. We are set to enjoy faster growth this year than anywhere in the G7, and our economy is now bigger than it was before the pandemic.

Job numbers are rising, unemployment is falling and the economy is back to its pre-covid level, but that has not happened by accident. The economy has been able to bounce back so strongly and quickly only because of the decisions made by this United Kingdom Government. Let me remind the House of those decisions. The £400 billion of direct economic support has protected millions of people's livelihoods in every part of the United Kingdom, with the furlough and self-employment income support schemes safeguarding, in Scotland alone, more than 1 million jobs. The success of our vaccine roll-out has meant that we have retained the most open economy and society anywhere across Europe. And our plan for jobs is creating work opportunities and ensuring that people have the right skills to get into work.

Those achievements are underpinned by the fiscal strength and stability of our economic union. That is why, at the autumn Budget, we confirmed that the devolved Administrations are receiving an extra £12.6 billion of Barnett-based funding this year, taking total block grant funding to £77.6 billion.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In that glowing list of statistics that the Minister had prepared for him, does he have a figure for the current level of child poverty on these islands, and if not, why not?

Mr Clarke: What the hon. Gentleman misses is that a jobs-based recovery lies at the heart of this Government's plan. If he cares to look at this Government's record, as opposed to that of the Government in Holyrood, he will see that the United Kingdom Government outperforms Holyrood every day of the week on job creation, growth and stability, which, in the end, goes to the heart of all our constituents' life chances.

Over the next three years, the Government are providing, on average, an additional £8.7 billion a year to the DAs on top of their annual £66 billion baseline. That funding equates to an average of £4.6 billion a year more for the Scottish Government, £2.5 billion more for the Welsh Government and £1.6 billion a year more for the Northern Ireland Executive. It will support the devolved Administrations as they shape the economic recovery and decide how best to invest in the vital public services on which people rely.

We are acutely aware of the cost of living challenges that people face. Inflation is expected to average around 4% this year, 2.6% next year and then to return to target by the end of 2023. It is true that almost every other developed economy is facing similar issues due to increasing global demand after the pandemic and a global spike in wholesale gas prices.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister says that almost every other economy is facing similar issues, but, of course, other economies have not recently left the European Union. The British Retail Consortium has said that labour shortages—shortages of HGV drivers and warehouse workers—which affect the supply chain are one factor behind the increases in food prices that all our constituents are experiencing. What assessment are the Government conducting of the impact of leaving the EU on the huge increase in food prices in our supermarkets?

Mr Clarke: Contrary to that rendering of events, the challenges we face in relation to the supply of HGV drivers are those faced by countries across Europe. This workforce is predominantly elderly, and has been badly affected by the covid pandemic. Industries across the world, let alone Europe, continue to be affected by the same challenges that we all face of constrained supply and rising demand as the world wakes up from the pandemic. This has absolutely nothing to do with Brexit, and it is fundamentally misleading to suggest otherwise.

As I said to the House earlier this month, we are focused on easing the pressures caused by the cost of living wherever and however we can, and of course we are constantly considering what more we can do. I should remind the House that we are providing support, worth about £12 billion in this financial year and next, to help families with those challenges.

Drew Hendry: The Minister has said that the Government will do whatever they can to help people. I have raised this point before. The Government promised people who have been diagnosed as terminally ill that they would ensure that the six-month rule was moved aside so that those people could gain access to their benefits and survive this cost of living crisis, but nothing has been done. The Government are dragging their heels yet again. Will the Minister give a commitment now to taking this issue back and making sure that it is sorted out once and for all, so that those people who are dying, and their families, can have the support they deserve?

Mr Clarke: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Gentleman speaks in this place. I am happy to take away the issue to which he alludes and to look at it with my Department. However, the wider point stands: we are providing £12 billion this year and next. That is a huge package of support, targeted precisely at the issues that face this country and countries around the world.

To help working people, we cut the universal credit taper rate from 63p to 55p—that is a huge reward for making work pay—and increased the work allowance by £500 a year. That is a tax cut for nearly 2 million low-income families, worth £2.2 billion in the next financial year, or, on average, about an extra £1,000 in their pockets. Furthermore, from this April we will increase the national living wage by 6.6% to £9.50 an hour, benefiting more than 2 million workers across the UK. We have also frozen fuel duty for the 12th year in a row, which means that the average UK car driver will save about £1,900 compared to the level in 2010. All that builds on the help we have already provided elsewhere, such as the increase in the local housing allowance. We have increased it significantly Great Britain-wide, so that it stands at the 30th percentile of market rates, and we have made a commitment to keep cash levels at those higher rates in the future.

For those who needed extra help with their housing costs, we provided £140 million for discretionary housing payments in England and Wales this year; about 4 million people are being given help with their council tax bills; and we are investing over £200 million a year to continue the holiday activities and food programme for disadvantaged children in England. We are providing nearly £5 billion to help children and young people catch up on lost learning. On top of that, we are taking a range of further steps to relieve the financial pressures on the most vulnerable: for instance, we are expanding the Great Britain-wide warm home discount to about 780,000 additional households. In September we announced the £500 million household support fund to help vulnerable people throughout the UK with essentials such as energy, clothing and food bills this winter. Of course, we are also giving NHS workers throughout the United Kingdom a 3% pay rise in recognition of their service during the pandemic.

As I have said, the Government are striving to shield families from the rises in the cost of living, but as I also said a moment ago, the best anti-poverty strategy is a jobs strategy. That is why we believe that supporting, protecting and creating employment opportunities, and giving people the skills that they need, is economically right for this country. That vision is being turned into reality through our investment in the plan for jobs, which is benefiting people in every part of the United Kingdom.

Matt Western: May I make two points? One is about jobs. I think the Minister would accept that the kickstart scheme has been disappointing. The target was set at 250,000 jobs, but I think that only 100,000 have been filled so far. If I could draw his attention back to a point he made earlier about our economic performance and growth in GDP, he said that we were the strongest in the G20. But when we look at the statistics on the OECD website, between Q3 2019—pre-pandemic—and Q3 2021, we are the third worst performing country in the G20.

Mr Clarke: If we look at the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts, we see that they are for 6.5% growth in 2021 and 6% growth in 2022. That is an incredibly strong economic recovery, and one of which we should be very proud. With regard to the kickstart scheme, we obviously always want to encourage maximum uptake and we continue to work to refine that scheme and make sure it works to best effect, but it must be considered in the context of an unemployment rate that is now only just over 4%. We have a very tight labour market, and that very success is leading to some of the challenges that we face in getting people through every different scheme.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the increases in energy costs, can the Chief Secretary tell us how much extra VAT the Treasury is taking, what extra oil and gas revenues are coming in and how much extra is coming in from the increased price of petrol at the pumps? Why are the Government not using that money to mitigate costs for the 6 million households that will be plunged into fuel poverty when the cap rise kicks in in April?

Mr Clarke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The concept of some kind of VAT windfall is fundamentally misleading. VAT is charged at 5% on energy and if people are spending more of their disposable income on energy and less on issues that are taxed at the full rate, the Exchequer gets less money rather than more, so it is a net cost to the Exchequer.

We have doubled the number of work coaches and we have provided vital help for those who have been unemployed for over three months through the job entry targeted support scheme, which is worth £200 million. Of course, we are not just helping people into work: we are also supporting them to develop the right skills so that they can adapt and thrive in the job market. In the Budget, we committed to increasing skills spending in England by £3.8 billion over the Parliament, and the plan for jobs is therefore giving people the invaluable tools they need to succeed.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): This is an important motion as it gives the House an opportunity to debate the cost of living crisis. It would be churlish to ignore some of the good measures that the Government have brought forward, but in talking about support for people to get into work and for those in work, there appears to be some contradiction with the proposed hike in national insurance. There seems to be some prevarication today around that policy and the suggestion that the Government may change tack. Is the Chief Secretary in a position to update us on that?

Mr Clarke: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman back in the Chamber. The reality is that nobody came into politics to raise the burden of tax on our society. We all feel that keenly, but we are equally clear that we face a £400 billion bill for covid costs. We have a clear programme of targeted investment in the NHS and in social care, designed to alleviate the backlog in treatment and the longstanding challenges that we know we face with an ageing society. We owe it to people to be candid that there are no easy solutions to how to pay for that. I certainly do not want—and I know the Chancellor does not want—to put more borrowing on to the books, when we know that those are structural challenges that need to be paid down, and therefore a tax increase is the most sensible and honest way for us to pay for that. In that spirit of total candour, that is why we are bringing that forward, and we believe that it is the right thing to do. The sadness is, of course, that the Opposition did not support us in that, and persistently criticise us for not spending enough on the NHS when they will not will the means for that investment.

Direct financial assistance, help to find work and support for people in every region and nation of the UK are just some of the ways in which the Government are aiming to secure a more prosperous future for this country. I note that the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) calls for the Government to spend more. I should remind him that the devolved Administrations already have the power and the money to make spending decisions of their own. The Scottish Government have significant tax and welfare powers, so they can choose to raise more tax if they want to spend more on welfare.

For our part, we have shown unequivocally that we are not afraid to make the big decisions to do right for the people of this country. That is why we are investing £600 billion in the public sector over the course of this Parliament, on our health service, our education system, and securing our borders. That is why, at the spending review, we took the total we have committed to the economic infrastructure to £130 billion. That is why, to respond the hon. Gentleman's point, we are spending more on the NHS as a result of the health and social care levy as well.

David Linden: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury talks about the big decisions that the UK Government have taken. Of course, part of the reason they can take these so-called big decisions is that they have the ability to borrow; he just talked about £600 billion. He knows fine well that in Scotland we do not have those powers. If he wants people in Scotland to have them, why will he not give Scotland the borrowing powers to do so?

Mr Clarke: This Government have worked very closely and co-operatively with the Scottish Government in Holyrood to make certain that we can, together, provide the most effective, targeted package of support for all our constituents. I have talks with Kate Forbes, the Scottish Government Finance Minister, coming up later this week as part of the fiscal framework. We continue to discuss all the issues that fall within the relationship between Holyrood and Westminster, and we do so on a genuinely open and constructive basis. We are quite clear that we have provided the devolved Administrations with a huge—indeed, a record—Barnett settlement precisely to make sure that all contingencies thrown up by the pandemic can be covered.

The broad context of our need to deliver the right package of support does not come at the expense of our commitment to safeguarding the country's finances. As I have said to the House before, reckless promises are the privilege of opposition; tough choices are the task of parties that are in government. We cannot fritter away our achievements on unfunded pledges. That is particularly true at a time like this when our level of debt means we are vulnerable to shocks, including changes in interest rates and inflation. In fact, a sustained one percentage point increase in interest rates and inflation would cost over £22 billion by 2026-27. Given that this country has suffered two so-called once-in-a-generation shocks in just over a decade, the case for building a stronger economy with the headroom to guard against shocks is clearer than ever. We must act to build on that headroom now, because to fail to do so would be folly.

I recognise, as do all my ministerial colleagues, the very real pressures that are facing families in every part of the United Kingdom right now. I have set out the comprehensive action we are taking to address those challenges. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, it is so disappointing that Nicola Sturgeon's first priority, as the omicron wave eases, is not the cost of living but rather another divisive independence referendum. The SNP's record of failure in government stretches back years. Before the pandemic, the SNP presided over the lowest rate of job creation in the United Kingdom. Under the SNP, Scottish schools have plummeted down international league tables, denying children a good education. Scotland has the highest drug death rate in Europe, tripling on the SNP's watch.

[Mr Simon Clarke]

Now, instead of supporting Scotland to recover from the pandemic, here we are, on an Opposition day, with the SNP again fixating on issues with the negativity that has become its hallmark. The SNP has entered into a nationalist coalition with the Scottish Greens, taking on extreme policies that will be hugely damaging for Scottish workers, in exchange for pushing ahead with its plans for that divisive second referendum. It is more focused on the break-up of our United Kingdom than on supporting Scotland to recover from the challenges the pandemic has created. By contrast, throughout this pandemic, the United Kingdom Government have taken the difficult decisions necessary to steer the country through the crisis we have faced. We will continue to strive to secure the better and more prosperous future that the people of this country deserve.

5.14 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I say how pleased I am that we are having this incredibly important debate today? While Parliament has been hopelessly paralysed by the Prime Minister's refusal to do the decent thing and resign, I hope that the debate allows us an opportunity to discuss the human reality of this Government's cost of living crisis.

Up and down this country, people are facing the anxiety that comes from worrying about whether they can pay their bills and heat their homes. Having to decide whether to eat or heat is an awful indictment of Britain in the 2020s. If that decision has to be made by one person, that is one person too many, but, under this Government, millions of people are having to make that decision. Moreover, there is total inaction; there is nothing to say. There is also nothing in this light parliamentary timetable to help. The Minister himself, in the near 20 minutes that he spoke, gave nothing to help families in this country in the cost of living crisis. The Government could have tabled an amendment to the motion—I am sure that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) would have allowed it—for us all to vote for and back to help the people of this country with the cost of living crisis, but we have radio silence. Because of that inaction, more and more face hardship and worry.

Inflation stands at more than 5%, a 30-year high. Energy bills are to rise by 40%—on average by £700 per household—shortly. The average UK worker is still not any better off than they were when this Government took power more than a decade ago. The Chancellor is planning the largest tax hike in living memory, taking the tax burden on working people to its highest since 1950. What a record that is: a high-tax, high-inflation, low-growth Tory party. This weekend, we were led to believe that the entire Cabinet would get behind stopping the planned national insurance tax rise, but what did we hear today? We heard the Chancellor turning against his own national insurance hike by calling it the "Prime Minister's tax". That is a whole new definition—the Chancellor of tax-dodging. Nobody in the country is buying it. The Government should bring the question back to this House if they want to vote the national insurance rise down.

The human cost of the situation is stark. In the past year, Citizens Advice Scotland has seen a 38% increase in the number of people coming to it for advice about being unable to pay their mortgage. The figure is much higher for those unable to pay their rent. Polling conducted on behalf of the same organisation found half a million Scots cutting back on their food spending in order to pay their energy bills this winter—before those huge rises. What is worse is that official statistics on inflation do not capture the full extent of the difficulty facing families, especially those on low incomes. The food blogger, Jack Monroe, who rose to fame with recipes showing how to cook family meals for less than £10 a week, highlighted that on social media over the weekend. They gave examples of the cost of the cheapest pasta in the local supermarket rising by 141% in the past year, the cost of the cheapest bag of rice rising 344% and the cost of baked beans rising 45% year on year. At the same time, those on the lowest incomes have seen universal credit cut and their budgets tightened even further.

To make matters worse, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned, the costs of filling up the car have risen to their highest level ever and, while they rise like a rocket, they fall like a feather, needlessly costing families much more. Then we have Brexit infiltrating the supply chains, making it much more difficult to get food into the country, increasing costs in our supermarkets. That is the reality not of a global market, but of this Government's decision making. Families are working every hour under the sun but are still unable to make ends meet, and the position is getting worse, not better.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way. He is talking about the price of food in the supermarket. Earlier, he will have heard me put to the Minister the problems identified by the British Retail Consortium with labour shortages affecting the food supply chain. Unless we were watching the BBC, we will all have seen the queues at the Kent ports over the weekend. What assessment has the Labour party made of the impact of Brexit on food price increases, and what does the Labour party intend to do about the problems of labour shortages and supply shortages caused by Brexit?

Ian Murray: I thank my constituency neighbour for that question. I hope that she watched with great interest the speech of the leader of the Labour party just a few weeks ago, and, indeed, the other speech he made before Christmas about making Brexit work. The reality is that this Conservative Government have given us a position whereby Brexit does not work. We have a thin deal that we said would fall apart, and it is falling apart. What we have to do is to get into power to fix the problems with that and to build on that relationship. That is the reality of where we are.

I listened with interest to the Minister not answering the hon. and learned Lady's question about HGV drivers and the cost of food and supply chains. He rightly said that there is an ageing workforce, but that shows that the Government have not planned for the medium to long term in that regard—it is as if everybody just got older overnight, rather than there being some plan. It sums up the Government that they have not had the foresight to see some of those problems coming. None of the promises that the Brexiteers opposite made to us about sunny uplands have come to pass; indeed, the opposite has come to pass, as we can see in the supermarkets and in prices themselves.

Those of us elected to this place owe it to the millions of people across the country who face such hardship to do everything we can to alleviate and change it. In the UK in 2022, nobody should have to choose between heating and eating. The Government have shown no compassion and not even pretended to care. Let us remember that they voted to cut the £20 a week universal credit uplift for the poorest in this country and refused to feed school kids in the holidays. The only response to the crisis from the Government so far, in all the noise of partygate and everything else, was when they snuck out a £4.3 billion fraud write-off from covid funds and business loans, which was branded "nothing less than woeful" by their very own anti-fraud Minister, Lord Agnew, shortly before he resigned at the Dispatch Box a few hours ago in the other place. Maybe the Minister would like to do the same this afternoon: get to the Dispatch Box, resign, grab his folder and suitcase full of wine, and head for the hills. Any Minister with any kind of morality would be doing just the same thing.

I am pleased that the SNP has called the debate, but it is not a bystander in this crisis either. The SNP is the Government in Scotland and has been for 15 years. A 33-year-old today, struggling to feed their family while paying their energy bills, has spent their entire adult life under the Scottish National party Scottish Government. Such a person might wonder why the SNP did not support legislation put forward by Labour colleagues in Holyrood to enshrine as a human right the right to food. Perhaps we might be able to find out this afternoon why not.

Parliamentary time will be taken up "in weeks" with legislation for another referendum. People are having to choose between heating and eating, but that will be the SNP's priority in Parliament and elsewhere for months. I accept that Parliament has the capacity to do other things, but nobody should be under any illusions. All the oxygen in the vacuum will be taken up in Scotland with another referendum or the thought of another piece of referendum legislation. That is the reality of what will happen. With the paralysis in this place, the Scottish Government are obsessed by what gets them out of bed in the morning, rather than the real, everyday issues of Scots.

Alan Brown: While the hon. Member is on the action of the Scottish Government, I presume he is going to commend them for bringing forward the £20 a week child payment as one way to help to mitigate the poverty being imposed by Westminster. Earlier he said that we all have a duty in this place to try to help people with the cost of living and energy crisis. In which case, why did Labour vote for the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill, the impact statement for which said that it could add up to £63 billion to household energy bills? How on earth is that helping people with the energy crisis?

Ian Murray: What a valuable and timely intervention that was, because I was just about to talk about the child payment. Indeed, we campaigned for the £20 child payment for some time in the Scottish Parliament and were delighted that the Scottish Government eventually introduced it. However, it is a key, targeted intervention that helps to address child poverty, so what we would like now—all the Scottish charities are saying this—is for it to be doubled to £40 a week.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What would you cut?

Ian Murray: I hear hon. Members behind me asking from a sedentary position what we would cut—which is surely the same budget dilemma facing the Government that they have just been arguing about. What I would do is this. I would not spend money on an independence referendum; I would feed hungry Scottish children instead. Such a move, Mr Deputy Speaker—*[Interruption.]* SNP Members seem to have woken up. It tells you all you need to know about how Scottish politics works that when this Government are in total disarray, rather than turning their guns on them, they are turning them on the Labour party. Such a move to double the Scottish child payment—*[Interruption.]* "Where would you get the money from?", they keep shouting. Such a move would take 80,000 Scottish children out of poverty overnight, so let us find the money indeed, with all these vanity projects and the wastage we have seen in Scotland.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Ian Murray: I will give way if the hon. Gentleman will tell us how much the SNP has spent on ferries that has been wasted.

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Member talks about the SNP turning our guns on the Opposition; perhaps if he was not so utterly thirled to trident missiles, we could find the money to lift Scottish children out of poverty. While the Labour party remains thirled to Trident, we cannot do it.

Ian Murray: It is a strange thing that over the past five minutes we have heard SNP MP after SNP MP justify why they cannot lift 80,000 children out of poverty. If that does not show how this country is stuck between two bad Governments, nothing will.

David Linden: Unfortunately, we on the SNP Benches have to turn our guns everywhere because there are very few guns behind the hon. Gentleman. He is focusing on social security and what we can do—I agree with him about how we can alleviate poverty and inequality—so will he tell us from the Dispatch Box that the next Labour manifesto will commit to the abolition of the welfare cap, about which Labour had nothing to say two weeks ago?

Ian Murray: There was not a vote on the welfare cap a few weeks ago. It was about giving more money to the poorest people in this country and SNP Members know that. I take umbrage with what the hon. Gentleman said about the number of people on the Labour Benches, because the criticism we always hear during SNP Opposition day debates is that the Labour party takes up too much time. We leave most of the time for SNP Members to speak and that has always been the case. SNP Members constantly complain that they do not get enough time in this place; they will get as much time as they like today.

I was delighted by that intervention; let me repeat my paragraph. Young children and families in Scotland might be wondering why the Scottish Government will not listen to charities or, indeed, to Scottish Labour's policy and increase the Scottish child payment to £40 a

[Ian Murray]

week. SNP Members cry, "Where would we get the money from?" Such a move would lift 80,000 Scottish children out of poverty and could be done tomorrow under the powers of the Scottish Government. They are wasting money on ferries, Prestwick and vanity projects. The underwriting of the Gupta organisation puts half a billion pounds on to the taxpayer of Scotland. That is what we should focus on.

The Scottish Government passed their budget last month and pushed incredible cuts on to local authorities. They then turned round to those local authorities and said, "If you want the money to run local services, put it on council tax." Nothing affects Scottish people more than their having to pay massively increased council tax bills because the Scottish Government are slashing the budgets of local government.

There is no better example of dither and delay than the devolution of welfare powers. In 2016, we agreed on a cross-party basis to the devolution of a whole host of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, in essence the Scottish Parliament could now create its own welfare system if it implemented the policies. Six years on, the Scottish Government still delay the full implementation of the policies. In fact, they will take until 2025 to take full control of the devolved powers. It is important because with skyrocketing energy bills and increasing child poverty, the powers could be used to give, for example, a supplement to the winter fuel payment to help pensioners who are stretched by increased fuel bills. That is what should happen in respect of the changes to welfare powers in Scotland, but it cannot, because the welfare powers have not yet gone through as they should have.

We know that the best way out of poverty is the creation of highly skilled, highly paid jobs, so I must give credit to the SNP Scottish Government because over the past 15 years they have created a host of highly skilled jobs in turbine development, in the construction of ferries and in steel manufacturing. But none of those jobs have been in Scotland: they have been in China, Turkey, Poland and elsewhere. The decisions that the Government make have a fundamental impact on the way we deal with things in Scotland. The newly announced Scotland projects could generate billions of pounds of economic activity in Scotland, so every single job created should be in Scotland, with fabrication plants, British Steel and others.

Of course, as the cost of living crisis develops, the Prime Minister faces some difficulties of his own. Although much of the country is about to spend all their income from their jobs on energy, the Prime Minister is spending all his energy on saving his job. It seems that the choice in No. 10 is not so much about heating or eating but about whether it should be red or white. Little does the Prime Minister know that the cost of living crisis will affect him as well as everyone else in the country. Will the Minister tell us how much more a suitcase of wine from the Co-op will cost next year than it did this year?

As the Government party through the night, Labour offers a serious solution and leadership on the crisis. While the Government are hopelessly distracted by the chaos of their own making and more focused on infighting than on tackling people's energy bills, we are calling on the Government to address the situation now. They could bring in a motion now to sort out this problem, with fully funded measures to reduce the expected price rise in people's energy bills in April through a VAT cut on home energy bills that would save most households £200 or more, and targeted extra support for the squeezed middle, pensioners and the lowest earners, who would receive £600 off their bills, paid for by a one-off windfall tax on the North sea oil and gas producers who have profited from the price rises. Under Labour's plan, every household in Scotland would save more than £180 off their energy bills, and 800,000 households in Scotland struggling with the cost of living would get an extra £400 in additional support. That is nearly £600 for those hardest hit by the energy price rises—critical money into the pockets of hard-pressed Scots now.

While everyone is dithering and delaying as we talk about new referendum Bills and why the Prime Minister is more concerned about his job, Labour proposes genuine action that would help families pay their bills over this most difficult year. That is the difference that Labour and leadership can make, and we will make it in power. With the support of the people of Scotland and those across the United Kingdom, that is exactly what we plan to do at the next election.

5.31 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I will begin by picking up a few remarks made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) in opening the debate. First, he criticised the Chancellor for not being here. I apologise for any harm that this does to his career, but I must say that I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury spoke for the Government in these opening speeches. It did irk me slightly that the hon. Gentleman felt he should highlight that the Chancellor was not here, because I remember being in Holyrood in the Scottish Parliament just a few weeks ago when—*[Interruption.]* SNP Members can laugh at this if they want, but we were discussing kids dying at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, and I led for the Scottish Conservatives, Anas Sarwar led for Labour and Alex Cole-Hamilton led for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Every party leader turned up to that debate with the exception of Nicola Sturgeon, who is the local MP in Glasgow and was the Health Secretary when that hospital was created. She has many questions to answer, but she could not even turn up to a debate about that. Not only that—she could not even be bothered to vote. When SNP Members pick fights and say who should or should not respond to these debates, they should remember what their own leader does in Holyrood.

Secondly, the hon. Member spoke about groundhog day. We are in groundhog day in Scotland because, in the run-up to another party conference and elections, we have got Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP yet again speaking about Scottish independence. She was on the TV yesterday saying that she is putting civil servants to work to get ready to fight the case for another independence referendum. Businesses in Scotland are still struggling as a result of restrictions put in place by the SNP. Even the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is no longer in his place, said it was a fair point that they went too far before Christmas, yet Nicola Sturgeon thinks that now is the right time to recharge her efforts to separate Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the wrong focus, and it is groundhog day all over again.

Finally, the hon. Member for Glasgow East spoke about the economy and currency. The SNP Benches are very full, so I want to ask SNP Members this once more. They all support independence and want to separate Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom, so who on the full SNP Benches can tell me what currency an independent Scotland will have? I will give way to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), who put up his hand—we stand up in this place.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): We will use our currency—the Scottish currency—the Scottish pound.

Douglas Ross: The Scottish pound—there we go. That has answered all the problems. There are no concerns about what the Scottish pound would be or when it would be introduced. I think that the muted response of the hon. Member's colleagues tells him that that was not the best intervention to make. Yet again, none of them can answer that question. I have asked them many times before, but none of them can credibly say what currency an independent Scotland would have. I think that is telling.

Peter Grant *rose—*

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) *rose—*

Douglas Ross: They are all excited now. I will give way to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) in a moment, but we are speaking about the cost of living crisis and the SNP leader in Scotland wants to start the campaign to separate Scotland all over again. If Scotland were to separate from the rest of the United Kingdom—which I hope never, ever happens—surely the SNP can tell us what an independent Scotland's currency would be.

Hannah Bardell: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that in the run-up to the independence referendum in 2014, we offered the public in Scotland more information about the currency alone than his party offered voters across the UK on the whole Brexit debate.

Douglas Ross: I note, having asked the hon. Lady to tell me what currency an independent Scotland would have, that she failed to do so. She did, however, mention the White Paper, which was very detailed. It said that oil would be worth $114 a barrel. I am not sure that oil ever achieved that figure; it is certainly not worth that much at the moment. I really do not think that the White Paper is a strong argument for the SNP to focus on, but—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I know that the hon. Member is having fun, but this is about the cost of living increase and not some possible referendum in Scotland, so could we get back to the subject matter, please? [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]

Douglas Ross: SNP Members are cheering because they are hoping that I move on very quickly. Like any good official, I will follow the rule from the referee and agree to do so. However, I think that many people in Scotland will be watching and will have heard that not a single SNP Member was able to answer such a crucial question for Scotland's future.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss an important issue for my constituents in Moray and for constituents across Scotland and the United Kingdom. Households are struggling with the rise in global energy prices; with inflation as a result of spending decisions taken by Governments across the world, including this Government, who have invested £315 billion to get us through the global pandemic; and, of course, with rising prices of essential items such as food because of continued supply chain issues, again as a result of the pandemic.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Ross: I have given way quite a few times—*[Interruption.]* Okay, I am happy to give way, but my answer to the hon. and learned Lady will be that, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has said, this is a global problem. We are seeing problems with shortages—*[Interruption.]* She says that she has not asked the question. I am about to give way, but I am pretty sure that her question is going to be about the British Retail Consortium and the points it has made, because she has asked it three times already.

Joanna Cherry: Clearly the hon. Gentleman, having been described as a lightweight by his colleagues, is planning a future career as Madam Zelda looking into a crystal ball, because he seemed to think that he knew what I am going to ask.

The hon. Gentleman's constituents in Moray, like mine in Edinburgh South West, will have noticed a very significant increase in food prices in supermarkets. The British Retail Consortium—I know how much he loves British things—says that labour shortages, including shortages of HGV drivers and warehouse workers in the supply chain, are contributing to those increased prices. Many commentators have said that the red tape on food imports from the EU is contributing to those increases, too. In the interests of the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine, and given his lofty standing—in the Scottish Conservative party, at least—will he tell us what request he has made of the Treasury to assess the impact that leaving the European Union in the middle of a global pandemic will have on the cost of living crisis?

Douglas Ross: It turns out that that was exactly the same question and the same point that the hon. and learned Lady has already made three times. She mentions the British Retail Consortium, but she also has to accept that there have been labour shortages and driver shortages in other parts of the European Union, the United States and many other parts of the world. I understand that it fits her narrative to paint her question in that way, but we also have to remember that these are global issues that Governments across the world are having to address.

Governments in this country have to think carefully about the effect that their policies have on family budgets. That is why I was amazed, but sadly not surprised, that there was not a single mention in the SNP motion calling on the nationalist coalition of the SNP and the Greens in Holyrood to take some decisions itself that

[Douglas Ross]

could make an immediate and direct impact on the cost of living in Scotland. The SNP motion that we are debating makes reference to tax rises, which is very interesting given that for the past decade and a half SNP colleagues have been running the country that is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) says it is about the rich, but it is not; it is about the 1.1 million Scottish taxpayers who earn more than £27,393. That is not rich; that is 1.1 million people across Scotland. Those who earn just over £27,000 are not the rich; people across Scotland are being punished by SNP decisions.

David Linden: It is reassuring that at least today the mantra from the Tories is that Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, because sometimes we are told we are not doing anything with our tax powers.

To go back to the point of what we are doing for people on low incomes, the hon. Member will know that the regressive tax hike in national insurance will take away 20% of the pay increase for a band 5 nurse in Scotland. Does he support the Government's plans for a tax hike in national insurance?

Douglas Ross: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and I make this point: the tax rises that his Government are introducing in Scotland have made Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, and that is affecting nurses, teachers and police officers. That is who it is affecting right now in Scotland.

Ian Murray: Does the hon. Gentleman think that his Government's national insurance tax rise in April helps or hinders that?

Douglas Ross: We have been clear, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, that the Government have taken a difficult decision to focus that vital funding on health and social care—an issue that has not been grappled with for decades by parties on either side of the Chamber. It certainly has not been grappled with by the Scottish Government. Sometimes difficult decisions must be taken to ensure that we have a health service and support for older people in this country that has not always been available.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned local government, and I suddenly got excited, because I thought we were finally going to hear an SNP politician standing up against the disastrous cuts that Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP are imposing on local government, but he said "local government"—*Hansard* will show this when the report is published—and then did not say another word. The SNP has the highest ever block grant since devolution. Since 1999, more money than ever before has been going from the UK Government to the Scottish Government, and what do they do to local councils? They cut the local government budget by £371 million. That is a cut from the SNP Government to local government, when the UK Government are giving them more money than ever before to spend.

David Linden *rose—*

Douglas Ross: I will give way in a second, if the hon. Gentleman will show that he stands up for his constituents, just like SNP council leaders have stood up to the Scottish Government and said, "That is a cut too far", and that they should change their view on the £371 million cut to local government.

David Linden: I know the hon. Gentleman is used to running the line on a Saturday, but we are not all going to play his game this afternoon. On the issue of local government, will he pass comment, given that he has the floor, on Councillor Tim Eagle from his council in Moray, who suggested that free school meals, free tuition and free bus travel for under-22s are somehow "little treats"?

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman knows that that was taken completely out of context. If he wants to repeat to the House the entire comment that Councillor Eagle made to the Moray Council committee meeting, he is welcome to do so. I gave way to the hon. Gentleman, so I will do so once more: does he agree with the SNP council group leaders who are saying to the SNP that the cuts are too much?

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I beg your forgiveness—I am not an expert in "Erskine May"—but I understand that if a Member resumes their seat without an intervention, they are deemed to have concluded their contribution.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As Christmas has just passed, let us be a little generous. Have you finished your contribution, Mr Ross?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful for your generosity, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I will begin to conclude my speech.

It is interesting that the Scottish National party uses such tactics when the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who introduced the debate, cannot stand up against the party in Holyrood and say that its cuts have affected the cost of living in Scotland.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) sits down, how is that an SNP tactic?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Well—I call Douglas Ross.

Douglas Ross: I would think a bit more about that comment if the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) had not arrived in the Chamber about five minutes ago for a debate introduced by his party.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will be cognisant of the fact that Norway has an oil fund that is worth more than $1 billion, while Scotland's oil fund is worth absolutely nothing on his party's watch. Does he regret the fact that the UK Government have mismanaged Scotland's resources for decades?

Douglas Ross: It is not worth nothing, because time and again we have seen the UK Government supporting Scotland. Indeed, during the pandemic, £15 billion or £16 billion has gone from the UK Government to the Scottish Government.

Stephen Flynn *rose—*

Douglas Ross: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman. That money was provided to support individuals, families and communities across Scotland. No matter how the SNP tries to paint it, its position on oil and gas is fundamentally different from what it was only a few years ago, and people in the north-east can see that and what it means for their jobs and communities. On the topic that we are discussing today, they can see what it means for the energy bills that they will receive in the weeks ahead.

Stephen Flynn *rose—*

Douglas Ross: I have given way a lot, and I realise that your patience is being tested, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss all these important issues. I only hope that SNP Members reflecting on today's debate will begin to ask serious questions of their Government in Holyrood, as they have been in power for a decade and a half and have many of the tools, levers and, indeed, the funding to deal with this issue right now in Scotland.

5.48 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate. May I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing it and, indeed, for introducing it in such an impressive manner?

I should like to put on record my disappointment that the Government have done very little to counter misplaced rhetoric that falsely links net zero commitments to the cost of living crisis. We have heard a great deal about oil and gas imports, and it is true that 87% of the price cap increase is due to increased gas prices, with the remainder due to supplier failure. The green transition is not the cause of rising energy bills. Inflation, reflecting the confluence of factors at play in the crisis, is running at 5.4%—the highest it has been in nearly 30 years. Worse, contrary to Government rhetoric, wages are not keeping up, which means a decline in real wages for UK households.

Sky-rocketing fuel bills, and the challenge of that to households and businesses alike, are a key element of the crisis. To help them both in the immediate term, I urge the Government urgently to consider that short-term measures be taken to alleviate the cost of those bills. Members across the House have in recent weeks raised the merits of a temporary VAT cut on energy and the Government must consider that. Both the UK and Welsh Governments should be looking to expand support to in-need households through existing channels, whether universal credit or the winter fuel support scheme. Finally, in the short term the Chancellor should reconsider the merits of planned tax rises in the new financial year. The national insurance hike has already been discussed in detail; that would harm many of my households in Ceredigion and come at a time when costs of living are rising.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman represents a rural constituency, as I do; I represent one of the vastest and most remote constituencies in the UK. As well as household costs, if the price of petrol and diesel goes up, as we are pretty sure it will, that will in turn impact on my constituents, some of whom are trying to work on a very tight, balanced budget. If they get the household heating fuel bill and the extra cost of getting the kids to school and everything else, that will be a pretty nasty vicious circle.

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Like him, I represent a rural constituency, where concern about rising petrol and diesel costs is bearing down heavily on families. For people in Ceredigion private cars continue to account for the overwhelming majority of commutes. Indeed, in Wales as a whole about 80% of people have to commute by car. Sadly, for people in Wales, and particularly in rural areas, there is no short-term alternative to using private cars, so those rising fuel costs are having a devastating impact. Of course the long-term solution would be greater investment in public transport infrastructure, but, as an MP representing a rural area, I know how devastating cuts to bus services have been in the last decade so, sadly, for the time being using the bus instead of a private car is not a viable option.

The crisis has also demonstrated the need for longer-term action, such as action to boost productivity, and green solutions to help address the energy supply emergency and in so doing to alleviate stagnating living wages. We can ease the crisis in the long term by reducing energy demand. We have discussed that often in this place and debates have also been held in the Senedd in Cardiff. If we reduce fuel and energy demand, we also reduce fuel bills.

A good place to start is with the simple measure of improving household heating efficiency. At the autumn Budget I called on the Chancellor to make a £3.6 billion investment over 10 years, in conjunction with the Welsh Government and the private sector, to improve home insulation in Wales. It is well-documented that the quality of Welsh housing stock is poor by both British and European standards, and its energy efficiency is, sadly, a sight to behold. Introducing measures to improve the heat and energy efficiency of our homes would not only boost employment in areas that are desperately in need of levelling up through the retrofitting schemes, but would also address fuel poverty. A report by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales has suggested that with such a package of investment over 10 years we would be able to end fuel poverty in Wales, producing average annual savings of £418.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: One great problem is inequality —there is always a fuel poverty issue in good times as well as bad times in the United Kingdom. I was Chair of the Energy and Climate Change Committee. We visited the Technical University of Denmark in Copenhagen and a Conservative member asked an academic there about fuel poverty in Denmark; the response was, "In Denmark, folk can afford stuff." There is a structural problem in the UK in that the problems are not always acute but are always there.

Ben Lake: I agree with my hon. Friend. He makes an important point. Those who had the fortune of being able to listen to the debate in the Welsh Grand Committee

[Ben Lake]

last week will have heard that this matter as it relates to Wales was looked into in great detail. Sadly, we have a situation where, too often, I can walk to a petrol station in London, for example, and the price of energy, of petrol from the pump, is the same or cheaper than it is at a place in Felinfach in my constituency, and yet London has the benefit of the tube, the overground and regular bus services, whereas Felinfach is lucky to have two services a day.

To conclude—I have spoken for some time already—we must also bolster local renewable energy supply if we are serious about tackling the longer-term issues of our fuel and energy supply. In closing, I raise Plaid Cymru's call for the devolution of the management of the Crown estate in Wales. Simply put, with many colleagues from Scotland in attendance this afternoon, if Scotland can, why not Wales? Devolving the management of the Crown estate in Wales would bolster Welsh revenues, increase our bargaining power with the private sector and support renewable energy deployment, all the while ensuring that the communities in which this energy is generated will be where its benefits are enjoyed the most.

In sum, the Government need urgently to do more to tackle the immediate crisis. The cost of living crisis is worsening, not abating, and households and businesses need support now—but let us not forget about the longer-term action that is required if we are not to find ourselves in this situation again in future.

5.56 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am grateful to the SNP for calling this debate. As parliamentarians, it is absolutely right that we should debate in this Chamber the issues that are of most importance to our constituents when those issues are high on the political agenda, so I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about the cost of living and what we can do about it.

In the opening remarks of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, we heard the long list of targeted assistance that the Government are providing. I will come back later in my speech to dwell on some of those. Overwhelmingly, however, the best solution for cost of living squeezes is high levels of employment and increased levels of pay when in employment. It is because of the Government intervention in response to the covid pandemic that we have an employment field that is so strong at the moment.

The Government intervened right at the start of the pandemic to save jobs through the furlough scheme, which supported more than 1 million jobs in Scotland alone, and other schemes, from the self-employment income support scheme—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—to the business bounce back loan scheme to CBILS, the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. Those saved thousands of jobs, including in the business of which I formerly had the honour to be managing director. Without a CBIL, that company—which employs more than 1,000 people, including several hundred in Scotland—would likely have gone to the wall. It has not and is now growing again—probably because I am no longer directly involved in it—and it is creating many hundreds more jobs, here and in America.

The impact of all that is that we did not suffer from 12% unemployment, which was the estimate of economists at the time. Now, as we leave this dreadful pandemic behind us—I hope—we have 4.2% unemployment throughout the country. In my constituency, it is at about 3.2%. Instead of having a jobs crisis in which people need jobs, the crisis in Broadland is the lack of people to fill the jobs available as our businesses grow.

It is always better to have good jobs with rising wages —which I will come on to—than to rely on a statist solution of increased benefits under universal credit, with the exception of the taper rate. The reduction of the taper rate from 63% to 55% should make good tabloid headlines. All those involved in that part of the economy know the importance of that injection of about £2 billion into the pockets of those who are least well off, as they move from benefits into employment. That is incredibly important, and I am grateful to the Government for focusing their firepower on the taper rate, rather than on the attention-grabbing £20-a-week part of universal credit, because that is where it can do most good.

There is now more employment in this country than in pre-pandemic times—over 400,000 more jobs—and we should celebrate that, but employment is only the first issue. The second is the amount people are paid when they are employed. I have already referred to the universal credit taper rate, and we should not underestimate how hugely important it is, but the other factor is the hourly rate people receive for their work.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is right that it is not so much about jobs as about earnings. Does he think the average worker would be better off in the UK, or in one of the Nordic countries, such as Norway or Denmark?

Jerome Mayhew: There is a trade-off between earnings and taxation: what people get to take home. I do not have the data, and I confess I do not know the full tax rates in Nordic countries, but I can say that the hourly rate in this country has risen consistently under this Government because of the national living wage—a Conservative Government development. The most recent rise of 6.6%, to £9.50, well above the forecast average inflation rate of 4% for the rest of this year, is the latest in a long line of above-inflation hourly rate rises under the national living wage.

From my local experience, I see the localised wage pressures to attract new staff in my constituency. Numerous businesses I have spoken to have told me they are raising their hourly rates above minimum wage to attract good new staff. There is a whole swathe of businesses, like the one I had the honour previously to lead, where, although the hourly rate is not the national living wage, it is in some ways pegged to it. The national living wage has a positive effect on hourly rates right across the economy.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The Living Wage Foundation has classified a living wage as an hourly rate of £11.05 in London and £9.90 outside London. That is significantly higher than the minimum wage set by the Government—it was George Osborne as Chancellor in a former Conservative Government who changed the branding from national minimum wage to national living wage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should support the Living Wage Foundation and the rates it independently sets?

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The Government are on a journey to get the national living wage to two thirds of the median income, and they are making good, above-inflation progress to get there. We have to balance the needs of the recipients of hourly rates against the viability of the businesses that pay them; they need to thrive as well.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury mentioned a long list of assistance in his opening remarks. Particularly important, from my perspective, are the household support fund, with £500 million going directly towards utilities support; the warm homes discount, which reduces the price of heating by £140 per household, at a cost of £200 million to the taxpayer; and cold weather payments, which provide £25 per week to up to 4 million people in this country. The Government have taken proactive steps to support those most in need while supporting the entire economy of our country, in Scotland and elsewhere.

If the SNP was really worried, it would reduce its income tax, which costs £800 million more to taxpayers in Scotland than the rest of the United Kingdom—I was shocked to hear that it applied to taxpayers earning just over £27,000 a year and above—support continued access to North sea oil and gas reserves, and regret Nicola Sturgeon's assertion that she would not give the go-ahead to the Cambo oil field. We need security of supply and we need to support domestic extraction during the period of transition between now and 2035. That supports our domestic prices and helps us in our transition to net zero. The Committee on Climate Change itself recognises that we need oil and gas resources between now and 2035

Jamie Stone: I rise to my feet as somebody who worked in the oil sector, but that is not what I want to address. The furlough scheme meant that the money paid out in my constituency was reinjected back into the local economy and the UK economy. It was not salted away in Zurich. In terms of supporting families through these hard times, the money does not go into a black hole. It is recycled. It can be clawed back by corporation tax on companies and so on. Perhaps it would be a good thing if all of us, including Her Majesty's Government, looked at that as we tackle the problem of fuel poverty that lies before us.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Treasury Ministers are attending this debate and I am sure they were listening very carefully to what he said.

In conclusion, there is a difference between grandstanding on these issues, which the SNP appears to be doing—there seems to be a certain amount of virtue signalling here—and what the Conservatives have been up to in government, taking practical steps to improve the lives of people right across the United Kingdom.

6.5 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The last few years have been times of great adversity and challenge for people across the globe. In every country in the world, people's ability to cope with those problems has relied on them having a sense of a common endeavour, a sense, to coin a phrase, that we are all in this together. The problem with Britain today is that there are many people who no longer believe that we are all in this together. The statistics, as we look around us, show that that is the case. This is a country where there is great poverty, but what is worse than the fact that millions of people are working themselves into an early grave through mental illness because they fear they cannot afford to feed their children, is that there are many people in this country for whom the story is the complete opposite.

Last year in Britain, a record number of billionaires were recorded. As I said in this House last week, the most alarming statistic to me is that 171 of the richest people in Britain could afford to cover every single penny the Government have spent in responding to covid—more than £400 billion. They alone could afford to cover that bill and still be the richest people in Britain. The stock exchange has never been higher and the people who own stocks and shares have never been wealthier. Because of the increase in property prices, those who own the biggest and the most properties have done far, far better than those who own a modest home. That is the dreadful story of unequal Britain that we have today—a story of poverty on the one hand and great wealth on the other.

Let us not pretend that we are all in this together, because the truth is that those people at the lower end of the scale, in particular those on fixed and low incomes, are the ones who will disproportionately pay the cost of this crisis. When prices rise, it is the people on fixed and low incomes who are hit disproportionately. When general taxes increase across the board, it is they who are hit. When benefits or state spending is withdrawn, it is those who are already suffering who are asked to suffer even more.

That is the state of Britain today and you would think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that any Government—not just a Tory Government, but any Government—would be concerned about those figures and would want to do something about them. Yet in every respect, the Government's only response is to either do nothing or demonstrably make things even worse.

Let me illustrate that in two ways. First, we have had a big debate about rising energy prices. Probably the most bizarre thing, which was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), is that when energy prices rise, Government income rises from taxes on the production and taxes on the consumption of that energy. The Government are facing a huge windfall in energy taxation and at the very least—the very least—we would expect them to say, "Let's put this back into the pockets of the people we're asking to pay these bills".

Jerome Mayhew *rose—*

Tommy Sheppard: If the hon. Member is going to confirm that that is the Government's intention, I will gladly give way.

Jerome Mayhew: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving way, but did he hear the Chief Secretary to the Treasury say that VAT is charged at 5% on energy and, if households are not spending on other things that are taxed at 20%, the net income for the Treasury is likely to be negative?

Tommy Sheppard: Forgive me, but I think that most people will find that argument rather perverse: 5% on someone's electricity bill is still 5%, and if it doubles or trebles, that is two or three times more than the Government were taking before.

Jerome Mayhew *rose—*

Tommy Sheppard: If the hon. Member does not mind, I would like to continue.

What the Government ought to be doing is recognising that we are coming towards a crisis in the cost of living, particularly with the fuel bills coming in April. They ought to make sure that the energy cap remains in place and does not rise. They ought to provide support for energy supply companies to be able to deliver that. They ought to make sure that the people who have already faced an increase in their bills are given a one-off payment to enable them to get through the rest of this year. But instead of doing that, they do nothing. Tax is another example of where the Government go out of their way, it seems, to make things worse.

When I talk about tax, it is worth bearing in mind that benefits are also part of the tax system. If the Government choose to withdraw benefits from people, the effect is exactly the same as if they were to increase taxes on their wage bill. That is why the cut of £20 a week to the 6 million poorest households in Britain is so iniquitous and so immoral. It would be at any time, but to do it in the middle of a cost of living crisis is beyond imagination. Of course that ought to be reversed, and of course the Government ought to do more to try to help those who are on fixed and low incomes, particularly those living on meagre state benefits. The fact is that, if the Government do not uprate in the next 12 months the level of benefits paid to those people who desperately need them, with rampant inflation, the real value of those incomes is going to go down even further, and the people who can least afford it are going to be the ones who will pay the most.

Of course, the increase in tax that the Government are proposing—the national insurance increase—is a tax increase that everyone will pay, and the proportion they will pay is exactly the same, no matter how rich or how poor they are. I have heard Ministers on the radio talk about this as a progressive tax. It is the farthest we can get from a progressive tax. It is fundamentally regressive. The reason it is being brought in is that this Government, who have to increase revenues because of the economic crisis, do not want to ask the very richest or the very wealthiest in our society to pay a bit more. If they had any morality to them, in a situation where they knew they needed to raise income through taxation, they would first consider taxing those who have the most and taxing accumulated wealth, before they levied a tax on people on poor and fixed incomes.

I think there are many Government Members who can see that this is not a good situation and that the Government's response is quite abysmal. By the way, I do not know how much of this is by design, or how much of it is turbocharged by the fact that the current Administration are in complete inertia and paralysis; they are unable to do something because they are so scandal-ridden at this point in time. I accept that the lockdown crisis the Government have makes it harder for them to govern, but either way this Government's honeymoon is long over—the veneer is disappearing. Those people in the red wall seats in the north of England who were conned into believing that this Government—this Tory Government—would stand up for their interests are going to see over the next 12 months things laid out very clearly for them. That is why, of course, there are a lot of nervous people on the Government Back Benches, and there are going to be a lot of problems for the Government in the 12 months ahead.

Let me turn, in my final remarks, to the situation in Scotland. I was going to congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), but he is no longer in his place. He brought into the debate the question of Scottish independence. He introduced it—it is not an SNP obsession. If we look at the text of the motion, the words "referendum" and "independence" do not appear in it. That is not just because we are capable of talking about many other things: it is because this debate, by itself, makes the case for independence. We do not need to write it down—it is self-evident.

If people want to see how things might be done differently or a different set of instincts, aspirations, attitudes and character at work, they can look north of the border and at what the Scottish Government have tried to do within the competence that they have available. The discretionary housing payment is ameliorating the bedroom tax. The child payments, already introduced and doubling in April, will mitigate some of the attacks on the very poorest in our community. Income tax increases for those who can afford to pay more, which the Conservatives claim make Scotland the most taxed part of the United Kingdom, in fact make Scotland the fairest taxed part of the United Kingdom.

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point about independence. Does he agree that the real fear on the Government Benches and in the establishment at the heart of Westminster is that when Scotland becomes independent the other nations of the UK will look north, see what we do with the full powers of independence and will want change for themselves, away from the corrupt, scandalous bunch running things here?

Tommy Sheppard: Indeed I do, but in closing I want to point to the monstrous deceit in this argument. It is a fact of life that no matter what the Scottish Government try to do in terms of the Scottish economy, they live with the reality that it is a regional economy of the United Kingdom, not the economy of an independent country. Therefore, for example, the decisions that we make on income taxation are very limited, because the Scottish Government have no authority or power over the movement of capital or labour within our borders. If it was an independent country, those things would be very different. I am afraid to say that that is compounded by Labour party Front Benchers. When they criticise the SNP Scottish Government, they basically think of a number and double it, without any regard to the actual powers, authority or legal status of that Government to deliver on the cost of living crisis.

The Scottish Government are doing some very good things, but those are only an illustration of what could be done if we had the full powers of a normal independent country. That argument has already become much more attractive to people in Scotland. Opinion is divided about whether we should have another referendum. I know that Conservative Members say that should never happen—

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: If it is on that point, I will, but I see that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, want me to finish.

Robin Millar: To the point about opinion being divided, I refer the hon. Gentleman to a survey on 25 November from north of the border in which 13 different policy options were presented. He is correct that the economy and jobs are important, as they came third in that ranking. The issue of independence—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Interventions must be brief. We have a lot of Members who wish to speak and I will have to put a time limit on almost immediately.

Tommy Sheppard: I conclude by saying that it is a complete deceit to criticise the Scottish Government for not doing something that the House actively prevents them from doing. The simple way to test the truth of that is to let Scotland become an independent country, which is what people voted for at the last election in Scotland. Let them have that choice and, when it comes, we will put before the people a complete proposition that will answer all the questions that the hon. Member for Moray wants and many more. I believe they will choose a different way, an alternative way, of running their economy than what we get from this Tory Government.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but as I said, I will have to put a time limit of six minutes on speeches; otherwise, people are not going to get in. I have been able to warn the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) about that.

6.20 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Duly warned and noted, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will not take up much of the House's time—I am sure that will delight SNP Members more than anyone else—because up and until the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) spoke, I was struggling for something to say in this debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who led the debate, is a passionate campaigner for combating poverty in his constituency and around the country, and I know how hard he works on behalf of his constituents to alleviate the burden that so many people find themselves under across this country.

However, the problem is this: the hon. Member for Edinburgh East said that we would not find any reference to independence in this motion, and he is right, but unfortunately, it does refer to the

"rising costs of the UK leaving the EU".

Unfortunately, we cannot get away from the deep irony of Scottish National party Members coming here today to talk about the cost of living crisis, which genuinely is one of the most important things we can speak about at this time, and the cost of leaving the European Union while making no reference to the inordinate cost and huge challenges that would be put on businesses and individuals in Scotland if it were to separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. They cannot make one case to answer that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that walking out of a trade bloc and increasing red tape, meaning that the UK has to have paperwork with every country that it exports to, is the same as repatriating political powers? Is he saying that Ireland or Finland are not independent, because if he is, he will be laughed at all over Europe?

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that separating Scotland from the United Kingdom would be far more than just repatriating powers to Holyrood; it would be the break-up of an economic, political and social Union that has been in existence for 300 years and, in fact, it would make Brexit look like a cakewalk. I understand the concerns of the hon. Gentleman, who stands up and fights for, for example, his exporters and fishermen, who are struggling with some of the burdens that Brexit has brought—I have said openly that I recognise that—but that is as nothing compared with the burden that independence would put on businesses and people in Scotland.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the cost and financial strife that an independent Scotland would inevitably go through, but does he also agree with me and many others, especially in the business community, about the cost of an independence referendum and how investor confidence would be shaken up by merely having an independence referendum?

Andrew Bowie: Yes. That goes to the heart of one of the arguments that was made earlier about uncertainty for business. Actually, I take issue with what my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said about the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) being a lone voice on the SNP Benches in calling for continued investment in the North sea, because he is not. A couple of other SNP Members are in the Scottish Parliament. For example, Gillian Martin, the SNP MSP for Aberdeenshire East, said that decreasing domestic oil and gas supply would lead to greater imports. Jackie Dunbar, the SNP MSP for Aberdeen Donside, said that

"a hard shutdown of the oil and gas sector"

would see Scotland "with thousands left unemployed". What does that say about uncertainty for businesses that are looking to invest, create jobs and take people out of the cost of living crisis in my constituency in the north-east of Scotland, and around the entire country?

Let me go back to the point I was making about independence. I understand that SNP Members do not believe what I say—that independence would be a bigger shock to the system than our leaving the European Union—but they might believe their own growth commission, which the SNP commissioned a couple of years ago. *[Laughter.]* There is laughter from SNP Members. Maybe they are laughing at the SNP's growth commission, which said that creating a separate state in Scotland would cost £450 million. I wonder what that would do to the cost of living. It also says that £5 billion would be

[Andrew Bowie]

paid to the rest of the United Kingdom annually to account for its share in the national debt, while public spending—despite what the hon. Member for Glasgow East would like to do to combat child poverty and poverty across the board—would have to be capped at 1% less than annual GDP growth. What would that do to the cost of living in Scotland?

I genuinely respect the efforts of quite a few SNP Members in what they do in their constituencies, along with Members across this House, to combat poverty in this country. The problem is that they cannot argue that the impact on business of leaving the European Union was bad for growth and created more poverty while saying that independence and the hammer blow that it would bring to the economy would be good. I am afraid that that is why I will not be joining them in the Lobby tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Due to interventions, which obviously give others extra time, I am afraid that after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to five minutes.

6.25 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). I listened to his contribution with interest. I just remind Conservative Members, in the politest of manners, that in last year's May elections the people of Scotland continued our tradition of rejecting the Conservatives' xenophobic and far-right policies.

Before I continue, I want to put on record my congratulations to my predecessor and constituency colleague, Neil Gray, who is set to join the Scottish Government as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. I know he is well respected across the House.

Yesterday we heard the interesting news that there were further allegations of Islamophobia within the Conservative party. That came as no surprise to me, of course, because we have seen Conservative MPs support a Prime Minister who has openly and publicly said that veiled Muslim women look like letterboxes. However, regardless of faith, or no faith, there is one community that the Conservatives have continually attacked since coming into power in 2010—the working-class community. The Conservatives have proved time and again that they only have the interests of one community at the heart of their policies, and that is those who are rich. The United Kingdom has the highest poverty rate in north-west Europe, and most people across all four nations have experienced some sort of financial hardship through the pandemic. But at the exact same time, we saw the UK gain a record number of billionaires, and it now stands at 171. Those billionaires do not have to worry about spending money on food or fuel, about how they will afford rent, or about losing their jobs. The Government did create some policies in response to the pandemic, but the crucial matter to remember is that while the Tories gave with one hand, they took with the other. I was inundated with correspondence from constituents when the Government made the horrific decision to cut universal credit by £20 a week. Then, just weeks later, they decided that they would hike national insurance. This is a series of continued attacks against working class communities.

The reality for people is that the cost of living is mounting. In my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, I receive regular correspondence on this. My team and I are currently working with a constituent whose only source of heating, due to a number of different factors, is two halogen heaters. They are expensive to run, and his running costs are over £60 a week. By comparison, according to Usave, the average cost for heating a one-bed flat is about £29 a month. So my constituent is faced with a decision every single day—does he heat his food or does he heat his home? His reality is not having parties in his back garden, or asking his rich mates to decorate his flat, or deciding what cheese goes with what wine. His reality is that the majority of his income has to be spent on heating his property, so he is often left without money for food or other essentials. Just yesterday, I also received correspondence from an elderly constituent, worried that she will be unable to keep up with fuel costs. That is the reality of our jobs as Members of Parliament. I am receiving regular correspondence from constituents who are genuinely worried about how they will afford the growing cost of living.

The Chancellor has an opportunity to introduce an emergency financial package to help people with that growing cost. There are a number of things he could do. One option to tackle fuel poverty could be reducing VAT on energy bills, which would save about £90 per customer and is backed by some in the industry. Loans could be given to energy companies which would, in turn, help consumers. The Government could increase minimum wage rates to bring them into line with the real living wage, and the completely inadequate statutory sick pay could also be increased to match it. Those are just a few steps that the Government could take to ensure that the most vulnerable in our communities are not left to suffer.

We have a Prime Minister who is asleep at the wheel, a Government who are trying to keep him in power, and Back-Bench Tory MPs who are either writing letters to the 1922 committee or trying to Save Big Dog—who knows?—while households across the country are having to prepare for the uncertainty that is about to follow. With soaring energy prices and inflation and the cost of living rising, the Prime Minister seems to be intent on ensuring that his own skin is saved, rather than protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

6.31 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) rightly pointed out that it is a UK-wide debate on an issue that affects constituents throughout the country, but in some parts of the country, pressures on the cost of living come from different sources and are very onerous. Wanting, as ever, to help, I have come to the Chamber today to highlight something that all politicians across Greater Manchester can do to prevent those pressures from being increased, namely ensure that the Greater Manchester clean air zone—created by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, supported by all the local authorities, and emanating from Greater Manchester Combined

Authority and Transport for Greater Manchester—is scrapped. It is a ludicrous proposal that will place burdens on those such as the taxi drivers who today have rightly staged a go-slow throughout Bury town centre. To go to work, if they are in a non-compliant vehicle, they will have to pay £10 a day, which will be devastating, while lorry drivers will have to pay £60 a day. That affects businesses of all kinds. It affects employment, and all the other things that we have been discussing. The Greater Manchester clean air zone will put people out of business and out of work, and will increase already onerous costs.

I visited a haulage yard in my constituency and talked to Mark Hinchliffe, who set out very clearly the costs faced by his business and others like it. There is a transport café in Walmersley Road, and lorries travel along the motorway two minutes away from it. Any lorry driver who wants to have his or her breakfast in that café will have to pay a £60 congestion charge, which is ludicrous. The business that comes from everyone who goes to that small café, which has been open for decade upon decade, will be obliterated by a charge and a process that emanate from a plan delivered by Greater Manchester Combined Authority to central Government on 1 March 2019. This is a plan that has been championed continuously by the Mayor of Greater Manchester. The charge on my constituents was put to a vote at Bury Council on 28 July 2021, and all the Labour members present voted for that tax to be imposed on them.

In discussing the cost of living today, we have heard SNP Members quite rightly talk at great length about matters involving the Scottish Parliament. We have also heard the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) talk about the Welsh Assembly. However, we, too, have devolved government in Greater Manchester. It is a disaster, but it is devolved government all the same. When required to be there for the constituents of Bury and every other part of Greater Manchester during this difficult period, the best thing that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, the leader of Bury Council and all the other local authorities could do was to impose onerous taxation on businesses and individuals that will destroy their ability to earn a living. It is ridiculous.

I understand that the Mayor of Greater Manchester is coming to Westminster this week, as he should, to speak to Ministers. He has been thinking for years and years and years that this is the greatest plan in the world. On his visit here, I encourage him and all politicians—

Navendu Mishra: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, since 2019, the market for vehicles has changed dramatically in the UK? That has a lot to do with covid, but also with the global semi-conductor shortage. Does he not think that the onus is on the Secretary of State to support the local authorities in Greater Manchester to make sure that they can make a just transition so that the population of Greater Manchester can breathe much cleaner air?

James Daly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. We have a complete difference of opinion. Both he and his Labour colleagues do not wish to scrap the scheme. They wish to go back to Government for further funding—for a hardship fund. That hardship fund has not been defined, but estimates of the funding required are in the region of £2.2 billion to £2.5 billion of income. I would be interested to hear where he proposes that income should come from. I hope that, instead of that and to support his constituents in Stockport, he will join me in telling the Mayor of Greater Manchester to say to the Secretary of State, "I got this wrong. We got this scheme wrong." The consequences of it for my constituents and for the constituents of the hon. Gentleman are too severe.

Surely no politician, whether in Greater Manchester, Scotland, Wales or England, would simply go ahead with the plan of the Mayor of Greater Manchester, of the GMCA and of Transport for Greater Manchester to put people out of business. Why would anybody do that? It is incumbent on the Mayor of Greater Manchester to come to London this week and say, "This plan is wrong. I got it badly wrong." He needs to ask the Government to look at it in that context and not dance around the edges. He should not say that we need extra money—a bit here and a bit there. He must say that the plan is a disaster in terms of the cost of living of my constituents and the constituents of the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra). Every single politician who believes in supporting their constituents with the cost of living, which has been talked about today, should completely and utterly oppose the Greater Manchester clean air zone.

6.37 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): While the immediate cause of the current cost of living crisis is being blamed on rising international gas prices, the real story is that of decades-long abdication of duties by the UK Government and an ideological frenzy of free market extremism.

Fundamentally, the UK's system of economic regulation is aimed at maximising returns for investors and shareholders, not ensuring a comfortable standard of living for the bulk of people across these isles. If we add Brexit to that mix, the UK Government are overseeing—nay promoting—a cost of living crisis that will impact every resident of the UK, but that will, as ever, impact the poorest and most vulnerable hardest.

There should be no doubt about what Brexit is costing households. Every minute, haulage firms are being held up at the new EU border as more costs are being passed on to consumers. Every extra worker hired to deal with the exponential increase in paperwork caused by Brexit is an additional cost added to sales. Every hurdle put in place by Brexit is another increase in living costs for every household and every family.

Perhaps the Prime Minister and his colleagues could dig out their old bus and slap the truth on the side of it—that Brexit will seriously damage household wealth. However, that sort of honesty would be out of character for the isolationists. They will still maintain that the uplands of Brexit are sunlit and that the confusion and barriers that they have erected are having no impact on the cost of living.

Scotland is being hit hardest despite voting against Brexit and voting, yet again, against the Conservative party. The inflationary pressures caused by the record vehicle fuel prices that others have mentioned are seen right throughout the UK economy but felt hardest in Scotland. The sad irony that we experience higher petrol and diesel costs while being responsible for getting much of the stuff out of the ground in the first place is

[Gavin Newlands]

not lost on many Scots. Until we have fully transitioned to a net zero society, that irony will continue to demonstrate the particular impact that Scotland has to endure as prices rise.

It is scandalous that in an energy-rich country such as Scotland, which has now been awash with both carbon-based and renewable energy for decades, nearly one quarter of households are in fuel poverty. The Scottish Parliament's limited powers mean that its actions are limited to measures such as programmes to improve household energy efficiency and insulation—programmes that have, in fairness, been pushed hard by both Labour-led and SNP Governments since devolution.

The plain fact is that the fundamentals of the energy market and the radical changes needed to tackle this scourge are in the hands of the UK Government, who have shown no sign of taking the kind of action needed to improve the lot of millions of households in poverty. In fact, rather than take that action, the UK Government simply changed the definition of fuel poverty to something more amenable to them—surely the ultimate in evading responsibility.

There is no dodging the carnage that is coming this year when the full effect of price rises is felt. I fear for the numbers of people who will find themselves in fuel poverty, whether the UK chooses to count them or not, and in particular when I look at what the UK Government think is an acceptable amount to live on for people who have to claim social security benefits. Does the Minister really think that a £2.30 a week increase in jobseeker's allowance in April will be enough to meet the rising costs? I would be delighted to hear him answer that. The poor, sick and disabled again face the brunt of excessive inflation, because of the Chancellor's refusal to maintain universal credit at its previous level or even to uprate legacy benefits to match.

As always, the Government will expect communities and charities—organisations such as Renfrewshire food bank and the Darkwood Crew in my constituency—or already hard-pressed local authorities to pick up the pieces. Scotland's citizens and their household bills are bearing the brunt of the UK Governments' systemic mismanagement over decades and the short-termism that has been the hallmark of successive Administrations. We are subject to policy made for London and the south-east that is simply unfit for purpose when applied to Scotland. Every resident in Scotland is literally paying the price.

The plain fact is that the UK Government have sat back over the years—indeed, decades—and allowed this crisis to build up as they repeat the mantra that the market will solve everything. The market cannot solve everything. Following that path has been a complete failure and now the chickens are coming home to roost. The Government allied that approach with a kamikaze Brexit that, as they were told umpteen times throughout the process, is destroying livelihoods and driving up the costs of trade and therefore the cost to the consumer.

The UK Government have unleashed a perfect storm on the country, forcing households to choose between heating their homes or eating. The choices made by this Government that have led to the present crisis are not the choices that Scotland made. There is a different road that supports our people instead of punishing them. These choices are not in my name. Scotland will choose its own future soon and I hope—indeed, I know—that it will choose a future that places a greater value on people's day-to-day lives than the current set-up and the current management.

6.42 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It was only a couple of weeks ago that I stood here and spoke in the Labour Opposition day debate. On that day, Labour Members were concerned about the cost of living but, two weeks later, it is not quite so important to them today.

We all agree that there is an issue with the cost of living. Office for National Statistics data shows that in December the consumer prices index and retail prices index showed average price increases of 5.4% and 7.5% respectively. Most economists predict that those rates will run higher still. Inflation at a 30-year high is obviously worrying, as it is for many families, but, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said when he was at the Dispatch Box, inflation is expected to come back to reasonable levels in the not-too-distant future. We have to analyse why that is the case.

High inflation is not a factor unique to the United Kingdom: the US is in a similar position and Germany is experiencing the same problems in the EU. There are inevitable consequences from our waking up from a global pandemic, with supply chains readjusting and struggling to meet the demand after we have been released from restrictions—restrictions that this Government have handled far better than the Governments of most other countries around the entire world. We also have to deal with the spiking of energy prices.

However as Conservative Members said in interventions at the beginning of the debate, it is fair to say that, since March 2020, the Government and the Chancellor's response to the pandemic has been one of the best in the world, with help and support for millions and millions of people. It is widely expected that our recovery will be the best in the G7. We have unemployment back to pre-pandemic levels, and we have multiple job vacancies—last time I looked there were 1.25 million of them. The SNP must realise that we cannot spend £400 billion and be some £2.2 trillion in debt without needing some degree of responsible management of the public finances going forward, especially when we will have rising interest rates in the future.

What the Government are doing is sensible. Indeed, when I spoke in the Opposition's debate only a fortnight ago, I said that targeted support was needed, and it is clear from reports that that is being looked at. The problem is that we cannot shield the entire country from rising food costs, or from rising energy costs—it is not feasible or practical. Anybody with a degree of understanding of economic policy will recognise that.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury was very honest when he said that, as we emerge from the pandemic, the reality is that there will be difficult times. We have been in a coronavirus pandemic and had an economic shock the likes of which we have not seen pretty much since the second world war, and the Government are targeting support at families whose need is greatest. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), there is the 6.6% rise in the national living wage, which is the highest ever—it is the highest

rate of pay that the United Kingdom has ever had—and the universal credit taper will help some 2 million families. However, what does not grab the headlines or really get picked up in the House is the other support that the Government give, including half a billion pounds through the household support fund and £200 million for the holiday activities programme, which is still being run. That support is there specifically for local councils to roll out on the ground, because often they know the people—we have talked about them all afternoon—who need it the very most.

There are short-term issues that we must deal with and longer-term ones. However, getting the economy moving is clearly by far and away the right approach. Ever more reliance on the state and increasing public debt is wholly irresponsible and the sort of mismanagement that the Opposition would use. Thank goodness they are not in power.

6.48 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is interesting to see the contrast in how much attention the UK Government are giving to their ever-increasing self-inflicted chaos while it goes completely unremarked by Government Members that the UK has the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north-west Europe and the highest levels of in-work poverty this century. It is all about choices, and while the Tory UK Government are choosing to look in on themselves just as the cost of living crisis really bites, the SNP Scottish Government, with their limited powers, are seeking to support those who need it most, whether through doubling the Scottish child payment, baby boxes or free prescriptions—I could go on.

It is not some random accident that has led us here; the Tory Government's choices have propelled us down this road. It was their choice to cut the universal credit uplift, which has been so devastating. What might not be a large amount of money for those in the market for fancy gold wallpaper, for instance, is actually a whole lot of money for someone who is short of funds to feed their family or heat their home. So much for the sunny Brexit uplands that we were promised, and so much for the utter lies written on the side of that Brexit bus or the extraordinary nonsense spouted by the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who told us that

"the price of food…will go down".

In reality, pursuing Brexit—against the will of the Scottish electorate, let us remember—has caused substantial damage to families and businesses, and will continue to do so.

The Government have chosen to remove the pensions triple lock, and their decision to write off the £4.3 billion in fraudulently claimed covid business funding, which has today caused Lord Agnew to resign at the Dispatch Box, is a very different approach from that taken by the DWP when it makes mistakes resulting in overpayments, which causes huge hardship to those affected. Whichever way we look at it, the choices that this Tory Government are making are pressing hard on household finances, but they are just closing their eyes to it, looking the other way while they prop up a Prime Minister who is so remote from the cost of living crisis that he would not know it if it arrived in his own garden dressed up as a work event.

The headline facts are bad enough. Consumer prices were 5.4% higher in December 2021 than the year before. It is the highest inflation rate recorded since 1992, and it is forecast to carry on rising. Energy prices are an enormous worry for many. Domestic gas prices increased by 28% between January and November last year, and electricity by 19%. We need serious action on that now.

We also need to drill below the headline figure. Low-income households will always take a bigger hit because they need to spend a bigger proportion of what comes in on energy and food. The cost of living crisis presses them so much harder. Those of us who work here in this Westminster bubble could do with reflecting on some of the points that Jack Monroe has made over recent days. Headline figures say that food prices increased by 4.2% in the year to December, but she looked further. Since this time last year, the cheapest pasta in her local supermarket went up by 141%. Similarly, rice is up by 344%. Those increases disproportionately hit those who, by necessity, have to shop for the cheapest items. How are people meant to make ends meet with those kinds of price increases for basic food supplies when their income is being reduced thanks to the UK Government's universal credit cuts, fuel price crisis, regressive NI increases to come, and two child limit? I could go on.

All those UK Government policies are actively pushing people into hardship—and they know that full well. The Resolution Foundation recently reported that the UK welfare system no longer does what it is meant to do—protect the poorest. It no longer provides a safety net. The UK Government know that but choose to ignore it. Ask yourself why that is: why do they not choose to follow the lead of the Scottish Government, who use their limited powers to support wellbeing with free prescriptions and dental care, free higher education and increased free childcare? Why do they not match the Scottish child payment and make it available for families across the UK? Why not introduce a real living wage of at least £10 an hour, or an energy payment for low-income households?

The UK Government know all of this. They know that, as the cost of living rises, propelled by their policy choices, many more people are in significant hardship. Their choices and their priorities have consequences, and it is absolutely clear to me that, as long as Scotland is under Westminster control, we will always be vulnerable, and it is time to make a fairer, better choice.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid that I will have to reduce the time limit to four minutes. I have been able to warn the next speaker, Christine Jardine.

6.53 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate and to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald).

It is important that we have heard contributions from the hon. Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), for Bury North (James Daly), for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), because they

[Christine Jardine]

emphasised that this is an issue that affects households not just in Scotland but in every single corner of the United Kingdom. I suggest to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) that there are people in the home counties who are suffering just as much as households across the rest of the UK. They will suffer as a result of the Government's hike in national insurance, and they are suffering from the record inflation rate and the stealth tax introduced as a result of the Government not increasing the tax threshold. All those things are affecting households who are also facing a massive increase in energy prices, which for a lot of them will mean a choice between heating their home and feeding their family this winter.

It is important that the Scottish National party take into account that this is an issue on which we all agree. The Labour party agrees; the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) made many of the same arguments that we have heard from the SNP Benches, and that people will hear from the Liberal Democrats. We want to see a doubling of the warm homes discount and the winter fuel allowance. We want to see a new 10-year home insulation scheme, support for energy-intensive businesses and a windfall tax on those who have benefited.

However, every single time SNP Members come to this House, they make it about independence and breaking up the United Kingdom, rather than sticking to the issue, which we all agree is important and which we all agree that our constituents across the United Kingdom face—yes, they face the same issue in Edinburgh South as they do in North Norfolk. That is something we have in common. It is a common problem and it will need all our attention and efforts in the United Kingdom to address it.

We have seen our cost of living degenerate over the course of the pandemic. Now we see it under more stress, and we have a Government whose attention—let us all be honest—is not entirely where it should be, but on their own internal problems, such as partygates and internal rows. Those should have no place here at a time when we face such a serious problem. I appeal to the Government to put all that aside, to fix it and to sort it; the Prime Minister should consider his position, and they should get on with dealing with the issue we all face.

To the Scottish National party I would say: we support you in fighting the cost of living crisis we all face, but we could fight it together. We could beat it together. We could help our constituents together, if we stopped having narrow identity arguments that simply divide us and make it more difficult for everybody.

6.56 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The rise in the consumer prices index will disproportionately affect those already facing pressure on disposable income. The rise will affect low-income families, including the disabled, the long-term sick, the unemployed and those on a low fixed income with no prospect of overtime or salary increases, who on average spend a larger proportion of their income on energy costs and food and will therefore be more affected by the price increases.

I make specific mention of the 3.8 million women born in the 1950s who were cruelly robbed of their pensions by the Government, who are still being unfairly denied full restitution for their loss and who continue to suffer an appalling injustice. I also mention the 3 million people, mainly self-employed and directors of small limited companies, whom the Chancellor callously excluded from any financial support during a pandemic.

There is sadly another, perhaps less reported consequence of inflation: an increase in crime. In 2014 Professor Richard Rosenfeld, an American criminologist, concluded:

"Inflation is the most powerful economic predictor of crime."

I have several examples from research data to prove that case, but time prevents me from explaining them. I am not suggesting that everybody in financial difficulties, poverty or debt will resort to theft or other crime to make ends meet, pay their bills or feed their families, but unfortunately we too often hear anecdotal stories of parents arrested for shoplifting essential items such as baby formula, nappies and food that will enable their families to survive.

While it is impossible to predict how much crime will increase, history tells us that if inflation continues to increase, crime will also inevitably do so. Therefore, to mitigate the effects of a predicted increase in all crime, which will put pressure on our already overworked police, courts, prison, probation, social work, women's aid and other support services in the criminal justice system, it is essential that the Government provide further immediate financial support for those services. Not to do so now would be negligent in the extreme. I also urge the Government to take steps to reduce those levels of poverty and spiralling debt in the rest of the United Kingdom by introducing measures such as we have in Scotland, including the game-changing £20 child payment, the 1,140 hours of free childcare a year for eligible children, free prescriptions, free sanitary products for women and girls, free bus travel across the country for everyone over 60 and the disabled—briefly expanded to include young people between the ages of five and 21—and free university tuition in our world-class universities for our young people.

I suggest that savings could be made by not renewing weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde, currently estimated at £205 billion. Spending could be stopped on vanity projects, including the new royal yacht, or on the refurbishment of Buckingham Palace, estimated at £360 million. There was also the shambolic process that resulted in the loss of £4.3 billion to fraud during the pandemic being written off by the Chancellor.

With independence, we could keep crime levels at least where they are, if not further reduce them, by gathering revenue from the massive energy production soon to power all the UK's 30 million or so homes. More importantly, as an independent country in the European Union, we would have full control of our economic levers, which would help to control inflation and deliver a more equal, progressive and prosperous—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Alan Brown.

7.1 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is incredible that in this cost of living crisis the UK Government have done nothing and that the Chief

Secretary earlier did not give us one new Treasury policy. Even when there was a chance for Tory Back Benchers to vote for a VAT holiday on energy bills, the Brexiteers dutifully voted it down.

In only a couple of weeks' time, Ofgem will undertake its review of the energy price cap and is likely to confirm the April increase of about £600, a 50% increase. There is limited time for action. Tinkering at the edges, such as delaying the impact of the £2 billion administration costs of 28 energy companies going bust, is not enough. Direct Government action is needed to prevent the cap rising or to support those affected by it. In UK Government policy, the Tories have already made matters worse for those who are struggling—a cut in pensions of more than £500 per year, the removal of the £20 a week universal credit uplift—and that in the midst of the cost of living crisis, with inflation at a 30-year high and household incomes dropping in real terms by up to £1,200.

National Energy Action estimates that the cap rising to £2,000 will lead to 6 million households in fuel poverty, a shocking 33% increase in only a six-month period. Worse, and shamefully, it also estimates that approximately 10,000 premature deaths a year arise from fuel poverty. How many more premature deaths will occur if the Government do not do something?

To date, the only direct Government intervention on energy has been the allocation of £1.7 billion for the development of Sizewell C. Not content with Hinkley Point C being the most expensive power station in the world, the Tories are determined to create another one. In their own impact assessment, they estimated costs of as much as £63 billion being added to our energy bills.

If people live in the Scottish highlands, they are more likely to be off the gas grid, so energy costs them more. Worse, many customers are on what are called restricted meters, so they pay about £400 more per annum for their energy, due to a 4p surcharge per unit of electricity. How is that fair? People in the highlands who export energy to the rest of the UK pay a surcharge for the privilege. It is time that the Scottish Tories stood up for their constituents on that.

To return to direct intervention, that can be paid for by levying a windfall tax on the Treasury. As our energy bills have increased, so has its VAT returns on them. As fuel prices have increased, the Treasury has raked in more money in fuel duty and VAT. As for the North sea, the November Budget confirmed that this year alone the Treasury would receive an extra £1.1 billion in oil and gas revenues, or £6 billion over the lifetime of the Parliament. The Treasury should release that money now. It is astounding that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury does not seem to understand that 5% of £2,000 is twice the value to the Treasury as 5% of £1,000.

By contrast, in Scotland, the Scottish Government are doing their best while operating on a fixed budget with limited borrowing powers. The Scottish Government's child winter heating assistance supports 14,000 families with disabled children through automatic payments of £200 a year. The low income winter heating assistance will help 400,000 low-income households with £50 every winter, instead of complicated cold weather payments of £25. For families there is a game-changing £20 per week child payment; compare this with the hapless £20 a week universal credit cut.

It is absurd that Scotland has paid £375 billion of oil and gas revenues to the Treasury, and that this has been squandered, with no legacy. We only need to look at Norway to see what a small independent country that is in charge of its own resources can do, and I look forward to Scotland's joining it.

7.5 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I thank the SNP for bringing forward this important debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for his opening remarks.

The front page of today's *Daily Record* newspaper brings this shameful situation into sharp relief. While inflated Tory egos jockey for position in a power struggle for the worst of possible reasons, the cost of real-world inflation is being felt across these islands as millions struggle to fund the power they need to heat their homes. What a dismal situation it is where more than one in three Scots are already in crisis with energy costs soaring by up to 28%, but there are more price hikes and more pain still to come. This underscores the need for my Cold Climate Allowance Bill, and I hope the Government will give that due consideration in the course of this Parliament.

This debate is on the cost of living crisis, but for Scotland it could easily be cast as the cost of the Union crisis. Since 2014, the cost of the Union has been to rip Scotland from Europe against our democratic will, damaging our freedoms, impacting our economy and driving European friends away from their homes. It has seen the opportunities of our vast renewable resources realised abroad, while Scottish jobs have failed to materialise. We have suffered the bedroom tax, the benefit cap, the rape clause, universal credit cuts, and Ministers acting unlawfully, while obscene billions of pounds have been lost or written off on covid contracts and schemes. All the while, the Government have pursued a tax and cut agenda, punishing the poorest and the most vulnerable, yet it seems today that the anticipated rise in national insurance may be abandoned. If the Government know it is wrong now, then they knew it was wrong when they pushed it through.

All of this is intrinsically linked to Scotland's continuing position in the UK, yet nothing is more emblematic of the cost of the Union than the current Prime Minister, who stands rejected by his own Scottish party and its leadership. I have found that politicians generally fall into two groups: people who want to do important things and people who want to feel important. The Prime Minister takes self-importance to stratospheric levels of self-indulgence. If he had just one ounce of humility, he would surely die of embarrassment.

It was the Tories' return in 2010 that brought me into frontline politics, because I knew it would be bad and that our communities would suffer, our economy would suffer, poverty and greed would rise, and compassion would fade into the shadows. I knew this because I remember when Thatcherism stalked the streets of Scotland, decimated industry, fractured communities, broke people and robbed them of hope. Toryism is the engine room of despair and the champion of injustice.

Of course the Prime Minister should resign, but what would this achieve? A Tory power struggle will not change the very real power and poverty struggle in Scotland

[Neale Hanvey]

one iota. Each and every one of us in Scotland should prosper from our vast natural resources, but instead those assets are handed on a plate to profiteering corporate interests, while our people are cold and hungry, and people turn to the oblivion of drink and drugs because hopelessness has replaced opportunity. I urge Scottish colleagues across the House to join my calls for the Scottish Government to begin a constitutional convention to consider Scotland's future. This is the cost of the Union, and from my perspective there is only one clear remedy—the aspiration and hope of an independent Scotland.

7.8 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey), and I entirely support his views on Scottish independence. I also support the call for a constitutional convention, which was the idea of our First Minister and was first called for by her just prior to the start of the covid crisis.

I just gently say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) that those of us who are returned to this House on an SNP ticket will continue to talk about independence for so long as we are returned in the very significant numbers that we are. If she has been looking at the opinion polls over the weekend, she will see that support for independence in Scotland is at 50%—considerably more than support for her own party—so I am afraid that her calls on us to stop talking about independence will very much fall on deaf ears. We believe that we could tackle these matters better in a social democratic, independent Scotland.

The real focus of this debate is how the weight of the cost of living crisis will fall hardest on low-income households, who on average spend a much higher percentage of their income on energy and food and will therefore be most affected. A number of hon. Members have referred to Jack Monroe's work. Jack Monroe has shown in a blog and in an excellent article in *The Guardian* at the weekend how the rise in food costs in particular falls on the poorest people in our society.

As for the rise in energy costs, I will give one example, from the many that I could give, of a constituent of mine in Edinburgh South West. She contacted me in despair after receiving her renewal quotation from Octopus Energy:

"I am really shocked. I currently have a fixed 12 month tariff and pay £86.55 a month but from end of Jan 2022, they"—

Octopus Energy—

"have proposed the following deals between £116 and £240 per month. I expected prices to rise and expected £200-300 more a year however based on their new tariffs I am looking at an extra £1000 to £2000 per year."

That is just one example of the sort of difficulty that my constituents have been put into by this crisis.

The constituents who will suffer the most are those who are already in considerable difficulty because of the misery heaped upon them by unfair Conservative and Unionist party policies. The Government have it within their power to help these low-income families and the most hard-hit. The Government can always find money when they want to, and they have written off a pretty extraordinary amount of money, squandered during the covid crisis because of what their own resigning Minister has called a "woeful" lack of oversight.

This is about priorities. When my constituents suffering on low incomes go to the supermarket to shop, they do not go with a suitcase to fill with wine and spirits for illegal parties; they go with a wee basket, which they fill sparsely, taking things out as they realise that their meagre budget will be exceeded. The low-income families in my constituency do not have money for cheese and wine parties in the garden. Most of them do not have a garden, and if they did, they would not have the leisure time to spend in it because they are working all hours in low-paid jobs and the gig economy to feed their children.

In households not just in my Edinburgh South West constituency but across this country—across all the nations of the United Kingdom, on the Tories' watch—parents go hungry to feed their children. The walls of those low-income families are not papered with expensive designer wallpaper; often, they are damp and poorly insulated, so they need to spend even more on extortionately priced energy to heat them than they should. The Tories have the power and the money to solve this. Do something.

7.12 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): A survey last year by 38 Degrees found that 36% of people asked in my constituency of Stockport had seen their energy bills rise. Since then we have heard from the Office for National Statistics that two thirds of adults in the UK have seen their cost of living increase. Meanwhile, half of Britons say that they could not afford an additional £50 a month or £12 a week on their cost of living.

What are the Government doing about it? While the Prime Minister jostles to protect his own future, he seems to have forgotten the job that he is in No. 10 to do. Wages have fallen in the face of inflation at a 10-year high, while rents have risen at their fastest pace in 13 years. All the while, the safety net of the furlough scheme and the £20 universal credit uplift have been swept from under people's feet. In 2019, the public were promised a national living wage by the Conservative party, ahead of the general election, but even back then it was a wage that most could not live on. Now, while people struggle to make ends meet, the Government are in a crisis of their own making.

I believe it was the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) who made a point about the minimum wage. What we need is an end to poverty wages. I am a supporter of the Living Wage Foundation, which sets the rate of pay per hour independently in London and outside. Surely what we should push for is better jobs—unionised, well-paid jobs—in communities such as mine.

If the meetings we hear about were truly work meetings, the Government and the Minister will have done enough work to explain to the people of Stockport how they will make tenancies more affordable or how their petrol and fuel bills will go down. In my constituency, the average rent for a two-bedroom property is an unaffordable £800 a month. Despite a recent review of the local housing allowance and a subsequent rise, the calculated rate is only £650 a month, so many people fall short. If people on low incomes have to find an extra £150 a month for a home, how can they be expected to cover the cost of the basics when prices are rising?

The Government do not seem to have a plan in place to boost skills and jobs for workers. As a result, we face a labour shortage, gaps on the shelves and rising prices. If the Government had a proper industrial strategy, we could deliver the green, well-paid jobs of the future but, sadly, we are missing that.

I shall keep my contribution brief and end with this point: as families face a calamitous drop in their standard of living, the Government need to get their house in order and sort out their act. My constituents, like many others across the country, need to know how they are going to pay those bills.

7.15 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We have heard in this debate heartbreaking stories of constituents who are facing real and enduring hardship; of the choices that people are already making in the face of the poverty that they endure; and of the impact of the cost of living crisis on those we represent. The crisis is the direct result of political choices made by the UK Tory Government and their predecessors over the past decade. Many of our constituents face grinding poverty, whether in or out of work. The Covid Realities report that came out today states:

"Our social security system is currently ill-suited to protect people from poverty".

That should be the system's very function.

The Tories have cut the £20-a-week uplift to universal credit and to working tax credits, which made such a difference to low-income families during the pandemic, and shamefully they completely forgot about the 2.5 million people on legacy benefits, including many people with disabilities, who depend on their heating so much more. To make matters worse, we have the upcoming Tory tax on jobs—the national insurance hike, which is coming in April. Laden on top of that, we have Brexit chaos, spiralling fuel prices and inflation seemingly running out of control at a 30-year high.

This is a perfect storm for the poorest in society. Already buffeted by the ill wind of austerity, a growing number of people have no savings, and debt which is becoming increasingly unmanageable. Last week's Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on poverty in 2022 highlights the two-child limit, which I have fought since 2015 but which remains on the Government's statute book, driving up child poverty with every passing day; the benefit cap—in Scotland, 67.8% of capped households are single-parent households; the five-week wait for the first universal credit payment; unaffordable debt deductions from benefits; and the freezing of local housing allowance rates since April 2020. All those things have increased the levels of poverty in the UK.

People are increasingly trapped in situations that are not their fault, unable to take on more hours, and unable to change their circumstances. Many of them, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) mentioned, are WASPI women, whose pension plans were cut short by the Government. I want to pay particular tribute to June Miller, part of the WASPI Glasgow and Lanarkshire group, who was buried today. She was 64 and never saw her pension—shame on this Government.

The impact on those facing the hostile environment is even sharper. Asylum seekers and people with no recourse to public funds are regularly left destitute, dependent on charitable support and help from local churches, gurdwaras and mosques to survive. If we know this, if people out there know this, then Tory ministers must know all this, and it makes it all the more utterly despicable that they have chosen not to act.

Ministers, of course, will talk up the changes to the taper rate, which are welcome, but they only help those lucky enough to be in work. The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that real wages will be lower in 2026 than they were in 2008. What kind of future is that for people in work? Ministers will laud their pretendy living wage, which is not even set at the real living wage rate, and has age discrimination baked in. They will praise food banks, calling them "rather uplifting", instead of their proliferation being a mark of shame. My former caseworker, Ellenor Hutson, has reflected that food banks were a rarity when she began advice work in 2005. Yet in 2020-21, the Trussell Trust distributed over 2.5 million food parcels across the UK, which is up 128% in the past five years.

Hannah Bardell: On food banks, does my hon. Friend agree it is disgusting that there are now more food banks in the UK than McDonald's restaurants, that almost 25% of folk in the UK are in poverty and that the Office for National Statistics calculated that the richest 10% of households hold 44% of the wealth while the poorest 50% own 9%—all under this Government's watch?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. While we know that those who work in food banks and support them do incredible work, they should not have to.

Away from the realm of boozy lockdown parties at No. 10 and birthday dumps for the Prime Minister while the rest of us were locked down, in the real world, people are experiencing a shocking rise in the price of the most basic necessities, as highlighted so powerfully by Jack Monroe. Average prices do not take into account the distribution of those prices across product lines. Increasing prices and the reduction in what is on offer is far more concentrated at the lower end, the cheaper end, of the food market, disproportionately impacting on those low-income families who depend on them. The reality of inflation is that it is much more than points on a chart to families who are already struggling. For many, it will be the difference between putting food on the table or not.

Energy prices mean that families cannot afford to heat or even light their homes, making them more vulnerable to health issues, particularly those who already experience health conditions and disabilities. Macmillan points out that about one in six people with cancer see their household fuel bills rise because of their diagnosis, with the average cost for those affected reaching £100 a month. The UK Government must act now on energy prices. Instead of a rising price cap, the UK Government must introduce an emergency financial package to support the most vulnerable and help families to cope with this growing Tory cost of living crisis.

The New Economics Foundation found that lone parents, pensioners and families caring for disabled relatives will be hit the hardest by increasing bills, and that the poorest will lose the largest proportion of their incomes to fuel bills. National Energy Action estimates

[Alison Thewliss]

that 6 million—6 million—UK households will be living in fuel poverty by April, a 50% increase from 2021. Resolution Foundation research shows that on average families will be £1,200 worse off in April and that fuel stress will dramatically increase from April due the higher energy price cap. New Joseph Rowntree Foundation analysis also warns that the energy price cap will have a harsher impact on the poorest families, who will spend on average 18% of their income after housing costs on energy bills after April. Minister, people cannot cope with those increases. The Government must act.

The reality is that poverty kills people: quickly and slowly, painfully and miserably. It stunts life chances and its effects endure. It is clearer every day that this UK Government, this Prime Minister, this Chancellor and this Minister in front of us today have the powers to tackle this, but not the will. They have the resources and the wealth, should they choose to use them. We can only conclude by their inaction that they have no interest in ending poverty—none whatsoever. Lord Agnew showed some courage—more courage than anybody on the Government Benches here—by resigning over the fraudulent misuse of bounce back loans: further billions to the amount they have allowed fraudsters to walk out the door with, including £4.3 billion from the covid support schemes alone, while so many were completely excluded from UK Government support. That incompetence is not new. According to Best for Britain, a total of £19.3 billion has been wasted by the Prime Minister since he came to power—all that while the Tories play their political games, shifting the blame for tax rises, filling suitcases full of booze, and ducking questions about lies and parties.

People are freezing and people are starving, not in some Dickensian dystopia but right now, on these islands. Tackling the Tory cost of living crisis is a matter of urgency and lives depend on it. The UK already has the worst levels of poverty of any polity in north-west Europe and the highest levels of in-work poverty this century. Only independence will allow us to recalibrate our economy to support and invest in those who have the least, rather than to reward those who already have the most. I urge all Members with sense and compassion to support our motion today.

7.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) speaks with conviction —I know that from having listened to many of her debates in the past—but it will be no surprise that I will come to a very different conclusion in my arguments today. Let me begin by thanking all hon. Members who have taken part in this important and sometimes lively debate. The pandemic has been a very challenging time for many. We acted quickly to put in place unprecedented levels of support. Since the start of the pandemic, we have spent more than £400 billion protecting people's jobs and livelihoods, supporting businesses and public services and providing unprecedented welfare support. That is not inactivity, as alleged by the SNP, and it has been conveniently overlooked by hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey).

Universal credit has stood up to the challenge of covid-19, providing a vital safety net for 6 million people, thanks to the hardworking staff in DWP across the nation, including in Scotland. Thousands of work coaches worked tirelessly to ensure that the benefits system did its job. Our successful vaccine programme is providing us with the protection to fight the virus in all its forms.

The latest labour market statistics prove that time and again we have made positive decisions during the pandemic. As has been highlighted during the debate, it is important to put the rising cost of living in context. Prices are rising in countries around the world. I know that Members such as the hon. Members for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) have raised concerns, but we need to look at the issue in context. As the global economy recovers from the pandemic, consumer demand is surging at a time when global supply chains are disrupted. We recognise and understand the pressures that is causing for people's wallets, and their worries as they see the cost of food, energy and other essentials increase.

The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—and, indeed, the Chief Secretary sitting next to me—are listening to those concerns. As shown during the pandemic, the Government will do what it takes to support those most in need, and we are looking at the best way to build on the support that is already available. With the economy moving into a higher gear, it is time to focus our attention on getting people into work and progressing in employment. That was ably highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) and for Moray (Douglas Ross).

Alan Brown: The Minister said that the Government will do everything it takes to resolve the cost of living crisis. What will they do to mitigate the energy price cap rise in April?

David Rutley: We have shown what we can do when faced with challenge. We are monitoring the situation and looking at all the solutions—we will come forward—as, I understand, the Scottish Government are monitoring the situation to see what more they can do.

David Linden *rose—*

David Rutley: I will not give way just yet: I will make further progress.

The latest job figures tell a very positive story. There is now a record number of people in payroll employment in the UK, with 23,000 people added to payrolls in Scotland in December alone. With around 1.25 million vacancies across the UK, up 33,000, or 2.7% in a month, and by 467,000, or 58.9% since the start of the pandemic, there are many further opportunities for people to move into and, importantly, progress in work and increase their earnings.[1]

Current estimates also show that the number of online job adverts in Scotland has risen by 13% since the start of the pandemic. We know the importance of employment, particularly full-time work, in substantially reducing the risks of poverty, especially in households with children. That is why the focus of the Secretary of State and the

1. *[Official Report, 9 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 11MC.]*

whole DWP ministerial team is on matching people looking for work with those opportunities, which will also boost key sectors and the economy as a whole. As well as getting people into jobs, we are taking action to boost the take-home pay of low-income working households by giving 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year through our cut to the universal credit taper rates and increasing work allowances. Raising the national living wage by 6.6% to £9.50 from April will mean an extra £1,000 a year for full-time workers.

To help people to take advantage of the record number of vacancies, our plan for jobs is helping people at any age and any stage of their career, as the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), is fully aware. Since the start of the pandemic, we have recruited 13,500 new work coaches to ensure that claimants, no matter where they live across the country, can access support and opportunities to get a job, progress in work and realise their potential. It is good to know that there are 1,200 extra work coaches in Scotland alone. In addition, the flexible support fund is available to remove barriers for anyone looking to access the labour market and is administered by work coaches on a discretionary basis, so it is a great tool to help people overcome their own personal barriers to work. For those who have been unemployed for between three and six months, the job entry targeted support programme provides intensive support to help them bounce back as quickly as possible, and for individuals requiring upskilling to take advantage of a vacancy in a certain sector—Members have discussed particular concerns in specific sectors—sector-based work academy programmes, or SWAPs, provide claimants with those key skills and a guaranteed job interview at the end of the placement.

For young people, who are of course most at risk of long-term unemployment and have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, we have the £2 billion kickstart scheme, which has seen over 122,000 young people start a six-month work placement across many different kinds of jobs and sectors, with 10,000 starts in Scotland alone. There are youth hubs in every jobcentre to support young people—150 youth hubs have been opened, 19 of them in Scotland—and extra support is available for those aged over 50 as well, to help them find the work they need and help them progress with their career aspirations.

We recognise the pressure people are facing with their household finances and are providing extra support for those who need it in this period of cost pressures. We must of course highlight the household support fund, which has provided £500 million of support across the United Kingdom, with £41 million going to Scotland and the Scottish Government.

We have provided extra support as well over the years, recently by increasing the local housing allowance in cash terms, with an extra £600 on average to 1.5 million households. As we look at the rising energy prices, we are working with Ofgem and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that we have the correct response to the recent pressures and make the appropriate changes where needed to increase our resilience to future price fluctuations. There is the energy price cap, and the winter fuel payments, cold weather payments, and the warm home discount, all of them making a real difference to people facing energy cost challenges across the country, including in Scotland.

So, we have done a lot. We will continue to do more. We are committed to working with the Scottish Government to help them achieve their devolution aspirations. We look forward to hearing more about them so we can help them in this task, and we are absolutely committed to help those—

Owen Thompson *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 57, Noes 0.

Division No. 167] [7.33 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela *(Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson)*
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Eastwood, Colum
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Hanvey, Neale
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hosie, rh Stewart
Jardine, Christine
Law, Chris
Linden, David
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stuart C.
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oswald, Kirsten
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Alyn
Stephens, Chris
Stone, Jamie
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and Richard Thomson

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Hywel Williams and Ben Lake

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes there is a cost of living crisis hitting homes across the UK; regrets the UK Government's current plan of reductions in certain benefits and tax rises coupled with rising costs of the UK leaving the EU; is concerned that the UK has the worst levels of poverty and inequality in north west Europe and the highest levels of in-work poverty this century; and calls on the Government to take immediate action with a package of measures to boost incomes and reverse rising poverty, including reinstating the £20 universal credit uplift, introducing a Real Living Wage of at least £10 an hour, introducing an energy payment for low income households, and matching the Scottish Government's Scottish Child Payment for families across the UK.

David Linden: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the Brexit campaign, we were all told that Parliament would be taking back control. Given that the House has just voted by a clear majority for a motion calling for the Government to reinstate the £20 universal credit uplift, introduce a real living wage of at least £10 an hour and an energy payment for low-income households, and roll out a child payment similar to that in Scotland—given that the Parliament that has been given all this control has just voted for that—can you inform me when the Government will introduce such measures to help people with the cost of living crisis?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very reasonable point of order. I am looking at the motion which the House has indeed just passed, and I note that the crucial point is that the House

"calls on the Government to take immediate action".

Well, the House has called, and I am sure that the Government have heard.

LEASEHOLD REFORM (GROUND RENT) BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 29 November 2021 (Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

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

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

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

Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [*Lords*]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

[Relevant documents: Twelfth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2017-19, Leasehold Reform, HC 1468, and the Government Response, CP 99; Correspondence between the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Chairman of the Local Government Association on the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill, dated 3 November and 16 November 2021; Correspondence from the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee to the Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing on the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill, dated 23 November 2021.]

New Clause 1

GROUND RENT FOR EXISTING LONG LEASES

"Within 30 days of the day on which this Act comes into force, the Secretary of State must publish draft legislation to restrict ground rents on all existing long residential leases to a peppercorn."—*(Mike Amesbury.)*

This new clause aims to ensure that the Government introduces further legislation to remove ground rent for all leaseholders, whereas the Act currently only applies to newly established leases.

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.47 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 3, line 16, at end insert—

"Retirement developments where some leasehold residential flats have already been sold prior to commencement but others remain unsold

(12) A lease is an excepted lease if it is a lease of a retirement home in a development, where—

(a) other residential flats within the development have sold and completed on a long leasehold before the relevant commencement day under section 26(4) but it is a flat within the development which remains unsold, and

(b) the development commenced prior to 6th July 2021."

This amendment seeks to avoid retirement developments where properties are on the market, but not fully sold by the time the Act comes into force for retirement properties, needing to have two lease types within one building, some paying ground rents and others funding the development of communal areas by another method.

Mike Amesbury: Let me begin by thanking all colleagues who have helped this short but important Bill through its stages so far, including our friends in the other place. In particular, I thank those who joined the Minister and me in scrutinising the Bill in Committee. Let me also begin with an apology to the Minister. I told him on the occasion of our final meeting in the Committee that that would be my last outing in respect of housing, having handed over the portfolio to my capable hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), who is sitting behind me. I was wrong to say that, and I am very pleased that I was wrong. I stand

here today ready to continue to raise an issue which matters hugely to me, to many of my constituents, and to leaseholders across the country—and, indeed, to the Minister himself.

Although the Bill is short, many important issues in it have already been covered extensively, first by our colleagues in the other place and then by Members here, in Committee. I do not wish to repeat too much of what has already been said, but the two new clauses tabled for Report are an opportunity for Members on both sides of the House to raise again two important aspects of the Bill.

New clause 1 would require the Government to produce draft legislation within 30 days to reduce ground rents to a peppercorn in existing long residential leases. The antiquated feudal system of leasehold is unjust for the many and not just the new. People in England and Wales have been trapped in that relic from the past for far too long. I urge the Minister to set them free, level up their life chances and support the new clause.

New clause 1 proposes that the narrow scope of the Bill be simply widened to improve the lives of leaseholders—the 4.5 million people trapped in this feudal system. Some 1.4 million of them are in houses, many in the north, the north-west and Wales, and may be experiencing high ground rents on top of other exploitative terms built into their leasehold contracts.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): We are all united in wanting to stamp out abusive practices with ground rents, but is the defect of the hon. Gentleman's amendment not that it amounts effectively to a confiscation of existing property rights? That in itself has fairness issues, but it also deters future investment in our building stock. That future investment is needed, for example, if we are going to insulate against climate change and turn our buildings into more carbon neutral ones for the future.

Mike Amesbury: A feudal system of kings and barons needs to be kicked into touch. It is unjust and it is unfair. I am sure the right hon. Member will make an informed decision when it comes to the Division Lobby, but I know whose side I am on.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee looked at the leasehold issues in some detail and produced a report that led to the Competition and Markets Authority conducting its investigation. We looked at the issue of property rights and took advice and evidence from leading property lawyers, who said that where there is a general public interest, it is perfectly reasonable under the European convention on human rights to go down the road being suggested, and that even for existing properties, the ground rent system and other leasehold issues could be changed to reflect the fact that currently they are simply unfair.

Mike Amesbury: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and all the work he and the Select Committee have done to move the matter forward. Together with the Select Committee and many others, I certainly want to see this system kicked into history.

I reaffirm that campaigners have waited long enough for change, and we should not keep them waiting any longer. A former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), referred to the Bill as the "appetiser" before "the main course". Again, I affirm that what we need is an all-you-can-eat buffet of reform here and now.

Amendment 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), would prevent some retirement properties from being bound by the legislation. Unfortunately, we are not able to support the amendment. In fact, in Committee I tabled an amendment that would have done quite the opposite. Those who buy retirement properties should have been able to benefit from this new legislation and be put on par with everybody else. Justice is justice. The right hon. Member has certainly been consistent, but consistently wrong on this matter.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has it occurred to the hon. Gentleman that for many purchasers it will be in their interests to pay a lower purchase price and pay a ground rent, rather than to have to pay a very much higher price at the outset?

Mike Amesbury: I will agree to disagree. The Government have proposed a compromise, giving a longer transition phase for retirement properties, and we will support that approach, as was stated in Committee.

I find that the concerns of retirement community developers do not outweigh the need for those buying retirement properties to be treated fairly as consumers. Given the notice that the retirement community has had about the change, the transition period is generous enough. Many in the industry have done the right thing and already moved away from this income stream model, and I ask that their colleagues do the same.

In conclusion, the Bill marks another milestone in the slow journey to put the feudal system of leasehold into the history books. I thank all those campaigners who have educated legislators and the Government to secure change. The investigation and intervention from the Competition and Markets Authority have shone an authoritative light on the leasehold scandal. Developers have been exposed and are now responding by ditching the practice of doubling ground rents every 10 years. I urge Ministers to strengthen the Bill for all leaseholders and back new clause 1.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I draw your attention, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am deeply embarrassed about the way that the retirement living industry has been treated over the past few years in the progress to this Bill. In recognition of the significantly greater capital costs of building developments that have communal areas, which have traditionally been funded through an income stream of ground rent, the industry was granted an exemption, or an assurance that it would be exempt from the provisions of the Bill, back in June 2019. That exemption was then withdrawn in January 2021. I understand that the decision to withdraw the exemption was made almost a year earlier, in February 2020, and that discussions about revoking the assurance of exemption had actually begun in August 2019. Throughout all that period, the industry continued to be reassured that the exemption was good and would hold, and it was not.

Throughout that period, the industry continued to raise capital on the basis of the model with which they had been told they could continue. The amendment

[Sir Desmond Swayne]

goes one tiny little bit towards trying to remedy the damage that has been done. It accepts that the practice will have to end, but it asks for one tiny concession, namely that, when the provisions of the Bill bite in March 2023, properties that are part-sold can continue to sell the residual remaining flats or properties on the basis of a continued ground rent. Without that, what we will have is some properties within a development being worth significantly more in terms of the purchase price than others, and some properties paying a ground rent and others not. It will be hugely complicated and divisive. Therefore, the amendment merely asks for that to be addressed. At the most, if the provision were to pass, we anticipate that this would account for about 2,000 properties. I ask the Minister to reflect on this, and, even at this late hour, accept the amendment.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury).

To respond to the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), on the issue of ground rents, it is clear that service charges are for communal areas. Indeed, McCarthy Stone's website says very clearly—

Sir Desmond Swayne *rose—*

Justin Madders: Go on then.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is unlawful to charge ground rent for the maintenance of a communal area. They are clean different things.

8 pm

Justin Madders: Indeed: ground rents are payments for which nothing is received in return, which is why they should be abolished. For the record, I am a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform and have campaigned for the abolition of ground rents for a number of years, having seen the impact on individuals of their use and abuse.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale for tabling the new clause and for being a consistently strong advocate for leaseholders during his time as an Opposition spokesperson. He apologised at the start of his speech; I would ask him to resign based on that apology had he not already been moved to another position. *[Laughter.]* He has done a sterling job in this brief, and the new clause is typical of the way he has used every opportunity available to him to push forward the cause for leaseholders.

As we know, new clause 1 would not abolish ground rents altogether but, if it is agreed to, will set a timescale by which concrete proposals on their abolition must be put forward. That is important because for too long my constituents and thousands of others have suffered because of the leasehold scandal.

I know that the overturning of a system that has been in place for 1,000 years is not necessarily straightforward, and arguments will always be made as to why things cannot happen, but, as has been said so many times—I have already said it once in this debate myself, but it is worth saying it again and again because it is such a powerful point that can never be made enough—ground rent is a payment made for which absolutely nothing is received in return. Why, then, can we not get on and reduce that payment to effectively nothing so that the legal position reflects the reality of the situation? That would send out an important signal—not just a departmental press release but a signal that will make a tangible difference to people's lives: that the days of leasehold are numbered and that this place does not accept that ground rent is a legitimate payment.

We see ground rent for what it is: a feudal device used to suck money away from people who get no benefit and no advantage from the payment but risk losing their home if they do not make it. Such arrangements have no place in the 21st century or, indeed, any century.

Some say that we should not ban ground rents on existing leases because that would introduce an element of retrospective impact on long-standing investments, including pension funds, but that is not an argument I have any sympathy with. The toxicity of leasehold has now been known for at least five years, which is plenty long enough for any investor to have taken a closer look at what they were involved in, looked for alternative sources of income and realised that nobody with an ounce of humanity should be using people's homes as an investment vehicle—and especially not ones that included leases that were so onerous they made the homes unsellable.

Yes, there is a concern that we should not readily change the law so that it works retrospectively and changes the legal nature of a contract after it has already been entered into, but let us not forget that this place voted to introduce the loan charge, which retrospectively changed the law, arguably to the considerable detriment of many who say they were misled about what they signed up to at the time. There are parallels, because let us not forget that the victims of leasehold did not sign up to leases in the full knowledge of what they entailed. The developers, lenders and lawyers all have some degree of culpability, but the innocent victims—the leaseholders—do not.

The Competition and Markets Authority has been clear on several occasions that leaseholders have been wronged, and I welcome its decisions, but of course those decisions do not cover everyone, which is why we in this place need to step in. We often talk in the House about the plight of the Women Against State Pension Inequality—did the WASPI women not sign up for something very different from what they ended up with?

I know there are legal opinions about freeholders' human rights, but what about my constituents' human rights? In fact, I would love the owner of a set of freeholds to get on the witness stand and try to convince a judge that they are the wronged party in all this. I would love to ask them whether they think people should have the right to live in their own homes without them being used as an income stream for someone else.

The irony of what we are debating is that many of those who have done the most to bring the leasehold scandal to the public's attention—I think in particular of the National Leasehold Campaign—stand to benefit the least from this Bill because there is nothing in it to help existing leaseholders. That is why new clause 1 is so important. Four years ago, when he was Communities Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) promised an outright ban on leasehold houses, and we all hoped that by now a law would be in place for everyone so that these wrongs could be righted.

Those people deserve an end to this. They deserve hope that something will finally be done to make their lives a little better. If the Government cannot support the new clause, then, at the very least, I would like to hear from the Dispatch Box a commitment in the form of a final date by which the scourge of leasehold will finally be consigned to the history books. The wronged leaseholders deserve that, and it is about time it happened.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I share his concerns and those of the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), because a significant number of new homes built in the north-west of England, particularly in my constituency and in theirs too, have been on leasehold contracts. Although I recognise the aim of the new clause, I am not completely sure that it will resolve all the issues for my constituents, and I want to talk through some of the issues that they have told me about over the past couple of months.

I welcome many of the proposals set out in the Bill and recognise the important role that they will have in protecting leaseholders moving forward. I am, though, concerned that, as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said, they will offer little comfort for the thousands of homeowners who have become trapped in historical leases, which I am afraid many were even unaware they were purchasing when they signed for their new home. That includes an number of constituents in Warrington South who have spent the past 12 years trying to resolve a situation that they were inadvertently drawn into when they were mis-sold their properties on the Steinbeck Grange estate in Chapelford village by David Wilson Homes.

My constituents believed they were purchasing their properties freehold, and many were not disabused of this position until several months after they moved in, when they received an invoice. One might rightly ask why their lawyers did not make them aware when they were signing the contract. It has become clear that most of them used a legal firm recommended by the developer—by the house builder's sales team—and those lawyers failed to point out the tenure under which the properties were being sold, and failed to make Steinbeck residents aware of the important clause in their contract documents. By using their first names in dealings with clients, they made sure they could not be traced by dissatisfied customers once they became aware of the situation. The law firm went into administration within days of the estate being completed.

I note with interest that the Law Society's response to the Bill states that it is not the solicitor's place to dissuade a client from entering into a particular transaction; their role is to ensure that the transaction is legally sound and efficiently completed. I agree with that, but I believe that every lawyer has a responsibility to their clients, and in this case the client was not the developer but the homeowner, or prospective homeowner. They should have made clear all the elements of the contract and their clients should have been advised accordingly. I am aware of one Warrington solicitor who, when looking at the contract that was brought to him, advised the purchaser not to proceed because of the leasehold situation, and has come forward to give me all those details.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the Competition and Markets Authority is currently investigating several issues surrounding the potential mis-selling of leasehold properties. I thank the CMA for its endeavours in addressing this poor practice. It has been to Warrington and engaged with my constituents, and I am incredibly grateful for the work that it is doing there. These investigations have looked at four developers—Persimmon, Countrywide, Taylor Wimpey and Barratt Homes, which is the parent company of David Wilson Homes. To date, the CMA has reached agreements with the first three. I therefore encourage the management of Barratts to recognise the harm that has been caused by its past sales polices and agree a way forward with the CMA as soon as possible to put things right.

Many hon. and right hon. Members have raised these issues in this House, but progress is also down to the tenacity of the men and women trapped in unfair leasehold contracts across the country who have continued to fight for their rights. I particularly praise my constituent Mr Mike Carroll, who has refused to take no for an answer and is continuing to work tirelessly with me and his neighbours to achieve the right and just outcome for them.

Ministers also need to look again at how consumer bodies around the country, particularly trading standards, should be working in the interests of homeowners, to help them resolve some of these issues. In the case of homeowners in Warrington, trading standards appear not to have been interested and have done little to involve themselves in any investigations. That is not the case in other parts of the country, where resolutions have been reached. I note in particular that Cardiff trading standards got involved and looked very closely at some of these practices.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tenacity in looking after his constituents. All of us across the House try to do that, and he has done a brilliant job. On other areas that need to be addressed, the solicitors that have gone into administration were insured. The big companies have liability insurance sitting in pots, so leaseholders could simply say to the insurers, "You've had the premium, and now we want to see some help from you."

Andy Carter: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The greatest challenge that my constituents face is that they cannot find the people who did the work—the lawyers no longer exist as a company body. My constituents are working to try to find some recompense, and I hope that the situation will be resolved by the CMA.

Will the Minister consider what actions his Department can take to tackle the problem faced by residents on Steinbeck Grange in Warrington and elsewhere who are locked into leaseholds and did not expect to be in this situation? I hope he will look very carefully at what the CMA says. I know that he has been working with the CMA to try to find solutions, and I hope that he will continue to do that, so that a satisfactory outcome can be found. Having met residents and constituents on Friday evening, I know that the impact that this has had on their lives cannot be overestimated. They have been living through a genuine nightmare, having bought what they thought was their dream home. I urge the Minister to think about the impact that this has had on those individuals.

It is time not only for us to protect those who will be looking to buy a new home in the future, but to secure justice for those who have been mis-sold properties in

[Andy Carter]

the past and are still paying a heavy price through unreasonable management fees and escalating ground rents. I am pleased to support the Government's efforts, but I urge them to go further.

Mr Betts: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I welcome the steps that the Government have already taken but encourage them to go that little bit further.

Thinking back to the Select Committee inquiry in, I think, 2018, I remember that we invited not just formal witnesses—I have mentioned certain very distinguished lawyers who advised us—but many leaseholders from up and down the country. Up to 100 people came to events. There were a number of roundtables at which they met individual members of the Committee and told us about their experiences.

All the issues that the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) has just raised were in our report, including mis-selling and how lawyers told people, "It's just the same as freehold, really. It isn't any different: you own your own house and, by the way, there's an incentive to go with us on this leasehold arrangement. Here are the presents we'll give you, the garden we'll do up for you and the new carpets we'll provide." What solicitors were doing was scandalous, and we identified that in our report.

The simple message we had from everyone present was, "Everyone's talking about changing the system for the future, but we've got problems here and now." I understand why the Bill goes only so far on future ground rents and future arrangements, because it is more challenging and complicated to unwind existing legal arrangements than it is to describe what should happen in new arrangements, but I say to the Minister that the people in these leasehold homes who are experiencing all the problems that have already been explained, including in our report, think that that is unfair. They think that people in the future will be protected but that they will not and that Ministers, having raised the issue, should take it one step further and bring in the same rules for them. It is almost as simple as that. They cannot understand why, as they see it, they are being left behind and, so far, ignored on not just ground rents but a range of issues including the mis-selling of the service charge and all the other scandals that the Select Committee unearthed in its inquiry.

8.15 pm

On new clause 1, if the Minister were to say, "I can't accept 30 days, but I'll put in 90 days, " or even, "I'll put in a year," I think there would be general agreement. At least we would have a timetable for when draft legislation will come forward. Will the Minister give us a bit of certainty about when we will get the full legislation that is promised? The Government have committed to it, and there is no argument about the principle.

The new clause mentions "draft legislation", and I offer again to the Minister that the Select Committee will go through that in detailed pre-legislative scrutiny. Given that it will be technically complicated but without a great deal of party political contention, that is exactly the sort of role that we can play. That would allow the Government to bring legislation forward more quickly because—before it sees the light of day—we can quickly iron out problems that would normally take Ministers and civil servants ages.

Finally, I still want a little more reassurance on the costs of the Government's proposed measures. The Minister has exchanged correspondence with me, as Chair of the Select Committee and, as I understand it, there will be a new burdens agreement with the Local Government Association—although that has not been published yet—and there will be some money to help with enforcement, with other money coming from fines when people misbehave and charge ground rents in the future that are not compliant with the law. That is all well and good, but the problem is that, in the same letter, the Minister says that the Government do not expect many breaches to occur, so I worry that the enforcement teams will be another burden on councils' already overstretched budgets. Given that fines will clearly not cover all the costs involved, what will be the new arrangements?

Sir Mike Penning: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. On new clause 1, I do not think there is any argument that we need to look at historical leaseholds. However, my constituency has lots of new build and regeneration going on, and a lot of leasehold properties being built, and I am not convinced that that investment would come forward if the developers did not see where that income stream would come from, including pensions and so on. A lot of evidence is going back and forth, but I disagree just on that point.

I completely agree on the historical leasehold issue. The real problem is in the myriad different leases that are out there and have been for many years. I read the Select Committee report referred to by its Chair, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), a moment ago, and I found some of the things that lawyers were doing astonishing. It fascinates me how they ever got insured and how they have not been struck off—I know that other investigations are going on. This is about not just ground rent but service charges and buildings insurance, which is an issue we must address, whether in this Bill or another measure.

I own a freehold property with a mortgage, and I have contents and buildings insurance. In my buildings insurance, I have legal protection of the sort that we would expect our constituents to benefit from when they pay for buildings insurance. However, those in leasehold properties must pay buildings insurance to the freeholder or their management company and have no choice whatsoever about the company, what the premium is or what the coverage is. I use an example from my own constituency of what happens when a claim is made. We had a large sinkhole in a housing development where there were leaseholders: I sat in a meeting with the insurance representative, the freeholder and my leaseholder constituents, and the insurance company said straight to me, absolutely deadpan, "Your constituents may well have paid the premium, but the policy is not theirs. They have no cover whatsoever—the cover is for the freeholder."

There has to be something morally wrong about that. Insurance has developed over the years; it used to cover very few things, but these days nearly all buildings insurance worth its salt has legal protection. That is what it says on the tin. The Bill does not cover that in

the way I think it should. Sometimes it is wrapped into the service charges and everything else, and the ground rent is part of that package, but at the same time we have houses with historical freeholds, some of them from the old military estates where people have bought properties on what used to be Ministry of Defence property, and they are paying leasehold rents on what everybody assumed was a freehold property. Something is structurally wrong.

There was an allusion earlier to looking forward rather than back. I say to the Minister that looking forward is fantastic—we need some dates and some targets that our constituents can look forward to—but we should not rule out looking back just because it is difficult. As I said on the Building Safety Bill in this House only last week, looking back because it is difficult is what this House is supposed to do. It will be more difficult to look back and bring in those leaseholders, our constituents, who feel left out of this legislation and still very vulnerable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) said, but it can be done.

This is not a case of, "It's impossible", because we are doing it retrospectively in the Building Safety Bill. We are going back 30-odd years retrospectively on that Bill. Can the Minister explain, when he sums up on new clause 1, why the Government feel that that is so difficult, when we are doing it on a separate piece of legislation that is going through the House today?

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I express my support for new clause 1; I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), and to others across the House, for their words tonight and for pointing out the enormous imbalance between powerful developers on the one hand and people buying a property for themselves, who possibly do not have all the information before them that ideally they should, on the other.

I refer to an issue in my own constituency, an attractive modern development on the edge of the town of Woodley, which is part of my Reading East constituency. The Loddon Park development is relatively recent, but there is a clear need for action to be taken. This development is in the south-east of England, a different part of the country from many of the developments mentioned tonight, and while there are some similarities there are also some differences.

Loddon Park is an attractive new estate, built in the past few years in parkland on the edge of Woodley. There are several hundred properties, a mixture of owner-occupied and some social housing. There are many attractive ponds and features, including meadowland, in the development. Unfortunately, when the whole development was given planning permission, the local authority—mistakenly, I believe—allowed the site developer to charge upkeep for those common areas in perpetuity. There is no limit, as I understand it, to the charge that can be made. It is deeply unfair for normal householders—many of them have young families, are commuters who work locally and are facing, like many people across the country, significant rises in the cost of living—to face in addition ongoing costs for maintaining the landscape around their homes. Frankly, that is wrong.

I hope the Minister will consider new clause 1. We have heard arguments from many MPs across the House and from different places around the country, whether in the south or the north of England; we have heard from the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who set out some powerful legal arguments for why this action should be considered. I hope the Minister will look at it again, even at this stage, and will consider further action by the Government and our new clause.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to make a contribution in such debates, and it is nice to be here. When we look at amendment 1 and the reasons why the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) tabled it, as he expressed in his contribution, it is hard to say that we should not support it.

We must make sure that there is financial fairness for leaseholders, especially long leaseholders who plan to hold a lease for more than 21 years. The issue of ground rent payment has been brought to my attention by my constituents, and the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) rightly gave an example of his constituents. An elderly couple in my constituency, who paid their mortgage off more than 15 years ago, are still paying ground rent of more than £50 a year. Although that is not much, I am pleased that the need to abolish this has been recognised. We already changed the legislation in Northern Ireland, so I understand why this Minister and Government are looking forward to making these changes tonight. Many Members have stated that many people have long leases with higher ground rents at the start of their lease, with shorter ground rent review periods. As a result, leaseholders face unsustainable ground rents, so there is a real need to change this, as hon. Members have said.

Leaseholders with high or escalating ground rents will often struggle to remortgage or sell their houses, leaving them in greater financial distress. The Bill aims to restrict ground rents on newly created long residential leases, with some exceptions, to a token of one peppercorn a year. That effectively restricts ground rents to zero financial value. The intention is to make leasehold ownership fair and more affordable for leaseholders. We should support that purpose.

In Northern Ireland, individuals can apply to the Land Registry to buy out their ground rent. In some cases, the individuals cannot afford to pay the substantial sum outright, so I am pleased that the Bill has assurances for long leaseholders and that Government have protected householders. If ground rent is demanded in contravention of the Bill and any payment received is not returned in 28 days, the landlord will face a fine ranging from £500 to £30,000 per qualifying lease. The fines are clear and hopefully prohibitive.

However, there is one substantial problem with the Bill, as others have said: it will apply only to new leases and will not assist existing leaseholders faced with high and escalating ground rents. I feel that they should not be left behind and I would be grateful if the Minister clarified this matter, looked at it again and considered the impact that the situation has not only on finance, but the possibility of remortgaging or selling property.

The Bill's commencement date has also raised concerns across the House, so I would be grateful if more clarity was given about that. A Bill on broader leasehold reform is expected in the third Session of this Parliament and I would encourage discussion and a closer look at how the situation can be improved to make circumstances

[Jim Shannon]

easier for leaseholders. Others have said that we just need a wee bit more movement, and perhaps that can be done in the next Session.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): This is a bit like the Rolling Stones tour in that I said goodbye to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and he has come back for an encore, for another concert. However, like the Rolling Stones, it is good to see him back again. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contribution to this debate and for the constructive way in which they have engaged with the Bill throughout its passage. I particularly thank the Opposition Front Bench team for their helpful contributions.

I will address each amendment, starting with amendment 1 in the name of the hon. Gentleman. The difficulties faced by existing leaseholders have rightly been raised by Members across the House, both in Committee and in correspondence. I understand Members' points about the fact that the Bill relates only to new leases. I point out, however, as I did in Committee, that the Bill is just the first of two-part legislation to reform the leasehold system and that further legislation will follow in this Parliament, so I encourage others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), to engage with me in discussions on the second part of the legislation as it begins to form.

The Government understand the urgency of the need for changes for leaseholders paying out unacceptable charges day to day. However, I do not think that the arbitrary deadline in new clause 1 is useful in this context, and similar is true of the alternative deadlines suggested by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). Although I appreciate that this is not completely relevant, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what he said about new burdens, the point of legislation such as this is to encourage people to behave appropriately so that they treat leaseholders fairly and there are no cases. However, as the Bill is implemented and we see how it develops, I look forward to discussing with him and the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee the impact that that will have on councils.

Justin Madders: The new clause is obviously not going to find favour with the Minister tonight, but could he at least give us the date—maybe even just the year—by which leasehold will finally be in the history books?

8.30 pm

Eddie Hughes: I would love to be tempted by something like that, but given that we have just gone through two years of a rather unexpected global pandemic, it is best not to pin these things down too firmly.

Unfair practices have no place in the housing market, and the Government are committed to ending them. That is why, in addition to our proposed reforms, we asked the CMA to carry out an investigation into the potential mis-selling of homes and unfair terms in the leasehold sector. We are clear that we want to see existing homeowners who have been affected obtain the justice and redress they deserve. During 2021, through determined negotiations, the CMA secured commitments from Aviva, Persimmon, Countryside Properties and Taylor Wimpey to amend their practices, which included righting the wrongs of doubling ground rents and houses being sold as leasehold. These settlements will help to free thousands more existing leaseholders from unreasonable ground rent increases. I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the progress the CMA has made.

Indeed, the investigation continues, and we are closely monitoring those developers and landlords that have failed to sufficiently change their practices, such as those described by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). The action against major industry players serves as a warning to other developers with similar arrangements in place. Let me be absolutely clear in reiterating the Government's position: we want to see other developers come to the table.

Again, I reassure hon. Members that we take the plight of existing leaseholders extremely seriously, and we are making moves across a number of areas of Government policy to reflect that commitment. It is on that basis that I ask the hon. Member for Weaver Vale to withdraw the new clause, and to work with me on the development of further reforms to support existing leaseholders, as I have described—or, alternatively, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), with his experience through the work of his APPG.

On amendment 1, which is in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), as hon. Members will know, it is our intention to protect leaseholders from unfair practice through this Bill by ensuring that in future regulated leases are restricted to a peppercorn rent unless excepted. The Government believe that those who purchase retirement homes should benefit from the same reform as other future leaseholders. While we would like the provision of the Bill to come into effect as soon as possible, we have decided to give the retirement sector additional time to prepare for these changes. The transition period for retirement properties is being granted in recognition of the fact that the sector had previously been informed that it would be exempt. We have provided this additional time—first announced over a year ago, on 7 January 2021—for the sector to prepare for these changes. As such, the ground rent Bill will come into force no earlier than 1 April 2023 for retirement homes. We have carefully considered this to ensure we are striking the right balance—giving the retirement sector time to transition and ensuring that protection for leaseholders comes as quickly as possible.

Amendment 1 seeks to exempt retirement properties from the peppercorn rent provisions where part of the development remains unsold at the commencement of the Bill and where the development itself was commenced prior to 6 July 2021. There is a simple reason why I am rejecting this, which is that we want to protect more leaseholders. The amendment would mean that many new leases enter the market charging a monetary ground rent, with more consumers of retirement properties being left outside the Bill's protections.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What was the rationale for granting the exemption in the first place? Surely the Minister recognises that, for many people in the retirement

sector, it will be in their financial interest to pay a lower purchase price and have a continual ground rent, rather than to pay a significantly greater capital sum upfront. Individual circumstances will of course differ.

Eddie Hughes: I was delighted when I was appointed as a Minister for the Department on 16 January 2021. The negotiations to which my right hon. Friend refers pre-date my time at the Department, so I will have to take his word for what happened. It is important that as many people as possible benefit from the provisions of the Bill. We have offered a generous transition period and many people have already adopted their operating models, so he can be reassured: the sector will cope.

The amendment could serve only to incentivise any retirement developer to sell simply one unit on a development before commencement of these provisions in order to continue to charge ground rents on all the properties in that development. The amendment would risk providing a loophole. Throughout consideration of the Bill, arguments concerning the transition period have been made on both sides: there have been those who wished to extend the period, including by application to part-sold properties, and those who wished to remove the period entirely.

On Second Reading, we heard arguments by my right hon. Friends the Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and for New Forest West in favour of amending the transition period for the sector. Subsequently, I had helpful conversations with representatives of the retirement development sector, whom I met on 8 December. I am grateful to them for taking the time to explain their position to me.

We appreciate that there are likely to be some developments that will continue to include a mixture of properties with monetary and peppercorn ground rents. That will not be limited to retirement properties, and we do not consider that that is a compelling case for retirement sector leaseholders to be exempted or treated differently. I put it to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there is a simple way to avoid this: reduce all ground rents to a peppercorn.

The Bill provides a clear-cut date for consumers. If a regulated lease is sold after the date, there can be no monetary ground rent. That is transparent and easy for consumers to understand. Indeed, many consumers may already be planning their purchase based on that date, secure in the knowledge that they will be protected from pointless monetary ground rents from that point forward. To bolster the clarity and transparency provided by the Bill, we will of course ensure that all relevant leaseholders are aware of the legislation and the impact that it will have on them, before the Bill comes into force. I therefore ask Members not to press the amendment.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 162, Noes 306.

Division No. 168] **[8.37 pm**

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)*
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and Gerald Jones

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Feryal
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham

Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and Scott Mann

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

Queen's and Prince of Wales's consent signified.

8.52 pm

Eddie Hughes: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I start by thanking colleagues across the House for their support for this important piece of legislation. I am pleased to say that there has been recognition from both Houses of the importance of getting the Bill enacted promptly for the benefit of generations of future leaseholders, and I thank the Opposition, particularly the hon. Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for their engagement and valuable input. I also wish to put on record my thanks to those who served on the Committee; the Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott); the Clerks; and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) for ably assisting me throughout.

The Bill delivers an important improvement to the leasehold system for future generations of home owners. It is a vital step towards addressing the historic imbalance in the leasehold system and it is integral to the Government's broader reform to create a housing market that works for everyone. It has benefited from a number of amendments both here and in the other place, and I thank all those who have participated in debates and given their time. The changes have included raising the maximum penalty from £5,000 to £30,000, giving certain powers to Welsh Ministers when a property is in Wales and a range of important clarifications that ensure that the Bill will not have unintended consequences. Taken together, the amendments have significantly strengthened the legislation.

The Bill is narrowly focused on the ground rent of future residential leases, but it is understandable—

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I strongly support the Government's commitment to ending the practice of charging unfair and excessive ground rents. As my hon. Friend will know, residents in park homes such as those in Penton Park in my constituency are still facing excessive pitch fee rises each year. Does he agree that legislation should be introduced to link the pitch fee review inflation index to the consumer price index rather than the retail prices index as soon as possible?

Eddie Hughes: As I have said, the Bill is narrowly drafted, so the pitch fees do not apply. However, the Government are committed to making the changes for which my hon. Friend has been campaigning, and we will make those changes when legislative time allows.

Although the Bill is narrowly focused, it is understandable that Members—including, just now, my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer)—have raised broader issues relating to the leasehold system. We understand that many leaseholders feel trapped in a system that is not working for them, and we are determined to provide greater protection and support for all leaseholders. The Government are committed to undertaking an ambitious and far-reaching programme of reform of the leasehold system, and I can assure the House that we are working apace to bring about those reforms.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way to me, because it saves me a speech.

The most important aspect of the legislation to which the Minister has just alluded is that "far-reaching" should not mean "far away". It is really important for leaseholders that it should be introduced as soon as time is available, and any help that the Minister may need in cajoling other parts of Government to introduce legislation as soon as possible to protect leaseholders in a way that this Bill does not will no doubt be extremely welcome.

Eddie Hughes: I strongly suspect that my right hon. Friend will be catching up with the Secretary of State next time they walk through the Lobby together, and will be making exactly that point to him.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): May I take up the point made by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)? When the Minister conducts that far-reaching review, will it return to the case of Custins *v.* Hearts of Oak Benefit Society back in 1969? Will it consider the abolition of leasehold, and the full ability of leaseholders to take on the franchise and ultimately the freehold of their buildings?

Eddie Hughes: I think it is too early for me to be able to predict exactly what will be in the Bill, and what its reach and remit might be, but I am sure I will be open to conversations with the hon. Member to discuss his thoughts on what could go into it.

It would be remiss of me to not mention that in fact only two weeks ago we launched a public consultation to seek views on proposals to allow more leaseholders in mixed-use buildings to take control and ownership of their building. That consultation will play an important role in shaping the next stage of our reforms to create a fairer leasehold system in England and Wales.

I thank the Competition and Markets Authority for the vital role it is playing in improving the sector for existing leaseholders. The CMA has already helped thousands of leaseholders to gain access to justice since opening its investigation, and I welcome its dedication

[Eddie Hughes]

in the ongoing fight against abuse in the sector. Let me repeat that the CMA's action against industry players serves as a warning to others, and we expect those who continue to permit such poor practices to heed the example set by the investigation.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con):To save the Minister time, may I, on his behalf and that of the whole House, thank the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the campaigning charity, especially Sebastian O'Kelly and Martin Boyd, together with their compatriots in the campaigning groups without whom we would still be saying that there was a major problem that had not yet been recognised?

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Father of the House for saving me the trouble of having to offer those thanks.

I thank Welsh Ministers and their officials for their engagement on the relevant amendments, both here and in the other place. My thanks also go to the Local Government Association, National Trading Standards and the relevant tribunals, all of which have provided support with the progress of this legislation. I again thank all Members for their contributions. This legislation will make a real difference to thousands of future leaseholders across England and Wales, and I commend the Bill to the House.

8.59 pm

Mike Amesbury: I thank the Minister and everyone in the House who has been involved with the Bill: the Clerks, the Library specialists and the Bill team. I also thank hon. Members who have participated in each part of our proceedings, giving their time, effort and wisdom. I thank the many Members who contributed on Report: the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who is not in his place but we agreed to disagree; my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform; my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee; the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter); my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda); and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). They all made very powerful contributions.

I would like to reiterate and re-affirm the comments made by the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and put on record my thanks, and that of the Opposition, to the incredible campaigners at the National Leasehold Campaign, Catherine Williams, Katie Kendrick and Jo Darbyshire, and at the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, Martin Boyd, Sebastian O'Kelly and, of course, the late Louie Burns. I want to pay my respects to the Father of the House, who has consistently campaigned on this issue and educated others, including me. I know he will continue to do so. I thank him.

They and many others have done the hard graft in fighting for leasehold reform and, with this Bill, they are only now beginning to see their efforts bear fruit. It is unfortunate that their wait will continue. The Bill represents the picking of a single apple in the orchard. It really is narrow in scope, a point acknowledged by the Minister. It does not attack the many issues raised by Members across the House that plague existing leaseholders. It will not deal with existing ground rent costs, untransparent service charges or management agent fees. It is crazy that anyone of us here or beyond could set themselves up as a management agent and charge astronomical and unfathomable service charges. Those issues must be dealt with sooner rather than later.

The Bill will not force accountability on freeholders or managers for their actions. It will not cover, as has rightly been pointed out, historical building safety costs, which are still being debated at considerable length in this Chamber. It will not deal with the cost or difficulty in obtaining enfranchisement, unfair contract terms or the many other issues still faced by homeowners locked in leaseholds, such as insurance, which is a major unfairness. The unfairness and injustice must be gone for good. The Government need to take further action. Leasehold is a system hundreds of years old. A 28-page Bill is not enough to finish it off—and we need to finish it off. The Bill is a good attempt at preventing future wrongs, but with so many real existing wrongs in front of us it is easy to see why leaseholders sitting in properties today will feel short-changed when new neighbours literally across the road will be freed from the problems that are still impacting them—a real injustice.

I am partially pleased—partially—that in advance of today's debate the Government published a consultation on wider leasehold reform, but let us not pretend that that is a considerable step forward. We have been here before. We have had numerous consultations. A consultation paper published in 2017 on tackling unfair practices in the leasehold market was closely followed up in 2018 by consultation on implementing reforms in the leasehold market. We have had announcement after announcement from Government press officers. What we have not had so far is real and fundamental change. After hundreds of years of leasehold, patience is wearing thin. England and Wales are lagging far behind the rest of the world and our neighbours closer to home—I referred to Scotland.

In conclusion, the Government will have to do more, and do it quicker than "in due course", to convince leaseholders that they are serious about taking on those vested interests to which Members from across the Chamber have referred. Members tonight have echoed the view that we need a clear timetable. Be the history-maker, Minister, set people free and usher in an age of commonhold.

9.5 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for his kind words. It has been right and proper and a pleasure to work in collaboration with him and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), as it was to work with Jim Fitzpatrick when he was co-chair of the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform.

It is 20 years since the House of Commons and the Government thought that we had brought some sense to the leasehold system. We failed and successive Governments did not pay attention to what had gone wrong, partly because the responsibility for the leasehold and commonhold sectors were split between Departments.

The Ministry of Justice, as it was at some stages, did not have any resources and it did not collaborate with the Ministry of Housing, so effective action has been delayed.

The Minister has referred to the narrowness of the Bill. We have to accept that. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) raised the issue of park home residents, who have been treated even worse than some leaseholders. I hope that the Government will give some serious attention not just to the inflation rate that they are charged, but to some of the criminal and near-criminal and exploitative actions of many of the people who run those sites. It is completely appalling, and I direct investigative journalists to look at that matter.

On the question of leasehold itself, I welcome the progress made by the Bill. I am sorry that I got back in time to vote on new clause 1—I probably voted in the wrong way and I apologise for that. The sooner that we can deal with existing leaseholders and the cost to them of ground rents and of extending their leases the better. We must get to the stage where owning somebody else's leasehold becomes a diminishing asset. The faster the freeholders sell the freehold to the leaseholders together and create, in effect, a commonhold the better. We are making progress. I am glad to have contributed in part, and I am glad that the Minister and his colleagues are taking the action that I wish had been taken many, many years ago.

9.7 pm

Justin Madders: It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the Father of the House. As we have already mentioned this evening, we are now four years on from the promises that were made about reforming leasehold, and the Bill, as we have all accepted, is a step in the right direction. However, as we have all acknowledged as well, it is little comfort to those who are still trapped in homes that they cannot sell because of the onerous leases with which they have been left, and we must do something about that. I tried to get the Minister to give us a year when that might happen, but we could not get anything out of him. None the less, I can assure him and the House that we will keep pushing on the issue, because justice demands that it is resolved.

It is also worth commenting on the fact that one in three houses sold in the north-west in the past 10 years is leasehold. There has been much talk about levelling up. Who can doubt that a person's home is the biggest investment they will make? So it is simply unacceptable for so many homes in my part of the world to have been built off the back of an exploitative and unjust business model. Surely, if levelling up is to mean anything, it should at the very least mean that people's homes are owned on the same basis wherever they live in the country.

The ending of ground rents for new homes is a positive, but it will create a strange situation. There will be houses within a stone's throw of one another that have a different form of ownership. That will just add more weight to the sense of injustice that existing leaseholders feel, which is why I am so keen for us to push on and deal with that issue.

As many Members have said, a lot more needs to be done. A whole range of issues have been mentioned tonight. We have, for example, barely touched on park homes. There are so many scandalous things going on there, and we really should be paying them more attention. For homeowners, we see the following: management fees, which are a rip-off; non-transparent service charges; the cost of enfranchisement; insurance scams; obscure penalty clauses; and other costs that appear everywhere we turn in a lease. They are all baked into the business models of those avaricious companies which, let us not forget, are still out there building houses.

I am a little concerned that the companies on which we rely to build the houses that we need are responsible for many of the injustices that we have discussed tonight. We need to keep a close eye on their practices in future. I still think that we need an inquiry into the whole industry. We have previously discussed some of the things that we touched on tonight, and the question of how close lawyers were to developers and whether they were acting in the best interests of their clients needs further examination. We need to look at the lenders and surveyors and what the developers were saying to people, often first-time buyers, who were misled about what they were buying. We need to make sure that the system is examined thoroughly so that there is no repeat of the scandal that we have seen over the past five years.

People who buy a home should have a right not to expect it to become an ongoing income stream for a third party. If we have that as our guiding principle we will not go far wrong, so let us crack on with legislating so that that can become a reality for everyone. As many Members have done, I want to acknowledge the fantastic work of the many campaigners who have been active in bringing this issue to the fore including, as we have heard, the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, Martin Boyd, Sebastian O'Kelly, the late Louie Burns, the National Leasehold Campaign, Catherine Williams, Katie Kendrick, Jo Darbyshire and many others, with the Father of the House being one of the biggest cheerleaders. There are many people who have contributed to bringing the issue to the attention of the House, but there is much more that we need to do. It feels at times as if progress is painfully slow, but that should not dim our determination finally to consign leasehold to the dustbin.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We know about some of the abuses, because people who were working in firms that I would respectfully declare to be dodgy provided information anonymously. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in saying to Richard Davidoff, who might take defamation action against people who have blown the whistle on practices that we would condemn, that the courts should not be used to stop people blowing the whistle on practices that are questionable, if not completely wrong?

Justin Madders: As always, I find myself in agreement with the Father of the House. Whistleblowers should be able to speak up freely. With my other hat on, it is probably time that we had a review of whistleblowing legislation to make sure that people are adequately protected. We owe a debt to people who are prepared to speak up and put their head above the parapet, possibly at great personal expense. The scams have to be stopped, and people need to be supported.

On that note, we have made a little progress tonight, and I want to keep making progress. I am sure that the majority of the House will want leasehold finally to enter the history books, rather than being something that we deal with on a day-to-day basis.

9.13 pm

Theresa Villiers: I shall begin by highlighting the investment property in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which is a flat held on a long leasehold basis. Like everyone else in the House, I recognise the need to deal with abusive practices in relation to leasehold and ground rents, but I fear that the blanket abolition of ground rents for every single new building could have significant negative unintended consequences.

Measures specifically targeted at unfair practices such as a code of conduct, a potential cap on ground rents and a ban on selling houses on a leasehold basis could be effective in stamping out wrongdoing, but without the negative potential consequences of the Bill's widely drawn approach. As drafted, the Bill will see professional freeholders exit the market. It is disappointing that the Government have not responded to the calls on Second Reading to consider an exception in the Bill to enable ground rents to continue to be an option for large, complex apartment blocks. If we remove the choice to use ground rents for buildings of that kind, all the responsibility for ensuring the safety and long-term viability of the block will fall on leaseholders. That will inevitably lead to higher costs, since individual residents groups will not have access to the kind of specialist expertise and collective buying power that professional freeholders have when they buy in services to repair, maintain and enhance buildings.

There is evidence that after the removal of professional freeholders in Scotland, the lack of professional oversight and accountability has meant many more buildings falling into disrepair. A 2019 report for the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors highlighted that many residents in Scotland had great difficulty in securing agreement from fellow flat owners to fund essential work on the fabric of their building. That can slow down remedial work, greatly adding to costs. Even identifying and contacting fellow flat owners may be difficult, for example if they are buy-to-let investors living overseas, and that is even before we get to the point of trying to secure agreement on the work that needs to be done, how much it will cost and persuading everyone to pay up. Disputes have left some leaseholders in Scotland having to threaten their neighbours with legal proceedings, generating even more fees to pay.

Without professional freeholders, flat owners in large blocks will have to take on myriad financial and legal responsibilities and keep up to speed with a rapidly changing and complex regulatory environment. These onerous obligations are an extra burden to be shouldered by ordinary people on top of busy lives holding down jobs and looking after their families. Some leaseholders might prefer to pay a modest regulated ground rent so as not to have the hassle and risk of taking on these responsibilities, but the Bill denies them that choice for new buildings.

Buildings that involve business as well as residential use will be especially difficult for residents to manage. Even the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee recognised that exceptions to the ground rents ban should be considered in such circumstances.

I find it hard to comprehend a Bill whose main effect will be to reduce professional oversight and responsibility for residential buildings at a time when we have a building safety crisis. This is also an era where we urgently need investment in our building stock to make the changes to insulation and heating systems needed to meet climate change commitments. That is another reason surely to try to retain professional freeholders, not shut them down. It is worth remembering that the investors behind most of these professional freeholders are generally the pension funds that are so essential to providing us all with security in old age.

I close by asking the Minister to pause, reflect on this legislation and consider whether an exemption can be allowed for large, complex apartment blocks. The system of freehold interests and ground rents has come under sustained criticism, including this evening. It has even been described as "feudal", but England's laws on real property have successfully underpinned economic activity for centuries, providing a crucial foundation for economic prosperity and development. That was made possible by adaptability and inventiveness, including the capacity to slice up different rights over land in a way that maximised the incentive to use the property constructively and efficiently.

Put simply, there is a reason why English land law has deployed the concept of a freehold interest for the past 900 years. It makes sense for someone to have stewardship of the long-term future of a building, and it makes sense for their economic interests to be aligned with maintaining the building and investing in it for the long term. Yes, we need to crack down on the unscrupulous activities of morally suspect developers abusing the ground rent system, but I fear that the approach in this Bill is too blunt an instrument. We would be better off with the regulation of professional freeholders, not the de facto abolition of professional freeholders. I hope that the Minister and the Secretary of State will give that the most serious consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 29 November 2021, be approved.—*(Craig Whittaker.)*

Question agreed to.

NHS Dentistry: Bristol and the South-west

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

9.19 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured this evening's Adjournment debate on access to NHS dentistry in Bristol and the south-west. Over the past few months, many of my constituents have told me how difficult it has become to find and access an NHS dentist in and around my constituency of Bristol North West. Their accounts have been wide-ranging, from having their NHS treatment left in limbo following the closure of a local practice to having to look as far as Gloucester to try and register as a new patient with an NHS provider.

In particular, last year an NHS dental surgery in Southmead in my constituency unexpectedly closed to patients. Many of my constituents were left without an NHS dentist, often mid-treatment. One constituent explained that they had paid for NHS treatment prior to the closure of the dental surgery but had been unable to secure another appointment with a local dentist. Their dental work remains incomplete. Another constituent described contacting nine dental practices across Bristol to try and resume their treatment as soon as possible, only to be told that none was accepting NHS patients.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate; I have similar stories from my constituents. Does he agree that we also need to think about pregnant women, for example, who have free access to care but are also being denied access to dentistry at a really important point of their life?

Darren Jones: I absolutely agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for her contributions, not least as a leading voice on healthcare policy, knowing that prevention is more important than cure.

A third constituent of mine rang over 25 practices across the south-west, but was unable to secure an appointment as an NHS patient—something that has affected patients who were pregnant as well as everyone else. Southmead in particular is now left without any NHS dentists at all.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The number of child patients nearly halved in 2021 compared with 2019, with a 42% decrease in the south-west, including my constituency and his. Is the hon. Member as concerned as I am that the most worrying part of these statistics concerns the loss of access to dental treatment for children?

Darren Jones: I do share that concern, because we know that children in particular are seeing the dentist on a fewer and fewer occasions, and I understand that the tooth extraction rate for children is increasing significantly because of a lack of prevention.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Some 3,925 teeth were removed from Plymouth children under anaesthesia in 2019-20. The figure was lower last year because of the pandemic, but does my hon. Friend agree that we will not solve this crisis until children get to keep the teeth in their mouths through better oral health, and that we will not get that until the dental crisis is properly addressed by Government?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; as ever, he is a strong advocate for his constituents. He identifies that children are ending up having teeth extracted in emergency situations instead of seeing the dentist in the first place.

While the three cases that I have referred to have stemmed from the closure of the same dental practice in Southmead in my constituency, their stories serve to highlight the difficulties faced by those across Bristol and the south-west in accessing NHS treatment.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): The hon. Gentleman highlights Southmead; may I highlight another important case for the record? The closure of the Frampton dental practice has left many of my constituents unable to secure any type of dental support at all. He is therefore quite right to say this is an issue right across the region and to bring it to the Minister's attention, so may I offer him my full support in this debate? Although we are grateful for the NHS's medium-term response, there are lots of people seeking treatment now who cannot access it. I therefore offer him my support and call on the Minister to meet me to discuss the issue in further detail.

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member, because it sounds as if his constituents are suffering the same problem as mine. Many have rung eight, nine or 10 NHS service providers, to be told that they could be accepted only as a private fee-paying patient. Going private is simply not an option that many of my constituents can afford. Some have been left with no other choice and others have just not been able to see a dentist at all. Outside of emergency cases, it seems that dentistry in our country has become merely a private healthcare service, with all the unacceptable inequalities that that presents.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): In many cases even emergency appointments are simply not available, given the number of people asking for them. The waiting time to get an NHS dentist in Exeter is currently two years. We have thousands and thousands of people in Devon as a whole with no access to an NHS dentist. They cannot afford to go private and they cannot get access, in pain, to emergency treatment. It is an absolute disgrace, and for the last eight years this Government have done nothing about it.

Darren Jones: I agree, and I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the case in Exeter, which seems similar to the many other cases we are hearing about this evening.

When I surveyed my constituents, 79% of those who responded said that they did not feel that they could access a timely dental care appointment when they needed it, while 60% had not had any form of dental treatment during the past year. Twenty five per cent. detailed that they had contacted 11 or more dental practices to try to register for NHS treatment but were unable to do so.

[Darren Jones]

Information compiled by the Association of Dental Groups puts those conclusions in context. The ADG highlights that 43% of patients across Bristol alone were unable to book an appointment when they wanted to do so. That figure increases to over 50% of patients when considering the south-west altogether.

In its 2021 "Great British Oral Health Report", mydentist found that those in the south-west who have had a dental appointment in the last year lived, on average, over 5 miles away from their closest surgery. More concerningly, those who had not had a dental appointment in the last 12 months were twice as likely than the national average to live over 30 miles away from their closest surgery. That seems to suggest that there is a correlation between someone's proximity to an NHS dentist and the amount of time that has elapsed since their last appointment, adding geographical inequality to income inequality in the often privatised dental care system—no doubt a levelling-up priority for the Government.

This is a growing problem, with increasing numbers of NHS dentists closing and a shortage of dentists available to do the work. For those familiar with the south-west's regional news, Thursday's BBC "Spotlight" reported that the number of NHS dentists practising across the south-west had fallen by more than 200 between 2017 and 2021. Across the country, 45% of patients have been forced to pay for private care due to the closure of a local NHS dentist.

The good news is that there are several actions that the Minister can take to address these issues. First, the Government should consider measures to reverse the decline in the number of dentists offering NHS services. Research from mydentist shows that nearly 1,000 dentists ceased providing NHS treatment in 2020-21, and in response to a survey, 47% of the British Dental Association's membership said that they were considering reducing the provision of NHS dentistry due to the pressures being faced. I understand that the Government have announced a south-west dental reform programme. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some detail as to how it could be deployed to increase dentistry numbers.

Secondly, the Government should look again at how they recognise international dentistry qualifications. The overseas registration examination has only 500 places available annually in the UK. The ADG has recommended that part of the examination could be taken in the candidate's home country as a way of reducing some of the pressures, and that the overall number of places available should be increased. Furthermore, both the ADG and mydentist have recommended that the Government take swift action to reduce the impact that Brexit will have on those who have received their training in the European Union but whose qualifications are not recognised in the UK, and therefore on the number of dentistry providers in the UK. At present, the Government have agreed to recognise dentistry qualifications achieved in the EU until the end of the year, but given that 22% of dentistry care and treatment is provided by dentists from the European economic area, it is vital that certainty about the future is provided to those dentists and their patients as soon as possible. It is ridiculous that Ministers would prevent EU dentists from being able to work in the UK. I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on that particular issue.

Finally, and most importantly, the Government need to bring forward long overdue reforms to the NHS dental contract, which was established in 2006. Local dentists in Bristol North West have contacted me to highlight their frustration with the current contract, which prevents them from seeing NHS patients when they need to be seen. They have explained that they have been expected to meet higher patient targets due to local closures, despite the need for covid-19 safety measures and without the full payment usually required to see those extra patients. Those pressures are in addition to the backlog from the pandemic, with more than 350,000 dental appointments lost in Bristol alone between April 2020 and November 2021. Reforming the NHS dental contract is vital to solving the underlying issues with access to NHS dentistry, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on the status of that work.

In the round, NHS dentistry is broken and the problems are getting worse. The system works only for those with dental emergencies—and that is if they are lucky—while everyone else is left largely to pay private fees in a private dental system that costs significant sums of money. The closure of so many NHS dentists is adding geographical inequalities to the income inequalities created by the private sector-led dentistry system, and the shortage of dentists in the country is being exacerbated by a failure to recognise European Union dentists and an unwillingness to make it easier to welcome dentists from other countries around the world.

From my experience with Ministers and officials, I get the sense that dentistry in this country is now nothing more than an afterthought, placed in the "too difficult for Government action" box.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I do not know whether my hon. Friend has written to Ministers about this. I have written to Ministers on behalf of constituents who are in pain and need emergency surgery, but cannot come up with thousands of pounds to pay for it. It is so frustrating when the response we get is a link to a site where they can check where their nearest NHS dentist is, or similarly useless bits of information. Does he share my concern that the Government are totally complacent about the crisis we face?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution and I agree entirely. I know from my own experience of trying to get access to ministerial time following the closure of an NHS dental practice in Southmead that it took ages to get a response. I then had time with officials, who tried to be helpful but could not resolve the problem, and we had local briefings in Bristol where, I am afraid, the presentations and information were completely inadequate. That confirms my point that dentistry seems to be an afterthought, not a priority, for this Government.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. Could he add one extra ask of Ministers—to keep the dentists we train in the west country in the west country? The last Labour Government opened a dental school in Plymouth that trains enormous

numbers of high-quality dentists, but then they have to spend time in practice and they go into a national shuffle. If there was a regional shuffle to keep those dentists in the south-west, it is more likely that they would stay in the west country, providing additional services, rather than being spread across the country. Does he agree that would be a good idea?

Darren Jones: That sounds very sensible, and no doubt it would be a great levelling-up opportunity for the Government to ensure that dentists trained and qualified in the south-west stay there. I do not want to put particular pressure on this Minister, because this has been a long-running failure over many years.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I have an interest here, clearly, but why should dentists, or any profession, be forced to stay and practise in the area they trained? No other profession has that. It would be a very unfair liability and tie on the dentists.

Darren Jones: I am not sure that was the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard); it was merely an opportunity for those who train in the south-west and who wish to stay there to do so, and I would support that.

Ministers' long-running failure to tackle this issue is resulting in hundreds of thousands of people across the country, not least many thousands of children, being unable to access NHS dentistry until it becomes an emergency and a hospitalised problem. That is unacceptable; it no doubt costs the Government more to treat problems instead of trying to prevent them, and I call on them to put in the work to fix this problem now. I look forward to hearing the Minister's responses to my questions.

9.32 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). He mentioned the word "prevention", but did not go into the prevention the Government are doing at the moment. There is enormous work being undertaken in schools, not just in England, but in Wales and Scotland, and the results are very positive. They are teaching children, from a very tiny age right through to infants school, how to look after their teeth, how to brush their teeth, what a toothbrush is, what toothpaste is, how to use fluoride and so on.

The hon. Gentleman failed to mention the fact that the Health and Care Bill currently going through the House of Lords will introduce an opportunity for fluoride and fluoridation. The roughly two-year payback will make a dramatic difference. Rather than complaining now, he should be campaigning as hard as he possibly can to ensure that fluoride is brought into his area as soon as possible. That will make a dramatic difference.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned dentists coming in from overseas. Those in the Commonwealth, new and old, will now be in a position to come here, once the immigration Bill is through and the General Dental Council gets the slight change in legislation it needs to bring the dentists in. They will come here, because this is an attractive area to work in national health, privately and in research.

9.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate and I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for securing it. I acknowledge many of his points but reassure him that dentistry is an absolute priority for the Government. He said he has previously tried to make contact with Ministers; he has not formally asked me for a meeting but I am happy to meet him should that be of assistance.

Let me touch on two of the main reasons why patients up and down the country currently struggle to see dentists. The first relates to covid. This is not a lame excuse for why there are currently difficulties: dentistry and dental services have gone above and beyond during covid. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who is a dentist, will back me up when I say that many dentistry procedures are aerosol-generating, so significant infection-control measures have been in place to protect patients and dentists and their teams.

At the start of the pandemic, when we first went into lockdown, only urgent procedures were allowed, so no routine procedures could be carried out. It was not until 8 June 2020 that infection-control measures allowed the reintroduction of some routine care. Even then, dental practices were able to work at only 20% of normal activity. That has of course had knock-on effects throughout England in respect of patient access to routine care.

Later that year, infection-control measures allowed up to 45% of normal activity, but it was not until last year that that proportion went up to 60%. Just before Christmas, NHS England and the chief dental officer wrote to practices to say that they could go up to 85% of normal activity and 90% of orthodontic activity. They are still not up to 100% of activity so they are literally treading water to try to keep the service going. I pay tribute to all those who have done such significant work to try to deliver services to the patients who have needed them.

Urgent care has been back at pre-pandemic levels since December 2020, so the backlog is in respect of routine services, whether fillings, caps, crowns or routine dental-hygiene work. Covid has significantly contributed to that backlog.

Wera Hobhouse: I understand from the dentists I speak to in my Bath constituency that the Government funding provided per patient just covers hygiene, not any of the repairs or dental work the Minister has just mentioned. Can she confirm or deny that?

Maria Caulfield: I will come to that in a moment, but let me first conclude on the impact of covid on dental services. The hon. Member for Bristol North West may be reassured to hear that the proportion of adults and children accessing dentists in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire remains higher than the average for access to dentistry in England. It is probably no consolation to his constituents, but access is slightly higher.

Darren Jones: Is the average acceptable or below where the Minister would like it to be?

Maria Caulfield: I have been clear that covid means we are not yet operating at 100% of normal activity. We need to get back to pre-covid levels, when the majority of patients were able to access a dental appointment and around 28 million people saw an NHS dentist every 24 months. That is where we need to get back to but we will struggle, because of infection-control measures due to covid, to get there until we are at 100% of activity.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that NHS England is supporting local commissioners. There was an intervention about helping to get more service provision; provision is commissioned at a local level, not by the national Government. National Governments provide the funding and then local commissioners commission the services. It is important that Members talk to their local commissioners to understand what services are being commissioned. NHS England provides flexible commissioning toolkits to local commissioners to help to focus the available capacity.

Darren Jones: Does the Minister recognise that local commissioners can only commission dental services if the NHS dentists exist and are willing to provide NHS dental services? The core of my debate this evening is not about the impact of the covid pandemic, which we all recognise; it is about the underlying issues of the dental contract and the shortage of dentists. Does she recognise that?

Maria Caulfield: I will come on to the contract, which was developed in 2006 under the last Labour Government, and highlight the impact it is still having on dentistry—

Mr Bradshaw: You've had 10 years!

Maria Caulfield: This Government are always clearing up the mess of the last Labour Government. I am hoping to have a constructive debate but obviously Opposition Members are not willing to engage in that.

Despite all our efforts to increase services, we know that patients are experiencing difficulty gaining access to dentists. There are a number of options that are helping patients to locate their nearest dentist. Patients can call 111 to find out which dentists are taking on patients. *[Interruption.]* If Opposition Members are not serious about this and make funny head-in-hands gestures, it is really not helpful.

Mr Bradshaw *rose—*

Maria Caulfield: No, I will not give way. The right hon. Gentleman is obviously not interested in my response.

In Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, a dental helpline has been set up to help patients to find an NHS dentist for routine care and to arrange urgent treatment. In addition, we have written to dental practices asking them to update their online information on the nhs.uk website. It is really important that this is available so that patients can find out which dentists are taking on NHS patients and which are not. It is crucial that that is kept up to date because it does change on a significant timescale.

Dentists are also being asked to maintain a short-notice cancellation list so that they can proactively contact patients who are on their waiting list if a patient cancellation occurs. All these measures help with the underlying problem of gaining access to NHS dentists. Later this week, there will be an announcement on some extra funding so that local commissioners will be able to commission services, because in some areas there would be more capacity if extra funding were available. Colleagues across the House will see the details of that in the coming days. My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) intervened on a similar point. I am happy to meet him to discuss the issue around Frampton Cotterell, as I am happy to meet all Members if they want to raise specific local issues around dentist availability in their constituencies.

To get to the crux of the long-term issues, we hope to get to 100% capacity at some point post the pandemic. However, as mentioned by many colleagues, there is an issue with the dental contract, which has perverse disincentives within the UDA—units of dental activity—system, which dentists struggle with because they are paid similar rates when they are taking out one tooth or doing one filling as compared with doing extensive dental work. This is a disincentive to dentists to take on NHS patients, or sometimes to hand back NHS contracts.

Work has already commenced on dental contract reform. The Department and NHS England are working with key stakeholders, including the British Dental Association, to look at alternative ways of commissioning services, because only when we address the fundamental of the contract that dentists are working on will we get to the crux of the matter of the poor uptake of dental contracts and the reluctance of dentists to take on NHS work. Our aim in contract reform is to improve patient access, reduce health inequalities and make the NHS a more attractive place to work for dentists, making them feel more valued and helping to recruit and, more vitally, retain the experienced dentists who do so much to protect and promote oral health in this country. I am sure that the hon. Member for Bristol North West will welcome that. We are making some building blocks in terms of work that is already happening.

A number of Members touched on the issue of recruitment and retention of dentists. Only in September last year, Health Education England published its "Advancing Dental Care" review report on a four-year programme of work to recruit, retain and train not just dentists but dental teams. We have identified more effective ways of utilising the skills mix in the dental workforce. We are widening access and participation to training, we are allowing more flexible entry routes, including for overseas dentists, and we are developing training places for dental professionals, not just dentists; we want to upskill dental technicians and dental associates by providing them with more skills so they can provide a greater range of services. We are also looking at providing training in areas where we have dental deserts—where we do not have dental provision that local commissioners can commission. Importantly, we know from GP trainees that those who train in an area are more likely to stay in the area. We want to facilitate that. Health Education England is doing a huge amount of work to make that happen.

Darren Jones: I thank the Minister for her answers. One specific question I asked was about the recognition of EU qualifications and the 22% of dentists in the UK who originate from the EU. Can she answer that specific question please?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. We want to encourage everyone who wants to come and work in the United Kingdom to be able to do so, and we are working with the General Dental Council to make sure that happens. Currently a period of continued automatic recognition is in place for dentists with EEA and Swiss qualifications wishing to work in the UK and we want that to continue. Those with qualifications which were previously automatically recognised will continue to be recognised in the UK. I have heard from dentists from abroad who want their qualifications to be recognised here and we will work hard as part of the contract reform to make sure that that process is easier than at present.

On preventive work, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley was absolutely right to point out that, as well as dealing with dental issues, oral health is crucial, and the Health and Care Bill is introducing proposals that will transfer the power to bring forward the new water fluoridation schemes, which will transform the oral health of many in the most deprived parts of our country, and could reduce the level of decay among five-year-olds by up to 28%. Simple measures such as that will make a big difference.

Although tonight I am unable to present colleagues with a quick-fix solution, I want to assure them that we are dealing with the issues covid has brought to us and we will be announcing further funding in this financial year to help to deal with some of that backlog, but there are issues with the current dental contract that unless addressed will continue some of the problems Members have raised this evening.

Darren Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way one last time. Might I gently suggest that the advice the Minister has this evening given my constituents in Southmead and across Bristol and the south-west who cannot get access to an NHS dentist is to call 111—they have tried that; it has not worked—to try to find a local NHS dentist, which they have tried too, and has not worked, and to wait for reform of the NHS dental contract, which has been in place since 2006 and this Government have been in office since 2010? They have been waiting for many years for that and I am not sure they are going to see it any time soon. I have constituents who are in pain waiting for dental care, and children who are not being seen. What are the immediate interventions the Minister can make? She has not offered any this evening.

Maria Caulfield: I would strongly disagree with the hon. Gentleman. He wants to work in a constructive way to deal with the issues facing his constituents, and he has already said that he wanted to meet the Minister, but he has never made an approach to meet me ever—

Darren Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not give way any further; I think the hon. Gentleman has made his points fairly clear. I have said to him that we are issuing a range of help. I have said there will be announcements later this week about funding in this financial year to help patients to be able to access dentists. I have also said that we are—

Darren Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): A point of order at the end of an Adjournment debate?

Darren Jones: It is for clarification and for guidance, which I think is a point of order, if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker? My question to you is: the Minister suggested I had not been in touch with her to arrange an appointment, but it was the previous Minister. I wanted to ask if I was able to clarify that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair, but I understand why the hon. Gentleman wanted to clarify that. *[Interruption.]* Order. We will not have any more shouting from people who are sitting down.

Maria Caulfield: I think it is very disappointing for the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) to say that there is no point in meeting or that it would be a pointless meeting. That is the sort of constructive engagement that Labour MPs in Bristol have. I have been very constructive and very open in offering to meet—my very first line in the response to this debate was that I was willing to meet—the hon. Member for Bristol North West to discuss that. If he was not serious about it, it is a shame that he has not been more constructive this evening. However, I am very clear that we are offering a range of options for patients. I have put on record and I have not shied away from the fact that patients are struggling to see their dentist. I have not shied away from the fact that dentists are not happy with the current contract, and we are instigating contract reform. I have not shied away from the fact that, with the current infection control measures, restrictions are still in place. However, as the Minister responsible for dentistry, I remain committed to playing my part to ensure patients can access NHS dentistry no matter where they live.

Question put and agreed to.

9.50 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 24 January 2022

[Ms Nusrat Ghani *in the Chair*]

Throwline Stations

4.30 pm

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

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 575967, relating to throwline stations around open bodies of water.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani.

In May 2018, Mark Allen was out with his friends on a hot summer's day. He was a bright and funny young man, who wanted to be an actor. The water where he and his friends had congregated was welcoming. Like many young men, and some girls, they did not register the danger. Feeling hot and sticky, the clothes came off and in they went. I am pretty sure that if I had been there, aged 18, I would have done the same. I have swum in the sea a thousand times, so what it is the difference?

In they all went. No doubt, they screamed with laughter and pain when the cold hit them. They probably splashed each other in the water, like we all do. Apparently, these boys got out, but they decided to go back in. Unfortunately, Mark never swam again. Last week I met Mark's mum Leeanne—a brave woman who told me her story. There can really be nothing like the pain of losing a child. My thoughts and prayers go out to all of Mark's extended family and friends for their loss.

When someone dies so young, we have to ask why. It is a very tough question. When a family can take something positive out of such a tragic event, it does not remove the pain, but preventing others from going through the same experience may help to bring at least some sense to it. Mark's mum made a promise to him that she would do all she could to stop this happening to other people, so that families like hers do not have to suffer a similarly tragic event. The petition started by Leeanne has reached 103,000 signatures, and 57 of my own constituents have signed it. It has huge support, and I am pleased to bring this debate here today. There has been similar campaign work on throwline stations and water safety education over the years, and I would like to recognise the work of those campaigners.

Hundreds of people die each year in water, and the statistics prove that it is mainly young boys and men. Figures have shown that over the last eight years between 80% and 90% of those who suffer fatalities in natural water have been male. What is happening? It appears that boys and men are less risk-averse than girls, so that is the first point that needs addressing. The second point, which I believe to be the most important, is that many of the deaths are not down to poor swimming capabilities. Just because someone can swim, it does not make them safe; it is the shock of the cold water that kills so many. It is not like jumping into a swimming pool, which is often heated. It is not like someone running into the sea and then running back out again until they get used to it. It is the jumping in that does it. The third point to raise is that there are no lifeguards to help anyone in trouble.

So what is the answer? This debate is about throwlines. Some people believe that having throwlines at all open water spaces could be the answer and would help an awful lot, but it is not completely the answer. The problem is that if I saw safety equipment around a stretch of water, it might suggest to me that this is a safe place where I can go in. David Walker of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents—a professional in the field—said to me that when he sees this equipment, he is pretty sure that there has been an incident. In other words, what shouts "safety" to me and many members of the public actually shouts "danger" to a professional.

Having spoken to David, I am convinced that there needs to be a three-pronged approach. Education must be the first part. A 20-minute session with every child once a year would be a wonderful start, and we must ensure that boys engage with the lessons. Secondly, mandatory risk assessments of all waters—natural or manmade—must be carried out. The RoSPA will help with those, and although many of the larger water companies and councils already perform them, it appears that too many are just a paper exercise; they do not really carry out a thorough assessment or act fully on their findings, and that should be addressed. Finally, equipment such as throwlines must be put in place only with sufficient warnings stating, "This equipment is not a signal that the water is safe—far from it—and no matter how many times you have swum before, it could be your last."

We will never stop young people doing risky things, since it is part of growing up. It is fun and makes us who we are. We learn from those actions: "That was a good thing to do"; "That was not so good." I am a believer in taking risks, but those risks must be calculated. If our young people are not fully aware of the dangers, it is our job to correct that.

I ask the Minister for Levelling Up Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), to address three points. First, I believe that the previous Education Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), was looking into the education element, so will she ask current Education Ministers to do the same? Secondly, will the Government make risk assessments of all bodies of water mandatory? Lastly, if and when any equipment is installed, will warning signs be placed everywhere that say, "This water is not safe. Do not enter"? We will never bring Mark back, but we can help Leeanne to fulfil her promise to her son, and at least reduce the number of families who have to go through similar fatalities.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): I must say that my experience of the Minister means that she will be able to cover all issues. She is normally competent across many issues and Departments.

4.37 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for introducing it on behalf of the petitioners and for making some good suggestions about how to improve the situation. I also thank Leeanne Bartley for being present, and for her tireless work campaigning to improve water safety. I spoke to Leeanne ahead of the debate, and I know that she made a promise to her son, Mark, after he died, to change things for the better. Today's debate is a testament to her hard work in keeping the promise that she made to her beloved son.

Mark was well known and well liked in Gorton, where he lived with his dad. He had taken his GCSEs at Wright Robinson College in my constituency, and was studying drama at Shena Simon College. He had big dreams of becoming a professional actor. When we spoke, Leeanne shared stories of the joy and laughter that Mark brought to a family holiday in Paris, his love of watching wrestling, and his generosity to those less fortunate than himself. In June 2018, Mark was enjoying the hot weather with his friends on the edge of Gorton lower reservoir. Wanting to cool off, and unaware of the incredible dangers of open water, Mark jumped in. The freezing water took his breath away. His friends were unable to save him, and he tragically died.

If a throwline had been available on the shore of the reservoir that day, Mark might have survived. Throwlines are basic equipment. They are essentially a bag containing a rope that can be thrown to a swimmer in distress, allowing the rescuer to pull them safely to shore. Since Mark's death, thanks to campaigning by Leeanne, and Mark's family and friends, with the support of the local community in Gorton, I am pleased that Manchester City Council, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and the reservoir's owner, United Utilities, have installed three throwline stations at Gorton reservoirs. They are dedicated to Mark's memory.

There is no reason why throwlines cannot be installed wherever there is a risk of drowning. They are not expensive and they save lives—they should be as common as defibrillators. The petition is absolutely right to call for Mark's law. I hope that the Minister will update us on progress in making open water safer.

4.40 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I say how pleased I am to see you in the Chair, Ms Ghani? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on his opening speech, and thank the Petitions Committee for securing the debate.

The petition was initiated by a constituent of mine, Mrs Leeanne Bartley of Ruthin, who is present in the Chamber, and it was prompted by the tragic death of her son, Mark Allen. As we have heard, on 5 June 2018, Mark, who was then aged 18 and living with his father in Gorton, Manchester, was with a group of friends in Debdale Park, one of the largest public open spaces in that city. It was a hot day, and Mark decided to cool off by swimming in the nearby Debdale reservoir—a large body of water managed by United Utilities. It would appear that he scaled a fence to climb up to a platform and dive into the reservoir. The water was bitterly cold, and, sadly, he immediately got into difficulties. His friends attempted to rescue him but were sadly unable to do so, and he disappeared under the water. Mark was a young man and talented drama student with his life ahead of him. He is severely missed by his family and friends.

United Utilities told the inquest into Mark's death that there were a number of signs around the edge of the reservoir warning of the danger of the water, and pointing out that it was extremely cold and very deep in places. Since the incident, however, the company has installed a number of throwlines around the reservoir. I am afraid that it is frequently the case that throwlines appear after such an incident has occurred. Mrs Bartley's view is that the authorities responsible for the management of large bodies of water should be proactive in the installation of throwlines, rather than reactive, as they are at the moment, sadly.

About 260 deaths from accidental drowning occur in the United Kingdom each year, and that is without taking into account the number of British citizens who die in drowning accidents overseas. Mrs Bartley believes very firmly that that number could be significantly reduced if there were a requirement to provide throwlines at every large body of water in the country. Clearly, everybody would agree that it is highly desirable that the number of deaths by drowning should be reduced. The provision of throwlines would be a move in the right direction.

Most reservoirs are owned by the major water companies. The Environment Agency is responsible for the management of rivers, and the Canal and River Trust is responsible for managing the canals around the country. Those entities have a responsibility for the safety of the bodies of water that they manage.

The Royal Life Saving Society UK is one of the leading charities in this field. It helps people to enjoy being on, in and around water safely. I commend its website, which is a tremendously valuable resource, which provides a huge amount of information about water safety and a catalogue of the risks associated with open water. As we have heard, those risks include: the shock of cold water, which can make swimming difficult even for the strongest swimmer, and can increase the difficulty of getting out of the water; the lack of safety equipment and the increased difficulty for rescue; the depth of the water, which changes frequently and is unpredictable; and strong currents that can sweep swimmers away.

Evidence given at the inquest indicated that the water in the reservoir was extremely cold. In fact, one of the witnesses said it was freezing. No doubt, the low temperature was at least a contributing factor leading to the difficulties that Mark got into. The coroner at the inquest remarked that Mark's death was caused, as he put it, by "the impetuosity of youth". He said:

> "We think we are bulletproof. We do what comes naturally to us and never think about the risks."

It is possible that, had throwlines been provided at the reservoir, more could have been done by Mark's friends to avoid this dreadful tragedy. It is also probably true that if throwlines were more widely available on bodies of water across the country, there would be far fewer fatalities of this sort. In their response to the petition, the Government have pointed out that landowners have a

> "responsibility to assess and act on the risks posed by open bodies of water on their land."

That is certainly true. I ask the Minister, when she replies to the debate, to explain what actions landowners should take in response to those risks, and whether she

agrees that throwlines, which cost about £250, should be more widely available. Perhaps she could indicate if the Government are prepared to legislate, as urged by Mrs Bartley.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making some excellent points. I have had 566 constituents sign the petition—a significant number. Does he agree that any guidance or legislation that comes forward following the debate needs to apply to Wales as well as to the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Jones: I believe so. There has, in fact, been a debate on the issue already in the Welsh Senedd in Cardiff. When one considers that the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 is a national piece of legislation, I would very much hope that the Minister will indicate what national legislation she has in mind, or at least what the Government are prepared to do to provide stronger guidance to those who manage large bodies of water.

Finally, I commend the work of the Royal Life Saving Society UK. I have spoken to Mr Lee Heard of that organisation, who told me that the RLSS is always happy to assist landowners by advising what sensible precautions they can take to minimise the risks associated with bodies of open water on their land. It is a hugely valuable resource and I encourage all landowners to make use of it.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): No doubt the Royal Life Saving Society UK will be in *Hansard* twice because of your contribution.

4.48 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, as always, Ms Ghani. I thank the Petitions Committee for selecting the topic and my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), for leading the debate.

It is truly heartbreaking to hear about Mark, who lost his life at just 18. I give my thanks and condolences to his family and friends. I also thank Leeanne for setting the petition up, so that others have a chance to speak and hopefully not go through the horror that she went through. It is deeply upsetting, and it makes me angry that, had basic safety equipment been available, his life might have been saved. What makes it even worse for me is that Mark's story is not an isolated incident.

According to the National Water Safety Forum, 242 accidental deaths took place in water in 2020. The debate provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on all of those tragedies and what more might have been done to prevent them. In May 2021, my constituent, Sam Haycock, tragically drowned in a local reservoir. Sam was just 16 years old. He was a talented judo competitor, who competed at a European level, and he really had a promising future ahead of him. Throwlines were available at the reservoir, and Sam's friends tried desperately to save his life, but with the throwlines having been padlocked to prevent vandalism, his friends were unable to access them in time. Procedures should not hamper access to protective life-saving equipment, given that the difference between life and death is a matter of seconds, but unfortunately they do.

I want to paint a picture. Just try to imagine that your friend is drowning and you are panicking. First, you have to locate the throwline. Then you have to call the emergency services to get an access code. Then you have to give them the access code. You have to remember the reference number that they give back to you, memorise the code and enter it—all the while, you can hear your friend crying for help. It is clear that this is about not just providing the equipment, but ensuring that it is easily locatable and accessible.

We must also confront the real reason why the throwline that might have saved Sam's life was behind a padlock. Mindless vandals who damage or steal life-saving equipment are placing lives at risk, and we must ensure that the law acts as a sufficient deterrent. Since Sam's death, his parents, Simon and Gaynor, have been campaigning for Sam's law, which would do just that.

I worked with colleagues in the other place to table an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill that would create a specific offence of destroying or damaging life-saving equipment, including lifebelts, lifejackets and defibrillators. The amendment was debated in Committee and on Report but, regrettably, was not pushed to a vote. Speaking for the Government on Report, Lord Wolfson argued that the amendment was not needed because endangering a life through intentional or reckless damage to property is already an offence under the Criminal Damage Act 1971. That may be the case, but it is clearly not enough, and more needs to be done to prevent this sort of vandalism.

Several examples show clearly that existing legislation is failing to provide sufficient protection for life-saving equipment. After life-saving equipment was damaged at Salford Quays just days after being installed, Salford City Council was forced to resort to a public spaces protection order to deter vandalism. In Uckfield in Sussex, a defibrillator was rendered useless by vandals. Each act of vandalism on life-saving equipment could ultimately lead to a death, and the law needs to reflect that. Lord Wolfson acknowledged that

"if the law is not enough of a deterrent, we must focus on those responsible for water safety, health and safety, and law enforcement to come together to find out what is not working and identify workable solutions that might include sign-posting more clearly on the equipment the consequences of damaging that equipment."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 12 January 2022; Vol. 817, c. 1123-1124.]

That is a welcome commitment—but with lives at stake, it must have real urgency. I urge the Minister to bring forward a strategy that will ensure easy access to life-saving equipment, strengthen public information about water safety, and ensure that punishments for damaging or destroying that equipment recognise the devastating consequences to which that can lead.

If we are to save lives, we need to take action now. We need provisions that require local authorities, private landowners or whoever is responsible for a body of water not just to provide and signpost lifebelts and throwlines, but to ensure that they are properly maintained. There must be more education for all about the dangers of open water swimming, particularly in schools. Sadly, many of those who die in open water are children, who must be taught about water safety from the earliest age. We can prevent other families from suffering as Mark Allen and Sam Haycock's families have, but it will take urgent

[Sarah Champion]

and consistent action from the Government to ensure that our legal framework, infrastructure and education are up to the task.

4.53 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on his opening remarks and the Petitions Committee on securing the debate. I thank all those who petitioned to bring this important matter to us.

The tragic death of Mark Allen highlights the dangers associated with open water. I send my prayers and best wishes to Leeanne and Mark's family and friends, and to Sam's. His death was so sadly and effectively described by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), whom I thank.

In this context, I would like to talk about the terribly sad death of my constituent, Lucas Dobson, from Deal. Lucas was only six years old when he fell into the River Stour in Sandwich and drowned. Lucas was excitedly enjoying a barbecue and a day out with his dad at a privately owned jetty. While his father was checking an engine nearby, Lucas tried to jump on the boat by himself. He missed his footing and plunged into the water. He was instantly swept away by the strong tidal currents. He disappeared for four days. During that time, thousands of community volunteers and police searched high and low on the river for Lucas. Tragically, he was found dead on Wednesday 21 August 2019, some four days later.

The inquest heard that on that day neither Lucas nor his friends were wearing lifejackets while they played amid the boats on the jetty. That is why I support Lucas's family—his mother, Kirsty Furze, grandmother Donna Kentfield and cousin Zoe Alldis—in their calls for a new law, Lucas's law, which echoes and builds on Mark's law, which is being discussed today.

Lucas's law has three parts. It would make it compulsory for young children to wear lifejackets on and around boats. It would require more life-saving buoyancy rings and lifelines to be installed near rivers, lakes and seas, and would start a new safety awareness campaign for parents of young children, including encouraging them to use float suits and swim vests when the children are playing near water, particularly on hot days. It can take only a moment for an accident to happen that can take a young life.

Children's float suits and swim vests can be inexpensive and cost as little as £10. Like cycle helmets and seatbelts, it just makes sense to be water safe. Yet more people die from drowning each year than from cycling, so we really need to start doing something about it.

I have been working alongside Lucas's family to raise awareness of this incredibly important issue. I have called on the Royal Yachting Association, as well as other water safety organisations, to back these life-saving plans. In the year that Lucas died, the RNLI helped about 40,000 people in the water to safety. I thank the RNLI and Her Majesty's Coastguard for all the work that they do to help keep people safe in my constituency, which is a coastal one.

However, I am disappointed that organisations such as the Royal Yachting Association and others, which should have water safety in their DNA, are not backing calls for new safety laws around water and compulsory lifejackets for young children. It is essential that such provisions extend to private boat owners and private jetty owners, and that they take legal responsibility and appropriate action for ensuring the safety of young people.

There have been changes in other areas of privately owned transport such as the car, and it is time for action on privately owned boats and jetties. Many other countries, including America, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand already have mandatory lifejacket laws. It is about time the UK put in place basic life-saving laws to protect young children near water.

Like Mark Allen, who also lost his life by drowning, Lucas Dobson might have been saved if the right safety processes had been in place and been followed. The tragedy in both those cases, and that of Sam, is that they were accidents that might have been avoided with better water safety support. We must now do what is right to stop accidents resulting in drowning and death.

In my coastal constituency, water safety is an extremely important issue for me and my constituents. I look forward with hope that in the next year we can see Lucas's law, Sam's law and Mark's law move forward together. There is a need for a comprehensive strategy in this place.

I want to end by paying tribute to Lucas's mother, aunt and grandmother. Since the death of their child, the years have been tough for them. I commend them for pulling together and campaigning for better water safety to ensure that no other families go through what they had to go through, and to ensure that no further lives are lost in water unnecessarily.

At a time when enhancing all aspects of public safety is seen as an important function of Government, safety, especially of the young, around bodies of water must not be a poor relation in the safety debate. That such tragedies happen rarely is not a justification for inaction. There is a responsibility to tackle water safety with a rigour that befits an island and water nation. The challenge must be to stop avoidable deaths by drowning happening at all: to educate, to legislate and to save lives.

5 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and the Petitions Committee for bringing forward this important debate.

This petition was signed by 606 of my constituents in Southport. I am all too aware of the tragic case of Mark Allen; I send my condolences to his family and friends and join my colleagues in calling for throwlines to be installed to prevent such needless loss of life in the future.

Landowners have a duty of care to those on their land. By speaking in this debate, I want to suggest that that duty should be strengthened, with further legal requirements for landowners to assess and act on the

risks posed by open bodies of water. I welcome the fact that, since the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Government have enforced legal requirements to prevent employees and other people from coming to harm during work activities. However, the 1974 Act has well-known limitations; under the legislation it is not possible to enforce simple solutions such as a duty to provide throwlines near all bodies of water, for example.

In a modern, 21st-century country such as the United Kingdom, it is unacceptable that drowning continues to be one of the leading causes of accidental death. It is estimated that a shocking 44% of drowning fatalities happen to people who had no intention of even entering the water. Drowning in the United Kingdom is reported to account for more accidental fatalities annually than fire deaths in the home or cycling deaths on the road. Men are the most at-risk group in every age group, accounting for eight in 10 of all deaths.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I apologise for coming in late—there was traffic, I am afraid.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people, particularly very small children, can drown in very shallow water? There are areas—in caravan parks or places like that—that people think are safe, but which are not safe for very small children. There have been terrible occurrences and deaths of children drowning in only a foot or so of water.

Damien Moore: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. That is why it is incredibly important for landowners to carry out risk assessments around open bodies of water, particularly where children are concerned, so that protections such as throwlines can be put in place.

In Southport, the sea rarely comes in, but when it does it is rapid and all too often deadly. Our local rescue services go above and beyond in their duty to warn and protect; I welcome the opening, last week, of Southport's new £1.4 million lifeboat station. The Southport Offshore Rescue Trust, which is independent from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, was founded by Kath Wilson after her son passed away in 1987 while fishing off the Southport coast. Southport Lifeboat is crewed entirely by volunteers and has helped to safely return more than 5,000 people since it was founded. I am sure that we all want to congratulate Kath and her excellent team of volunteers on their amazing work.

I also want to highlight that the RNLI has some excellent videos and explainers about what someone can do if they are in trouble in the water, including dealing with cold water shock, and I encourage all hon. Members to share them with their constituents. If those watching take anything away from this debate, it should be the three extremely important words provided by the RNLI: "Float to Live".

I am sure that many of my colleagues are aware of the tragic incident involving Ben Smith-Crallan, who fell into a lake in Southport's Botanic Gardens and sadly died following complications from an infection. Following the "Make a change for Ben" campaign, led by my constituent David Rawsthorne, tens of thousands of pounds have been raised for improvement works to the gardens, including the installation of an aeration fountain at the end of the lake to ensure that water is oxygenised, and potential measures to stop people falling in. I would add throwlines to the list of safety measures that need to be included.

The UK drowning prevention strategy acknowledges the difficulty caused by the fact that responsibility for managing water risks is dispersed among a number of organisations. While many, such as the Southport Offshore Rescue Trust and the RNLI, do excellent work, further efforts should be made to unite their various responsibilities to ensure that resources are effectively used, responsibility is clearly defined and individuals are best protected.

Let us start with the simple solutions. We should heed the calls of this petition to implement throw bags and throwlines around open bodies of water and go further by expanding opportunities to learn how to swim and spreading awareness around water safety. When the UK drowning prevention strategy was published in 2015, it called for accidental drowning fatalities in the United Kingdom to be halved by 2026. The latest data shows that we are halfway there, with a 25% decrease since the strategy was published. We should maintain that progress—even speed it up if we can—and ensure that we all do everything we can to prevent senseless tragedies, such as that of Mark Allen, from ever happening again. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to do everything she can to help prevent those tragedies from occurring in the future.

5.5 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and the Petitions Committee on this afternoon's debate. I have come along as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on water safety and drowning prevention. We are ably served by the Royal Life Saving Society UK. It is a great pleasure to be able to speak to some of the issues of concern that I have. However, I would first like to start, as many others have, by giving my condolences to Mark's family, and indeed to those of all the people who have died as a result of drowning.

As has already been said, drowning occurs in this country on about 400 occasions each year. To put that into context, that is about one drowning every 20 hours. Within the time we have been awake, one person will have drowned. That is something that we simply must stop. It has also been mentioned, by the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), that that figure is in excess of the number of people who die from fires in the home or in cycle accidents. Those 400 deaths are preventable.

We also know that many people who do not die as a result of drowning still end up in a persistent vegetative state. We do not have the numbers for those people who then go on to need care for the rest of their lives. Drowning is about not only the number of people who die, but the accident as a whole and the impact on both the NHS and the emotional—and, on occasions, economic—welfare of our constituents' families.

The second reason why I came along today is that I have been interested in water safety for many years. I am—I suppose—still a qualified lifeguard. I was a lifeguard for many years, in two pools that I can remember and on five beaches in Cornwall, where I grew up. I not only have my bronze medallion, but can go into the water with a reel and line, or with a paddle board and

[Dr Matthew Offord]

my torpedo tube. Some of us remember our former colleague Charlotte Leslie, who I worked with on the beach at Bude.

The whole issue of water is very important but, in addition to that, I am an active sailor in this country. I also like to scuba dive and surf. I sea-kayak and canoe, and have a paddle board. I think you get the point, Ms Ghani: I am either, on, in, or under the water on many occasions.

However, it is not at those times that we see people drowning—or even having problems in the water. As has been said, most people who actually drown end up in the water without expecting to. They could be running along a canal path, for example, could simply trip after a night out, or could be pushed in as a simple prank. That has happened on many occasions. Also, the popularity of activities such as wild swimming—something else that I do—and paddle boarding is leading to more and more people having problems in the water.

With paddle boarding, the problem has been people being pushed out to sea and we see problems around that in parts of the United Kingdom. A throwline initiative would not help with that, but it certainly would with wild swimming and we must identify places where people regularly swim. The issue of wild swimming, and indeed water quality, is very much on the mind of the Government following the Environmental Audit Committee—I will give it a small plug—report on the quality of our rivers, which is very important.

I mentioned people actually going into the water. Two weeks ago, I went to Waterstones in Covent Garden—other bookshops are available, of course. I was saddened to see a poster about a missing person called Harvey Parker. Two days later, I was watching the London news and it said that Harvey's body had been found in the Thames. Harvey, who was not a constituent of mine, had been to the Heaven nightclub. I presume that he had been drinking and he found that he was simply in the water, not realising that he would end up there.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Order. That may be an open case. We must not reflect too much on that situation.

Dr Offord: I certainly will not; I take your advice, Ms Ghani.

There is also the case of James Clark, to whom the same thing happened. He was at a nightclub in Kingston upon Thames, but he was not among his friends when they all left. When they got home, they realised that he was not there—in fact, it was the next day when they realised that James had gone missing. A few days later, his body, too, was found in the Thames. On both occasions, these guys did nothing wrong. They had been drinking, but that is not a crime. In the end, they found themselves in the water and, sadly, expired.

That is why I welcome the RNLI's initiative. The RNLI station here at Westminster, on the embankment, is the busiest station in the United Kingdom. We may find it hard to believe that an inland water body is actually the busiest. The RNLI has worked with organisations including Nicholson's, the pub partnership, and throwlines are now being supplied to other pubs, including the Horniman at Hays, just down by HMS Belfast. Some of the bouncers on the door there say that they feel more empowered. When people leave, they have often been drinking and they will be quite likely to hang around or stay near the railings; sometimes they even decide to stand over the railings if it is a warm evening. On those occasions, people have been known to fall in, so the bouncers feel that it is a great initiative to have a piece of equipment that they are able to use to help and save some of these people.

There has been mention of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. It is true that that legislation is necessary for companies and employers that are responsible for waterways, but most of the waterways in the United Kingdom are actually used by recreational users, so they are not covered by the Act. Therefore I would particularly like throwlines to be installed in a greater number of places in the United Kingdom—across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as England.

The National Water Safety Forum, in its drowning prevention strategy, has come up with a target to halve—reduce by 50%—the number of drownings by 2026. I would certainly like that target to be more ambitious, but most of all, I think it could make a valuable contribution to preventing untimely deaths. When anyone goes into the water, it comes as quite a shock, but that shock is nothing compared with that of the friends and relatives of the person who no longer comes home at night.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Thank you, Dr Offord, for that very serious contribution, although you did also give us a kaleidoscope of all your water activities and all the time you have for that as well.

5.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Ms Ghani, for chairing this sitting this afternoon. I also thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and the Petitions Committee for ensuring that this issue has been brought to the House for debate. It is incredibly important that we debate it, and the debate is very timely. My thoughts are with the family of Mark Allen—I applaud their bravery and tenacity in taking this issue forward and bringing it here today. Hopefully some change can be brought about to ensure that other families do not go through what they have gone through.

In Scotland, we have a pretty specific situation in relation to open bodies of water: we have lots of open bodies of water, and our open bodies of water are very cold. We have seen in the course of the pandemic, as was mentioned, an increase in the number of people wild swimming, paddle boarding and canoeing. I cannot claim to do any of those. I have tried sea kayaking and I am never going again—I was so seasick it was ridiculous. I did not expect to get seasick while sea kayaking, and it is not a thing that I will carry on with.

The increase in the number of people going out and enjoying the water and having a good time in the water in Scotland is brilliant, but we need to ensure that we increase the education as well. We need to ensure that, when people are going into the water, they are doing so while understanding the risks and what they need to do should they get into difficulty. The RNLI's incredibly important "Float to Live" campaign was mentioned. It does not matter how strong a swimmer someone is and

how many times they have been in that water before, hitting the water and getting the shock of the cold can mean that they freeze up, are unable to rescue themselves and get into real difficulty. It is really important that we ensure that as many people as possible are aware of that campaign.

In Scotland, we had our own response to the drowning prevention strategy in 2018. It included a number of things, but one of the key measures was to develop and promote water safety education and initiatives in primary and secondary schools. Given that in Scotland we have a different education system and a different police and fire system, as well as having a massive number of bodies of water, there needs to be a unique strategy, and we are taking that forward in Scotland in an attempt to make a difference.

In July last year we saw a doubling in the number of fatalities in Scotland's waters, which is a big issue. As a result of that, particularly around Loch Lomond, the amount of safety equipment has massively increased. Several organisations, including the council, have worked together to increase the number of throwlines and safety signs and to increase the presence of the lifeguard boat at that side of the Loch to ensure that people can be saved, should they get into difficulty. That should not happen only after the fact. It should not take those fatalities for us to realise the issue.

We should increase the amount of education and safety equipment. We should ensure that people know how to use that safety equipment and that it is kept up to date and looked after. All of those are incredibly important. By 2026, we will hopefully see the number of people drowning in open water reduced. We all want to get there, and we are all pushing in that direction, but I think we particularly need to see education in schools.

I have young children aged eight and 10. As we quite often do in Aberdeenshire, whenever I go to a harbour, I am terrified that either my or somebody else's children are going to fall into the water. My children probably do not realise, but I am hyperaware of it. When they hit 14 or 15 and go out by themselves, they will not have the same level of terror about the water as I have when they are near it. As a parent, I think schools need to ensure that young people are educated and have a reasonable awareness. It is okay to go into the water, but they need to have awareness of the danger it can pose, so that we see fewer fatalities and so that people can enjoy the outdoors safely in Scotland, England or Wales.

5.17 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a particular pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms Ghani. I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), on behalf of the Petitions Committee, on bringing forward this debate. I was a member of the Committee in the past, and I know how important these debates are.

The hon. Gentleman introduced the subject with a gravity and comprehensiveness that did justice to a serious set of issues. He particularly dealt with the pain that has been represented in all today's speeches. Most of all, I express my admiration for the campaigning that Mark Allen's mother, Leeanne, has done. When I was researching this issue, I was struck by the impact that the campaign has had in garnering support. A magnificent number have signed the petition, not just here but in Wales. I hope that all of that will lead to change, and that is the purpose for which we are here today.

We have heard powerful speeches from around the Chamber. What struck me was that every single one reflected a tragedy for families and constituents. The roll-call of names is very sad indeed. I was struck by the comments of the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who represented his constituent very effectively. I thought his point from the coroner's report was quite striking. We all think we are bulletproof, do we not? I suspect we can all look back on occasions in our own lives when we have done things that, on reflection, were probably not wise. Mostly, we get away with it, but occasionally we do not. That is the key to trying to find a way to make our fellow citizens' lives safer.

I was struck by the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). It seems almost indescribable that people could be vandalising safety equipment, but that is the world we live in, unfortunately, and I thought she made strong points about the need for action on that. The hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) mentioned the sad situation of Lucas, and a strong series of points were made, to which I hope the Minister will listen closely. The hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore) spoke of Ben. On it goes, it seems. Important points about the RNLI were also made. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) can at least come to our rescue as a lifeguard. He made a very positive contribution as well.

I was also struck by the fact that this is not the first time that the issue has been debated in this place. There was a debate last July that was slightly more education focused, but in which more sad cases were recounted and the same points were well made that it is not just about swimming; it is much more about an awareness of the dangers, and the need for that message to be put forward effectively in schools.

I ask the Minister what impact that discussion—I think it was raised by one Member in the debate—has had on the Department for Education? I know that the curriculum is crowded, but what has the Department been doing to ensure that these important issues are raised, because the number of deaths is striking? A number of us have been involved in transport over the years. Of course, we work hard to improve cycle safety and road safety, but to have so many people dying from drowning each year rather makes the point that we need to do more about it.

I contacted the water company in my area, Anglian Water, and was grateful for its guidance on quite a complicated subject in terms of the advice from the National Water Safety Forum and the Visitor Safety Group on when and how to use public rescue equipment. Although I am grateful, I also could not help noticing over the weekend the amount that the water company has paid out in dividends to shareholders over the past few years. Resources could be made available by a number of water companies to help us with this exercise in public education. I think the right hon. Member for Clwyd West asked what advice the Government expect landowners to be taking and what they expect them to be doing. What assessment have the Government made of the effectiveness of the panoply of measures that supposedly ensure safety, and what conclusions have been drawn from it? I also ask the Minister to outline what actions have been taken following last year's petition and debate.

[Daniel Zeichner]

I noticed that there appeared to be a slight delay in responding to the Petitions Committee. I remember that during my time on the Committee we had many complaints about Government replies, but not always delays. I wonder why that was. The response seemed to me to be an account of the current layout, but I am unsure that that quite amounts to a response. I would be grateful if the Minister could produce a response, rather than just an account of the current landscape. Given the roll-call of Mark, Sam, Lucas, Ben and so many others, we need to make some progress, and I hope that the Minister can give us some assurance.

5.23 pm

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing today's important debate. I offer my condolences, and those of the whole Government, to Leeanne Bartley, who is with us today. There is nothing more horrific than losing a child. It is something that we all pray that we never see. I pay tribute to her for her tireless campaigning since her son's tragic death in 2018. It is impossible not to be moved by this tragedy. It is heartbreaking to hear that Mark Allen drowned after jumping into a freezing reservoir on a hot day and that there were no throwlines in sight, and to hear similar stories of Sam, Lucas and so many of our young constituents.

It is also heartbreaking to learn that a similar tragedy apparently also took place the same year at another reservoir not a mile away. Dwayne Thompson, I am told, drowned aged just 20 after encountering similar freezing temperatures at Audenshaw reservoir, so there is clearly a problem that needs looking at. Leeanne Bartley, Amanda and Stephen Thompson, and Kirsty Furze have all shown tremendous courage, channelling their grief and using a platform that no parent should ever wish to have to press for change. The fact that Mrs Bartley's petition garnered more than 100,000 signatures and is being debated in the House is testament to her efforts not being in vain. United Utilities, which owns both reservoirs, has installed new throwlines at both sites, as has been discussed, and these throwlines may one day be the difference between life and death for somebody else.

However, I acknowledge the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley and others that these things seem to occur only after the tragedy. I was struck by his point that it is not just about having the equipment, because what screams safe to us may scream unsafe to safety professionals. The company is now running hard-hitting campaigns targeted at teenagers, using TV, print and online media, to warn about the dangers of swimming in reservoirs and highlight the risks, as well as collaborating with the fire service.

I will answer a few of the questions raised in the debate, and then talk about what we are doing to protect people and ensure they are able to enjoy the waterways safely.

Many Members asked what the Government are doing on this issue, and I assure them that we are committed to protecting people in the weeks and months ahead. It was interesting to me that this issue does not sit within one Department. I am responding from a local government perspective but, as others have mentioned, the Department for Education is involved, as is the Cabinet Office, in terms of convening. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a role for some waterways, and even the Department for Work and Pensions is involved, because it runs the Health and Safety Executive. When many Departments are looking at something, it is often not that straightforward to get a co-ordinated response, which is why we tend to answer questions specifically on the particular issues afforded in our remit.

The Cabinet Office is currently reviewing coastal water safety. We will explore with all our partners across central and local government what more can be done to raise awareness of water safety, and to increase the provision of throwlines and other vital lifesaving equipment near open bodies of water.

Members asked what landowners can do. Providing them with information is clearly required, and that means ensuring that businesses, landowners and councils are conducting up-to-date and thorough risk assessments. The Local Government Association's water safety toolkit is an invaluable resource for councils in those cases where the local authority has a role. I am committed to working more closely with the LGA on ensuring that that is being properly publicised and used by local authorities across the country. People need to know about water safety, and we need to do more to publicise that.

Many Members asked about mandatory legislation. That is not where we would start. It may or may not be the answer, but we need to look at the various issues first.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) raised an important point about throwlines being present but not usable, and a lot of work needs to be done to discover the right way to resolve those issues.My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Natalie Elphicke) raised issues about compulsory lifejackets and better education. That does not fall within the remit of my Department, but I know that officials will have taken that point away.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). Despite my Department covering only England, we need to ensure we have whole country coverage and work together with the devolved Administrations to provide a comprehensive view. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House on this issue.

There are 40,000 lakes in this country and no matter where anyone is in the UK, they are no further than 70 miles from the coast. Between 2019 and 2020, searches for "wild swimming" increased by 94%. The pandemic has increased the number of people wild swimming. We do not want to discourage people from wild swimming as full-water immersion boosts the immune system, reduces inflammation and has many other health benefits, but we need to ensure people understand the risks involved, especially as more people carry out the activity.

In the past few years we have enjoyed very hot weather, but our waterways remain cold. They remain northern European, even if the weather is becoming Mediterranean. That is one reason why we must ensure people know the risks of wild swimming are just as real as the benefits.

The tragic deaths of Mark, Dwayne and other young people we have mentioned should have been unique accidents, but they were not. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) stated, in 2020 alone there were 254 accidental drownings and 631 water-related fatalities in the UK. Combined with the surge in interest in wild swimming, this tragic loss of life highlights and reinforces the responsibility of landowners, whether they are local or not, to properly assess the safety requirements of bodies of water on their land. The Government's No. 1 priority is to keep people safe, and we expect landowners to act in the same way.

Sarah Champion: First, I thank the Minister because she was clearly listening intently to my speech and to the whole debate. One thing that contributed to the death of Sam was that the equipment was overgrown—most of the places where we put throwlines are in areas of dense vegetation. I have a two-part question, thinking about how local authorities assess, and ensure the maintenance of, life-saving equipment for dangerous situations. We have identified that open bodies of water are dangerous, so could the Government say that there have to be so many throwlines for however many metres of waterfront, but also ensure that local authorities go in and make sure regular checks are being done? In the case I mentioned, that meant vegetation being cut down; in others, it may be that the equipment deteriorates in bright sunlight. Doing those things would ensure that, if the equipment is needed, people can access it and it is fit for purpose.

Kemi Badenoch: That is a really good point. It is exactly the kind of thing that I would expect the Local Government Association's water safety toolkit to contain. If it does not, it is probably worth us mentioning it to the LGA when we next meet. I will ask officials to take that point away.

I was going to talk about the 30 different navigation authorities that manage regulated inland waterways, but I will mention just two: the Environment Agency and the Canal & River Trust, which some Members might have heard of. The Canal & River Trust is a charity that owns about 2,000 miles of inland waterway, and the Environment Agency is an arm's length body of DEFRA that manages 630 miles of waterway. Both bodies are responsible for ensuring that waters are safe, and they have to undertake public safety assessments to work out where public rescue equipment such as throwlines should be on the waterways, so some work is done on that. Those bodies know waterways back to front and know the best places to install throwlines—the busiest locations, particularly where there have been previous safety incidents, or places of high risk, such as waterside parks. Those organisations run proactive public safety campaigns to raise awareness of the risks.

It is clear that we need to keep redoubling efforts to make as safe as possible the unregulated inland waterways and bodies of water that are not covered by charities and arm's length bodies. The responsibility for providing water safety equipment rests with those organisations but in larger urban areas it rests with local authorities. Local authorities tend to work with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the Royal Life Saving Society UK and the National Water Safety Forum, which have been mentioned. Those groups do a great job of warning people, through campaigns, of the dangers of getting into cold water, which can lead to panic, water inhalation and, in serious cases, cardiac arrest.

We all know that the best rules and guidance are redundant if people do not know how to swim to begin with. My hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley and for Southport (Damien Moore) and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) were right to draw attention to the critical role of education in all this, and I will speak a bit about what people are being educated on. It goes without saying that swimming is a truly vital life skill, and that is why swimming and water safety form compulsory parts of the physical education curriculum at key stages 1 and 2. As part of the curriculum, pupils are taught to swim at least 25 metres competently and confidently using a range of strokes, and to perform safe self-rescue.

As part of our efforts to help children to catch up on learning and activity lost as a consequence of the pandemic, DFE organised for sports facilities at 101 schools to reopen their pools or extend their swimming offer in the last academic year. DFE has also been working closely with Swim England, the Royal Life Saving Society UK and Oak National Academy to support pupils in returning safely to swimming and to promote water safety education. DFE Ministers were very keen that I mention those points so that people would know what they are doing.

Although education has an important role to play, and the bodies I have mentioned continue to undertake proper risk assessments and put safety mitigations in place, there are other practical steps that each of us should keep in mind when we want to enjoy our waterways, and I will state them for the record as a reminder.

As part of her campaign, Mrs Bartley has really pressed home the importance of talking to children about cold water shock and the dangers of open water. She is absolutely right to stress that it takes a whole different set of skills to swim in open water than in a swimming pool, so what we are doing in schools is critical, but it is not all that needs to be done. The National Water Safety Forum advises swimmers to wear wetsuits and allow their bodies to acclimatise to the change in temperature, instead of jumping straight in. Another essential factor that people should consider before they go swimming in open water is the location, because the safest places to swim will always be supervised beaches with lifeguards and outdoor pools. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution also recommends that people check the weather forecast and sea conditions before a swim on the coast so that they can avoid the potential danger of getting caught in a strong comment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) spoke very eloquently and with much expertise—far more than me—about these issues. Safety in the water is about not just safety equipment but understanding and being aware of the danger. United Utilities, which owns the reservoir where the tragic death of Mark Allen occurred, has now made sure that its signs make clear the risk to life. On its website, it has set out guides for parents, highlighting how a cold shock can affect even proficient swimmers. The advice of the RNLI is:

"If in doubt, don't go out."

Sarah Champion: I wonder whether the Minister is able to comment on something or pass it to her colleagues in Education. When I was at school, we had swimming

[Sarah Champion]

lessons. I hated them and they worked, because I have never been near water again, so they have kept me safe. I went to a local authority school, and many local authority pools have now been shut down and many schools are now academies. Is it compulsory or recommended in education that children, particularly primary school children, still have swimming lessons? If not, is it something that the Minister could raise with her colleagues?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, it is part of the key stage curriculum, but I will get DFE Ministers to write more comprehensively to the hon. Lady on this issue. I would not want to say something that is inaccurate, because it is not in my portfolio.

Mr David Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way before she concludes. As I understand it from her remarks, the Government are yet persuaded that legislation is the appropriate answer to the problem that we are debating, and she wishes to carry out further assessments. When does she anticipate that those assessments will be complete? Although I appreciate the point she makes about education and understanding the risks of the water, which are obviously correct, may I remind her what the coroner said? It was the impetuosity of youth—we all think that we are bullet-proof. Frankly, had there been a throwline there that day, it might well be the case that Mark Allen would be alive today. Will the Minister give serious consideration to legislation?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. We will give serious consideration to all the options. We need to make sure that this is absolutely the right pathway to go down. I understand the points that everyone has made. I do not want to be standing here for another debate when another child or young person has lost their life, so I want my right hon. Friend to know we take this issue very seriously. He has been in government and he knows that it is never a matter of making a statement in Westminster Hall. All sorts of people need to be consulted, and we need to work out which Department would start looking at this issue, but I have committed that we will come back with a response. We should be able to do that in a reasonable amount of time.

I reiterate that we all share the same ambition of making our waterways as safe as possible. There is more that can be done to educate people on the risks, but I know that the bodies charged with keeping people safe take that responsibility seriously and will be upping the ante in the months ahead to prevent deaths such as Mark's in the future. I take this opportunity on behalf of the Government to urge every landowner, council, agency and charity involved in our waterways to find new and engaging ways in the months ahead to teach people about how to enjoy the water safely. We are here to support them in whatever way we can.

Finally, I want to thank again Mark's mother, Leeanne Bartley, for bringing the petition forward and inviting us to debate this important issue. We are very grateful.

5.39 pm

Nick Fletcher: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ghani. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Mark's mum, Leeanne, for being here today and for bringing the petition forward. I hope she is pleased that it has been a thorough debate, and I thank all Members who have taken part. This is obviously a really big issue. Every death is a death that should not have happened, and we should do all we can as parliamentarians to try to stop such deaths.

We have spoken about the need to educate people, whether they are young people or landowners, through risk assessments and local authorities. We should also take the time to listen to the advice of professionals. Sometimes we like a quick fix, when really we should take on board what the professionals say. If they say, "The equipment should be put there," then it should be put there, but if they say, "No, it may cause a further problem," we should look at that. On what the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said about maintenance, the risk assessment should state the frequency of inspection.

An awful lot of these accidents happen in the summer months, so one thing that we can all do as parliamentarians is use our social media to get good, positive messages out there prior to the summer and prior to bank holidays, to let parents know, and perhaps to remind teachers who are dealing with children around water, that if they are teaching children to swim, "Yes, this is a fantastic safe place, it's warm and you've got lifeguards, but out there it's a different world." I really think that there is a massive education piece, and we should all do what we can to try to keep all young people safe.

The last statistics I looked at—the figures I have from the Library include both "natural water" and "other water", so we need to be careful which figures we quote—showed that 82% of accidents last year involved men. Everyone needs educating the same, but when I was a young man, sometimes I did not listen. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said, we think we are bullet-proof—I know I did. We really need to get this message over, because no one should have to go through such tragedy. Once again, I thank everybody for coming to the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 575967, relating to throwline stations around open bodies of water.

5.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Requirements for Employees to be Vaccinated

[Ian Paisley *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they should wear a face covering when not speaking in the debate. That is what the House of Commons Commission would like Members to comply with. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House authorities to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the estate, and to give Members and staff space when they are seated and entering and leaving the Chamber. I call Martyn Day to move the motion.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 599841, relating to requirements for employees to be vaccinated against covid-19.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. This might be one of the more interesting debates to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic. It has implications for health and business, and there are serious ethical questions.

The concept of mandatory vaccination is not new. Historically, children were required to be vaccinated against smallpox in the mid-19th century by the Vaccination Act 1853, which made it compulsory. Now, following on from mandatory vaccination for care home staff in England by 11 November, frontline health and social care workers in England will need to be fully vaccinated by 1 April, which means that they will need to have their first jag by 3 February.

Several countries have taken harsh stances on requiring vaccinations, such as Italy, which is requiring all over-50s in the workforce to be vaccinated. Given these recent developments, this is not some theoretical or abstract debate; it has considerable real-world implications for us here and now.

The petition was started by Ryan Karter. It has already gathered more than 175,000 signatures, and it still has several months to run until it closes on 1 May. The Government responded on 25 November, and I will comment on the response in due course. I am grateful to the creator and all those who have signed it, as the scale and speed with which it is being signed is a clear measure of the public interest in the issue.

The petition states:

"Make it illegal for any employer to mandate vaccination for its employees."

At its heart is support for the principle of informed consent. In speaking to Ryan prior to this debate, he made me aware of several reasons he had for starting it, not least of which was the concern that mandatory vaccination for frontline health and social care workers will lead to a loss of workers, increase the pressures of staff shortages, and be unfair and disrespectful to essential workers. That is a theme I will expand on later.

Ryan also has concerns over vaccine safety, the evidence of their efficacy, and the failure of current policy to account for natural immunity to covid. The petition goes on:

"All British people should have the right to bodily autonomy and must never be coerced into receiving a medical intervention they may not want."

That does not seem a particularly radical position to advocate, especially as the principle of consent is an important part of medical ethics and international human rights law. It is highlighted on the NHS website, which states:

"Consent to treatment means a person must give permission before they receive any type of medical treatment, test or examination."

It adds:

"This must be done on the basis of an explanation by a clinician",

and,

"Consent from a patient is needed regardless of the procedure".

That is a position I find comforting and reassuring.

What do the UK Government say? In responding to the petition, the Government make a number of points. On the efficacy of vaccination, the response states:

"The vaccines are the best defence against Covid-19 and uptake of the Covid-19 vaccination has been very high across the UK. Vaccination reduces the likelihood of infection and therefore helps break chains of transmission."

I assure the Minister that in that aspect he has my full support and agreement, and the weekly publishing of the covid-19 vaccine surveillance report evidences that fact. However, it should be noted that the reports state:

"Vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease with the Omicron variant is substantially lower than against the Delta variant, with rapid waning. However, protection against hospitalisation remains high, particularly after 3 doses."

The Government's response to the petition states:

"Government has identified limited high risk settings where there is strong public health rationale for making vaccination a condition of deployment. The Government has recently announced that health and social care services will need to ensure that workers who have direct face to face contact with service users have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19, following consultation."

It should be mentioned that within the NHS there is an existing, long-standing precedent requiring vaccination against hepatitis B for those undertaking exposure-prone procedures due to the potential health risk involved. Having said that, the expansion of this position to cover covid-19 is on a very different scale.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member. Does he recognise that the requirement to have a hepatitis vaccination is only in the public heath green book? It is not mandatory in statute.

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Member for making that very good point. As I say, it is on a very different scale. It also takes no account of the fact that vaccines do not prevent viral transmission or infection.

The Government's response puts the position in England out of step with the other UK nations. It is probably the most contentious part of today's debate, and it is where I find myself very strongly in agreement with the petitioners. By contrast, the Scottish Government have pursued an "educate and encourage" strategy in their vaccine roll-out—a strategy that has resulted in a higher vaccine uptake to date. In Scotland, the covid vaccine is entirely voluntary, and the Scottish Government have no plans to change this position for healthcare staff or anyone else. The Scottish approach advises companies to bring staff along with them and to encourage vaccination rather than require it.

[Martyn Day]

I mentioned earlier the deadline of 3 February for NHS workers in England to have their first vaccination in England in order to become fully vaccinated by 1 April. This is imminent, and I believe there is an impending staffing crisis.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The biggest issue facing the NHS has to be the backlog of operations and appointments. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that sacking 100,000 NHS workers can only make that worse—certainly not better?

Martyn Day: The right hon. Member has read my mind. She makes a well-put point, which I was just about to come on to. I have a slightly different figure, but the principle is the same: it cannot help the situation.

In November, a Department of Health and Social Care impact assessment found that as many as 73,000 NHS staff in England could lose their job as a result. I do not think we will split hairs over a few thousand; we will not know the exact number until we find out how many people have had their first dose by 3 February. These Government policy job losses would come on top of the long-standing staff shortages experienced by the health service. Some estimates put the figure at 99,000 current vacancies in NHS England. If we do the maths using the figures I have just quoted, we could be looking at 172,000 vacancies in England come April. That position is not going to help the NHS provide care at this time of great pressure. It presents a very real threat—one which may put patients at risk and place further pressure on a significantly depleted workforce.

There are growing calls for this policy to be, at the very least, delayed. Pat Cullen, general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, has said:

"We are calling on the Government to recognise this risk and delay a move which by its own calculations looks to backfire… To dismiss valued nursing staff during this crisis would be an act of self-sabotage."

His reference to self-sabotage is very well put. Frances O'Grady, the TUC general secretary, has said:

"We are in the middle of an NHS staffing crisis, borne not only from covid absences, but also long-term problems that need long-term solutions. Now is not the right time to introduce more bureaucracy."

The BMJ has highlighted that recruitment agencies are concerned about the effect of the policy on their ability to place staff, as well as the additional bureaucratic burdens of processing documentation, which is likely to take around 45 minutes per locum. I hope that the UK Government will listen to those concerns and the petitioners, look at the example of the devolved nations and think again, before they do serious damage to workforce levels and capacity in the NHS.

On requirements by other employers for staff to be vaccinated, the Government's response states that

"an employer who proposes to introduce a requirement for staff to be vaccinated will need to consider the existing legal framework, including the law on employment, equalities and data protection. Whether or not it is justifiable to make COVID-19 vaccination a condition of deployment will depend on the particular context and circumstances."

Some UK businesses have declared that all employees must be vaccinated or face a review of their contracts. The legality of that has been disputed by employment lawyers and trade unions, although, of course, it may be legal if it is written into contracts. For most of the UK, power over employment law is reserved to Westminster; only in Northern Ireland is it devolved. Decisions over companies' requirements rest with those businesses.

On legal protections for workers, the Government response states:

"In addition to contractual and common law protections, there are relevant statutory frameworks, such as the Equality Act 2010, which provides protection against unlawful discrimination. The Employment Rights Act 1996 provides various general protections, including against unfair dismissal and unlawful deductions from wages. In addition, collecting, storing and using information about workers' vaccination status will engage the law on data protection. Employers will need to ensure that they have acted in accordance with their legal obligations when making decisions on requiring a COVID-19 vaccination."

That sounds like a potential minefield of complexity if ever there was one.

Last April, the Equality and Human Rights Commission said:

"Employers are right to want to protect their staff and their customers, particularly in contexts where people are at risk, such as care homes. However, requirements must be proportionate, non-discriminatory and make provision for those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons."

From an employment law and non-discrimination perspective, the safest route is to encourage vaccination, not to mandate it.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I note that there are so many points that could be made in this debate but limited time to make them. I have only scratched the surface while setting the scene, and I look forward to hearing what other right hon. and hon. Members have to say. I reiterate my main point that an "educate and encourage" strategy would be a better approach and that there is still time for the Government to change tack on mandatory covid vaccination for England's NHS workers.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I am not going to set a time limit. If Members stick to no more than six minutes, they will have ample time to get everything in and it will allow everyone to have a free-flowing debate.

6.13 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this evening, Mr Paisley. The petition calls for it to be made illegal for any employer to mandate vaccination for its employees. It states:

"This should apply to all public sector (including the NHS, armed forces, care workers), third sector and all private sector."

At the time of this debate, more than 218,000 people have signed the petition; of those, more than 44,000 have done so in the last four days, which shows what a live issue this is and how strongly people feel about it.

As we know, it is the Government's intention to make covid-19 vaccination a requirement for all health and care workers in England from 1 April 2022. I would like to state at the outset that I believe it is incredibly important for people to get vaccinated against covid-19 to protect themselves and those around them. However, if people are hesitant or frightened, they should not be pressured into receiving the vaccine. The Government should be doing far more to tackle misinformation and promote the benefits of taking up the vaccine to NHS

and care staff who are concerned about it. The Government should focus on driving up vaccination rates through persuasion, education and support.

Forcing the vaccine on people is coercive and will do nothing to build the trust that is needed. It is an issue of employment rights and—more than that—of human rights. It is about freedom of choice—a basic fundamental principle.

There is already a staffing crisis in the NHS. The latest figures show that there are more than 90,000 full-time equivalent vacancies in England's NHS. The Government's impact statement on making vaccination a condition of deployment in the health and wider social care sectors estimates that 88,000 NHS and independent health sector workers, and 35,000 workers in domiciliary care and other care services, will not have fulfilled the condition of deployment by the end of the grace period.

The warnings from the sector have been clear. The Royal College of General Practitioners has described compulsory vaccination for health professionals in England as

"not the right way forward,"

and it said over the weekend that there will be "massive consequences" for the NHS if unvaccinated staff are taken out of frontline roles by 1 April. I hope the Government are listening. The NHS Confederation has said that mandatory vaccination will reduce frontline NHS staff numbers even further and lead to more gaps in capacity, at a time of intense pressure and patient demand. I know what a serious issue that is, having spoken to members of the Royal College of Nursing about the pressure that they are under due to the lack of staffing.

The Government are making a major crisis even worse by making it mandatory for NHS staff to be vaccinated. A number of constituents who have written to me are dedicated NHS staff with many years of experience. One wrote of how she had worked throughout the pandemic, at times with inadequate personal protective equipment. Sometimes she worked 60 or 70-hour weeks, and she feels greatly aggrieved about how the Government are now treating her.

Nurses facing a choice between losing their job and having a vaccine that they are worried about taking have written to me about their sleepless nights and the huge stress that the situation is putting on them and their families. Some say that they are supportive of the vaccine but, for medical reasons, are fearful of having it; however, they find that they do not meet the exemption criteria. One constituent expressed her concern that the Government website states:

"The clinical decision on your medical exemption is final. You can't appeal the decision."

I would be grateful if the Minister could let me know whether the Government will revisit that on behalf of my constituent and others in her situation.

Ministers really should listen to the voices of the hundreds of thousands of people, including hundreds in my constituency of Wirral West, who have signed the petition that we are discussing. The Government should not be pursuing policies that could potentially put more than 120,000 health and care staff out of work, exacerbating the already desperate situation in which the NHS and the care sector find themselves. Nurses, care workers and doctors are highly dedicated professionals who are trained in infection control. Their sense of vocation and selflessness during the pandemic has been, and continues to be, inspirational. Will the Government change course, protect these professions and respect the human rights of working people?

6.17 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I put it on the record that I am massively pro-vaccine. It is the right thing to do, and it is the right way for us to move on from this pandemic and to protect ourselves. However, I agree with what the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) said in opening the debate about the importance of bodily autonomy and education, as opposed to forcing people to take the vaccine. I certainly do not think that businesses should be forcing existing staff, and I cannot imagine how seeking to do so would benefit their attractiveness as an employer or their viability as a business.

I want to focus my remarks on public services. As a county council leader, I am directly affected by this issue as someone who has to deliver social care services. Although staff made an incredible effort over Christmas to try to mitigate the massive staffing pressures that exist in the sector—my thanks go out to them all, because it was an incredible effort to do that and to protect those services and vulnerable people as far as possible—the impact has been huge.

As a county council, we have already gone, in just a few months, from having no waiting list for social care provision to having 400 on the waiting list. It is hugely important that we are not further hit by additional staffing issues. Care plans are regularly handed back to my director of adult social care at 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon for the council to pick up, because care services cannot deliver them over the weekend. We are just about managing so far, but further issues, including mandatory vaccination, will continue to hit us.

We have lost some staff already, and we are set to lose more. Overnight, hospitals and NHS trusts put out figures on how many staff they are set to lose. My local hospital is set to lose around 200 staff from 3 February. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) said earlier, that can only be detrimental given the continuing backlogs and the challenges of existing of NHS pressures.

I did not vote for mandatory NHS vaccines. In hindsight, I would not have voted for care sector vaccines, either, but unfortunately I cannot go back in time. The Government still have time to rethink, and that is my plea to the Minister. The wider debate about the importance of bodily autonomy and our rights and freedoms is hugely important, but it is also the case that, in this instance, the health argument does not stack up.

As we move out of the pandemic—touch wood—and beyond the period of most intense risk, I cannot see how it can be okay for these staff to have worked throughout the riskiest time of the pandemic, when transmission was at its highest, only for us to sack them now, as it falls away and the risk recedes. We know—the evidence suggests it—that omicron is less impacted by the vaccine. We have argued, when it comes to vaccine certification, which I also did not vote for, that it is okay

[Ben Bradley]

to have a daily test and that that mitigates the risk of not being vaccinated, but we are not making that case for NHS or care staff. I do not see how we can argue both positions at the same time.

As we have touched on, there are 73,000 or 80,000 staff to go across the NHS and big numbers across the care sector. That can only make things worse when we have backlogs and waiting lists in both sectors. I do not know how getting rid of 80,000 staff across the NHS chimes with our commitment as a Government to 50,000 more nurses or doctors, or whatever it was. It is nonsensical.

I totally understand people's wish to choose a vaccinated carer over an unvaccinated carer, but truth be told, that is not the choice; it is an unvaccinated carer or no carer. If it were my elderly relative being looked after, I would certainly prefer them to have somebody rather than nobody. Listening to Radio 5 this morning, I heard a GP making the same argument about a colleague in his practice who had been there for many years and had managed to work throughout the pandemic quite successfully, as far as access to GPs goes—that is another matter that we could debate for hours—but who now faces no longer being able to see patients over the next few weeks. How is that better than having an unvaccinated GP?

There is still time for the Government to reconsider. I really think we need to delay the 3 February deadline, hopefully with a view to reconsidering this measure altogether in due course. I recognise that there are probably significant legal implications of reconsidering the decision for the care sector, with people already having lost their jobs in that sector, but still, this is not a good plan and it will not help us to deliver these services. I call on the Government to reconsider. The evidence does not make a strong enough case, from a health point of view, to override those freedoms, to override bodily autonomy or to exacerbate the staffing issues that already exist, so I call on the Government to think very hard over the next week or two about whether this is something they really want to do. I certainly do not think it is.

6.22 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing this debate and for making his case with such eloquence. I also draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I begin by acknowledging the immense debt of gratitude that I and all my constituents owe to Dr Mantgani and his Birkenhead vaccination team. Throughout the pandemic, they have consistently outperformed all other teams in the north-west, and even today, from their base in the Birkenhead medical centre, they continue to work tirelessly to encourage the vaccine hesitant to come forward and have their first jab. The vaccine remains the most powerful weapon that we have in the long fight against covid, and I implore any of my constituents who have not yet had their first jab to get it as soon as possible, without fear of judgment or ridicule.

However, as the Government start speaking of a future beyond covid restrictions, we must confront the uncomfortable fact that many people in the country still refuse to get vaccinated. For those of us who have proudly had our boosters, their reasons may sometimes seem unfathomable. Some have fallen prey to the online conspiracy theories and scare stories that the tech giants have failed miserably to stamp out, some have legitimate health concerns or suffer from deep-seated phobias, and others distrust established authority, with varying levels of justification. All of them deserve to be treated with compassion—and so, as we ask ourselves whether employers should be allowed to make vaccination a condition of employment, my answer is a loud and resounding no.

The recent vote to introduce a vaccination mandate in the NHS highlights some of the issues that we face. To defy the party Whip is never an easy decision, but I voted against that motion, and resigned from the Front Bench in the process, because I could not in good conscience condemn so many of our healthcare heroes to the dole queue. Now, 80,000 healthcare heroes face the grim prospect of unemployment in the midst of a once-in-a-generation cost-of-living crisis.

Experts were quick to make their objections known. The Trades Union Congress warns that without a delay to its implementation, the vaccine mandate could compound an already acute staffing shortage and lead to a "staffing nightmare". The Department of Health and Social Care's own equality impact assessment makes it clear that black, Asian and minority ethnic workers, young workers and women are likely to be disproportionately affected. Meanwhile, the Government seem to have run roughshod over the concerns of the trade unions in their haste to drive through the policy.

NHS staff need only look to the care sector to see the consequences of enforcing such a mandate. Following the introduction of a "no jab, no job" policy in care homes last summer, many dedicated workers have been forced out of the profession they loved. Unison is warning of a "catastrophic" staffing crisis in a sector that was already in desperate need of no fewer than 100,000 additional staff.

Of course, service users have every right to feel safe in their hospitals and care homes. Every effort must be made to protect them and to convince those who care for them of the need to get a jab. But we must never forget that it was only two years ago that these very same health and care workers were asked to enter clinical settings that the Government had so utterly failed to make safe. Nor should we ignore the far more fundamental role that shortages of PPE, tests and staff continue to play in jeopardising patient safety. We should never stop holding the Government to account for their monumental failure to engage with the alternative and effective safety measures that have been set out by the trade unions.

It is not just clinical settings that have been affected. In the last few weeks alone, a score of major retailers, including IKEA, Next and Ocado, have announced that unvaccinated workers will be forced to survive on the pittance that is statutory sick pay should they be forced to self-isolate. What a shame. It is not safety that has motivated this decision; it is profit, pure and simple.

I urge the Minister to consider the implications of the Government's actions. I fear that this draconian and punitive strategy will do nothing but harden the minds and strengthen the convictions of the vaccine hesitant. The only way to win minds and get jabs in arms is through compassion, engagement and understanding. That will do far more than vaccine mandates ever will in bringing us closer to winning the long war on covid.

6.27 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who opened the debate, and to all the petitioners.

Like others who have spoken, I am hugely supportive of the vaccine—it works. Office for National Statistics data from November shows that, throughout 2021, the death rate was 28 times higher among the unvaccinated than among those who had been double-jabbed. It is utterly clear that the vaccine is our way out of this, and we should stand behind the evidence and encourage people to take it. But to compel people is utterly illiberal, utterly wrong and a challenge to our freedoms.

The petitioners rightly challenge us to consider how we treat our fellow citizens who are not yet vaccinated. Some are not vaccinated for good clinical reasons, and we know that they are covered, but others are hesitant—not resolutely opposed, but hesitant. Some are resolutely opposed, and a smaller number will be those who spread information that we would perhaps term "fake news", which has a huge impact because it can lead to and feed the hesitancy of a much larger number. But for liberal, compassionate and practical reasons, we must agree with the petitioners and oppose compulsion.

Treating the unvaccinated members of our society as second-class citizens is utterly wrong. It is an attack on freedom and, as has just been mentioned, it is hardly going to win over hearts and minds. My challenge and ask of the Minister is: what are the Government going to do to step up their efforts to educate and inform, to tackle the common objections, and to answer them rigorously and regularly through challenge? Changing hearts and minds will take skill, patience and persuasion. I am certain that compulsion will do the opposite of what the Government think it will achieve.

Forcing people to be vaccinated who have chosen so far not to be will, understandably, turn hesitant people into hostile people. It will solidify resistance to the vaccine. It will give the small minority who wilfully spread misinformation the status of martyrs, making the whole exercise utterly counterproductive.

As has been mentioned, compulsion will have a particular and appalling impact on our health service at every level. We reckon that in my local hospital trust, which has three hospitals in the Morecambe bay area and more further north in the rest of Cumbria, at least 94% of NHS staff are already vaccinated, and that figure is growing by the day. To explode that by introducing compulsion is wrong on so many levels.

This might be a high estimate, but staff in the trust estimate that up to 800 staff across those three hospitals and in other parts of the NHS in our community could lose their jobs. If they are not vaccinated in a week and a half's time, they will be on a trajectory to be out of a job by 1 April. That is an insult to those people, who have served us, kept us well, saved people's lives and put themselves and their families in harm's way over these two appalling years. Ministers clapped them, and now they will sack them. That is utterly wrong and ungrateful, above all else. As we have said, 3 February is just a few days away, so a U-turn now is urgent. This will cause colossal damage in our health service in a matter of days and weeks.

In our communities in south Cumbria and north Lancashire, at times, more than 50% of people diagnosed with cancer are waiting more than two months to get their first treatment. We know that for every four weeks that someone waits for cancer treatment, there is, on average, a 10% decrease in their likelihood of surviving that cancer. Thanks to figures provided by Macmillan, we know that through the pandemic, 740,000 cancer screenings were missed, and 60,000 diagnoses were missed. There are 60,000 people out there with cancer who do not know it, or who were not diagnosed until probably far too late.

That is a snapshot of the kind of pressure that our health service is under just when it comes to cancer, yet we are just weeks away from the Government potentially cutting the workforce by at least 5% in one go. That is unconscionable and wrong. Of course people must get vaccinated—I will plead with people to get vaccinated—but to compel them is an insult, an assault on liberty and counterproductive to the effort to increase vaccination. It will hugely undermine our national health service just at the moment when we need it the most.

6.32 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank all the petitioners, including 354 from my constituency of York Central, for enabling us to have this important and timely debate just days before legislation will mean that hundreds of thousands of NHS workers will lose their jobs. Before I begin, I must declare my interest as a former head of health at Unite and a senior clinician for 20 years, working in acute medicine.

The Government know that they have to withdraw the mandatory vaccination regulations. They have no choice. We are heading for such a serious NHS and social care crisis that no one will ever forget that the Tories broke the NHS and spun it into this unnecessary crisis, delaying operations and sacking vital NHS staff after all they have done to serve us, even at a time when they were very much forgotten. We are already around 100,000 staff down in the NHS. According to Government figures, another 88,000 people could be sacked if they are not vaccinated by 3 February. That is just days away. People are already having to hand in their notice. Many already have, which is putting pressure on our service.

If a Health Minister were present—I have to say that I am perplexed that one is not—they would know that the exodus of staff will not only seriously exacerbate the covid crisis but place incredible stress on the staff who have to remain, and therefore break them too. We already know about the very fragile mental health of the staff, who have been so traumatised by covid. As for social care, which is already unable to meet demand, the most vulnerable will be left without vital care. Delayed discharges will fill our hospitals, blocking the back door as well as the front door.

Just think: 115,000 staff who are in work today will be sacked—gone, no longer serving, in the dole queue. It is negligent and illiterate to not remove the regulations. I trust that Labour has also seen the light and understood the risk, and that it too will call for the immediate withdrawal of the regulations. Labour cannot be complicit in the sacking of hard-working health and care workers, or in bringing our NHS to its knees.

[Rachael Maskell]

I want to make it clear that I want everyone to participate in the vaccine programme. Covid remains a killer disease. To date, 1.3 million have been left with debilitating symptoms of long covid. The public inquiry has never been more needed, with devastating mortality and infection rates—and excess deaths on top—in our country. We must get on top of that. More than 1,000 people are continuing to die each week. The Government's inconsistency in their application of the public health measures is at the root of many of those deaths. It is a complete scandal.

However, it is also a complete scandal to sack our NHS and care staff. The foresight of scientists to embark on the development of the vaccine, with taxpayers' money, and that being rolled out through the NHS, has saved so many lives. As the professional bodies in the NHS—such as the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Nursing—say, the regulations must be withdrawn. As all of the NHS and social care trade unions say, the regulations must be withdrawn. I have talked to NHS and social care staff, and they are resolute that they will not be bullied into a vaccine. They have very real concerns, and they are resolute.

The NHS constitution, and the whole health system, is dependent on informed consent. The vaccine does not remove the risk of transmission or sickness. Government statistics sent to me by the Health Minister, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), state that vaccine efficacy depletion against omicron is reduced to between 40% to 50% in 10 weeks. It helps for now, but there is no long-term plan. By April, efficacy will be below 50%, which means that the risk of transmission remains unless other measures are taken. The Health Minister knows that we cannot keep vaccinating every eight to 10 weeks, but she has not produced a plan for what we will do next. Higher-grade PPE will help, and regular testing will of course make us safer, but what is the plan?

The Government recklessly removing all restrictions, as covid continues to rip through our communities, is placing lives at risk. At the same time, they will put more pressure on the NHS because people will be sacked. That is illiterate, inconsistent and dangerous.

Staff are intelligent; they have analysed the data and come to their own decisions. It is through support that they will make their final decisions. That is why that supportive conversation—with a health professional with the right competencies, rather than a manager—is essential. I trust that the Minister will move on that point too.

There have been 431,482 reports of vaccine side effects on the yellow card system, up to 5 January, so of course health professionals are analysing that data—that is what health professionals do. There is no longitudinal study about the impact on long-term fertility—why not? That is the reason why many women are not getting vaccinated. Many staff have had covid and have antibodies. Why did they get covid? It is because the Government failed to provide PPE in those early days. Remember that? The Government were not sacked, yet today they will sack NHS staff. Well, I say no.

It is time to climb down, withdraw the regulations and respect our exhausted, stressed and traumatised NHS and care staff. It is time to work with them, not against them. It is time to say sorry for putting them under such pressure through these regulations. It is time to withdraw.

6.39 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this incredibly important debate and on his superb contribution.

We are sleepwalking into a crisis. The motives for making vaccination mandatory for NHS staff may have come from an honest and sincere place, but one issue is not properly resolved if that inadvertently creates a bigger problem elsewhere. So polarising is this debate that we often find ourselves qualifying our support for the vaccination programme. I am double-jabbed and boosted, and I encourage my constituents who are staff in the NHS to get vaccinated if they have not done so. However, this can be done through encouragement and consent; it does not have to be mandatory.

I laid out my concerns to the Health Secretary when the statutory instrument was considered in the Chamber. I said then that it would cause a workforce crisis; I said then that such a practice should not be applied to the law, as it was in the case of hepatitis B, as hon. Members have already mentioned. Increasing vaccine uptake should be built on consent and negotiation with those who have not yet been jabbed. I also said in December that forcing people to get vaccinated when they have already given blood, sweat and tears during the most dangerous periods of the pandemic is not only immoral but illogical.

The founding principles of the NHS were built on consent. This legislation flies in the face of that. We clapped for the workers on a Thursday evening at the start of the pandemic. Those brave souls put their lives at risk because most of them did not have the appropriate PPE—the Government failed them on that, yet again. A variation of either delaying, pausing or scrapping this move entirely is the position of the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Nursing, the British Medical Association, Unison, Unite the union and other organisations that represent most NHS staff. Like them, I know that creating a workforce crisis when our NHS can least afford it, in its 74-year history, is reckless. It will be on this House if such a crisis comes to pass.

What is really interesting is that the Health Secretary believes that these people are such a danger to the public that, in December, he did not want them to immediately be moved from the workplace. No, he wanted them to get us through the Christmas crisis in the NHS and then he would thank them by sacking them on 1 April. It is morally reprehensible.

We do not know what the impact of losing up to 8% of its workforce will be on the NHS, because the final number has yet to be revealed. The House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee raised credible and critical concerns that have had no impact whatsoever. There has been no thorough impact assessment from the Department and there is a lack of clarity on whether the benefits of this measure are proportionate to the NHS losing up to 126,000 staff members and then spending over a quarter of a billion pounds on recruitment to fill the resulting vacancies.

I did not come into politics to sack thousands of health workers on the back of an unprecedented public health disaster, but that is what this Government are going to do—this Government who disregarded their own rule book throughout the pandemic; who had "bring your own bottle" parties; who are led by a Prime Minister who claims he did not know whether it was a party or not, and who has come to this House and circumvented answering the most precise questions, while the rest of us obeyed the rules and while care and NHS workers worked tirelessly to save people's lives. Those health workers are now going to be sacked. It is absolutely disgraceful.

Opposition parties should play no part in taking this sledgehammer to our national health service—and that is exactly what this will be. It is morally reprehensible and I implore the Government to change course on this, because it is not too late.

6.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very pleased to be here, Mr Paisley. I think this is my second consecutive Westminster Hall debate under your chairmanship—you will soon be here as much as I am, at this rate.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Impossible.

Jim Shannon: I jest. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on setting the scene so comprehensively. In the light of the contributions from hon. Members, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that there is a clear case to make on behalf of workers, and I will speak about that as well.

On 7 December 2020, 90-year-old Margaret Keenan—a grandmother originally from County Fermanagh—rolled up her sleeve at University Hospital Coventry and took her place in history. Each of us remembers that day exceptionally well. I know that we do, Mr Paisley, because she was from Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, but I believe that she was an inspiration to every one of us who took our jabs and boosters.

Mrs Keenan became the first person in the world to be vaccinated against covid-19. Since then, almost 10 billion doses of the three main vaccines have been administered around the world. We thank our Government, and the Minister, for that incredible initiative. I have absolutely no doubt that many people are alive today because of the vaccine roll-out. It is just unfortunate that others did not get that chance. There is no doubt that all those who quickly followed in Mrs Keenan's path helped to create the turning point in the first pandemic in living memory. In countries that quickly rolled out the vaccine programme, it has had a major impact on cutting hospitalisation and death rates.

I do not think anyone can ignore the fact that more than 200,000 people have signed the petition. Although that shows how many people felt moved to sign it, my interpretation of petitions is that they reflect only a small proportion of overall support, because many people who would have agreed with a petition's intent and wording did not get to sign it.

I heard in the news today that Israel is considering a fourth dose of covid vaccine for the over-60s. The evidential base indicates that a fourth dose seems to make the over-60s resistant to many other diseases as well. Maybe that is something that our Government should be looking at to ensure that our people are safe in the long term.

To date, 9.87 billion doses of the vaccine have been delivered worldwide, and 4.09 billion people—52.5% of the world's population—are fully vaccinated. We should recognise that as a remarkable undertaking and an achievement of human effort and medical science since that very first dose just over a year ago in December 2020. It has been achieved purely through voluntary effort and by successfully persuading people that getting vaccinated was the right thing to do not only for themselves, but for the people around them. I use the word "persuading" because that is what the Government should be doing rather than coercing or strong-arming people into doing things that they feel strongly about.

We must recognise, however, that vaccination has not eradicated covid-19. We have not vaccinated our way out of the pandemic, however much that might have been intended. New variants have emerged, and people are talking about the B.1s and C.1s, so people have become re-infected and have continued to transmit the virus—that was mentioned on the radio today. I am a supporter of the vaccine programme. I am triple-vaccinated because I chose to be vaccinated, as has just over half the world's population, but I strongly believe that being vaccinated against this virus should remain a personal choice.

How life changes. I bet that a year ago every one of us in this room was out clapping for our NHS staff on Thursday nights—I know that my family and I were, because we recognised what those in the NHS were doing. Yet a year later we have a different policy, as if none of that mattered any more. It mattered a year ago, and we were prepared to say so; it should matter now, too. I am not sure whether the Minister is deputising for someone else, or maybe I have got that wrong, but in any case, I am concerned that Government policy seems to be to coerce and strong-arm people into getting a vaccine. I have to stand by those who come to see me about this matter.

Mr Paisley, you and I have discussed the nurses, NHS care staff and other staff who routinely work on wards making things happen. They have chosen their vocation and made a commitment. Many of them have shed tears about the Government following through with a policy that will take their jobs away from them. In her intervention, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) rightly mentioned the figures. Where will we be with cancer and cataract operations, or treatment for heart disease and strokes? We all know the conditions for which there are now long waiting lists, and those lists will just get longer if we pay off 80,000 staff, 115,000 staff, as the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said in his opening speech, or 175,000 staff, as others have said.

It is a foundation principle of medical ethics that consent must be given for any medical procedure. Making vaccination against covid-19 a requirement for employment is opening the door to imposing penalties on those who, for their own reasons, do not comply with the law. As I have said, I have been contacted by many constituents who work in healthcare and have expressed very real concerns that mandatory vaccination for covid-19 will lead to a two-tier workplace—yes, it will—that will see vaccinated employees rewarded by financial incentives over those who choose not to be vaccinated. That is happening across the world.

[Jim Shannon]

Every one of those staff has dedicated themselves to their excellent work. We all know that our healthcare workers are driven by their duty of care and commitment to their chosen field while being in the most underpaid, under-resourced and overworked profession. If we lose that number of staff from the healthcare sector in February because they have made a personal choice, waiting lists will get longer and diagnostic investigations will not take place in the timescale that we hope to see.

I commend the healthcare workers who choose to come forward to be vaccinated. We need to make the distinction between vaccine refusal and vaccine hesitancy. Hesitancy is based on trust, and is something we can work on. Rather than directing health system resources and political muscle towards imposing penalties for non-compliance, we would do better to invest further in education and more efforts to facilitate meaningful conversations between concerned people and healthcare professionals.

We cannot and should not become a society or Government that penalises or sanctions people for making a personal health choice. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made an excellent point about libertarianism. It is a policy of his party that I share—by the way, I do not share all Liberal Democrat policies; just this one. This is about liberty, freedom and choice, and about people following the vocation they love without being penalised for that choice.

When we make legislation for the workplace, as for anywhere else, we must always balance public objectives against individual rights to freedom of choice and freedom from discrimination. We must recognise that trust is a major factor for people from some ethnic and religious groups, some of whom will have a problem with vaccination from a religious point of view. Should they be penalised because they work in the NHS? The Government would do better to build confidence in the vaccine programme and see vaccination rates increase, instead of creating a legal requirement for the workplace.

Let us use this Westminster Hall debate to build trust in the vaccine programme and respect choice, because choice is not only part of the informed consent process, which we should all adhere to, but a valued and inherent sign of respect for the person. To pursue compulsory vaccination flies in the face of all that is key and core for our NHS workers, including doctors, nurses, care staff and others. I believe that we must stand by them.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I thank all Back Benchers for self-regulating their time during the debate, which has landed perfectly for everyone. Thank you for doing that without me having to set a time limit.

6.53 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr Paisley. I thank all the petitioners who signed the petition. I believe this shows our democracy in action, which is why I always like to come along to petition debates.

E-petition 599841 calls upon the UK Government to prohibit employers from asking their employees to be vaccinated before starting employment, a hugely impactful decision with consequences that stretch across many sectors and industries. Enforcing the vaccination of employees, according to the petition and the petitioners, violates the concept of informed consent. I find that hard to disagree with. We do not live in a totalitarian society, and we should not expect individuals to be punished or persecuted for refusing vaccinations.

Mandatory vaccination in the workplace is, in my opinion, fundamentally and morally wrong. Instead of using—for want of a better word—force, the Scottish Government believe that we should educate and encourage individuals to receive vaccines through persuasion rather than coercion. With the idea of mandated vaccinations being mooted, I believe that more employers will act to reduce statutory sick pay for unvaccinated employees who are forced to, for example, self-isolate.

Companies such as Morrisons, IKEA and Next have already moved to implement such policies, and it is only a matter of time before more follow. Perhaps instead of introducing mandatory vaccinations, the Government should consider enacting legislation to prevent employers from altering their sick pay policies in relation to unvaccinated workers. A pandemic should not be an opportunity to lessen employment rates. As a morally just legislature and legislators, we should simply not allow that to happen.

Given the Government's requirements for healthcare workers to be fully vaccinated by April, it is important to understand that healthcare professionals feel a duty of care towards their patients, but mandatory vaccination is not the answer. If there was overwhelming evidence that the vaccine prevented someone from passing the virus to others, it might be justified or compelling. Unfortunately, we know that vaccines, amazing as they are and have been, do not work in that manner, and I do not see how we can justify such moves. The health unions agree, and have criticised the policy, pointing out that it might result in the loss of up to 10% of staff at some hospitals in England when it comes into effect. With an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 NHS workers in England who have not yet been vaccinated, the consequences could be irreversibly damaging.

At the weekend, we witnessed frontline health workers join in the many anti-vax protests in the streets. The conflating of both groups is of real concern. With a workforce that is already depleted across the NHS and other sectors, I am concerned about and resist in the strongest terms any "no jab, no job" policy. The NHS cannot afford for employees to be absent from work. It would be a form of self-sabotage to terminate the contracts of valuable, hard-working healthcare workers now.

Unlike the UK Government, the Scottish Government have not mandated vaccination of care home or NHS staff in Scotland, instead relying on an educate and inform strategy that has resulted in a higher vaccine uptake to date. A constituent who works in University Hospital Monklands spoke to me recently about how his day-to-day experience over the duration of the pandemic—seeing at first hand the effects of covid-l9 on the unvaccinated and on treatment options—was the greatest first-hand insight that he and his colleagues could gain in convincing them to take the vaccine. There was no need for any forced-hand approach; seeing and learning about the effects of the virus was all the education required.

The covid vaccine is entirely voluntary in Scotland, and the Scottish Government have no plans to change that for healthcare workers or anyone else. The Scottish Government have put public health and welfare at the forefront of their coronavirus response, and will do so for the duration of the pandemic. Scotland's first and second vaccine uptake rates are the highest in the UK, and Scotland's booster campaign is second in the world, behind only Chile. All five of the UK's most vaccinated regions are in Scotland, with Argyll and Bute topping the list with a vaccination rate of 99.8%.

There are several reasonable and fully acceptable reasons why people prefer not to get vaccinated. Some persons are unable to receive vaccinations due to underlying or pre-existing medical problems. Trypanophobia, a severe and overpowering fear of needles, accounts for up to 10% of vaccine phobia in the United Kingdom. Many people are hesitant to obtain the vaccine because they believe in simple vaccine myths that conflict with their religious convictions, such as the belief that vaccines perhaps contain aborted foetal cells.

Explaining why vaccines do not violate religious or moral precepts, as well as answering honest and sincere questions about assisting individuals with needle phobias, is a considerably more successful means of increasing vaccination uptake. Educate, educate, educate—we have heard that many times within these walls over the years. Forcing vaccination will not help people to overcome their fears, which are frequently the result of trauma. In fact, doing so may well exacerbate such fears. Support and encouragement is the best way to get people who have fears vaccinated. Mandates would cause more harm than good to any individual, but also to us all in society. Why would we allow for such legislation, when the outcome is significantly negative?

When it comes to employment, the law is ultimately decided here in Westminster, which has the final say on which laws companies must follow. As a result, any questions about the legality of companies requiring vaccination are left to Westminster and, latterly, to the courts. Legal experts have already noted that making vaccination mandatory could result in civil cases under the Equality Act 2010, given its potentially discriminatory nature. For example, employers who belong to a religious group that opposes all medical treatments or vaccines, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, may be able to claim indirect discrimination. The law is not clear on vaccination mandates and must be addressed by the Government. From the standpoint of employment law and non-discrimination, it is safer to encourage immunisation than to mandate it. I urge the UK Government to reconsider their position and adopt the Scottish Government's approach of allowing individuals to have freedom over what they put into their own bodies.

To conclude, I urge the UK Government to reconsider their position and adopt a strategy that we have seen work for the Scottish Government by educating communities, educating religious leaders and allowing individuals to choose what they put into their own bodies. Lastly, I urge everybody, if they can, to get vaccinated.

7.1 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on his introduction to the debate. As he set out, the petition calls on the Government to make it illegal for any employer to mandate vaccination for its employers, including those in the public sector, the third sector and indeed the private sector.

This is a timely debate, coming at the start of the week when the current coronavirus restrictions will be reduced and many people who have been working from home will be planning to return to the office. Employers will also be contemplating how some of the changes, including the removal of the requirement to wear masks, will affect their employees. It will be a period of uncertainty and anxiety for people who are vulnerable. Although we see the number of daily infections falling from its peak earlier in the month, it is still at a higher level than we have seen throughout most of the pandemic. Sadly, the number of daily deaths also remains extremely high. This reminds us that the pandemic is not over yet, and it is likely that there will continue to be pressure on the NHS, as well as some level of disruption, due to high levels of staff absences across both the NHS and the wider economy.

As we know from the Confederation of British Industry, companies have been struggling with staffing issues for several months, even before the rise in covid cases and the increased levels of absence that that has produced as a result of labour shortages across the economy. As has been reported over the weekend, businesses of all sizes are debating the vaccine question, and whether to distinguish between vaccinated and unvaccinated members of their workforce. As has been mentioned, some well-known high street names, such as Morrisons, Next, IKEA and Ocado, have already changed their company's sickness policies, and will be treating vaccinated and unvaccinated workers differently. That may well be because the rules surrounding isolation for vaccinated and unvaccinated people are different, but there is no general law requiring employees to be vaccinated, nor any law requiring employers to mandate vaccination of their staff.

Regardless of whether staff are vaccinated, supporting them to self-isolate is entirely the right approach. It is consistent with the prioritisation of public health, as has been the case throughout the pandemic. I therefore agree with the approach that John Lewis has taken, which is to treat all its staff the same, regardless of vaccination status. However, the issues play into wider concerns about the totally unacceptable level of support for many of those who have had to self-isolate. From the shockingly low levels of statutory sick pay to the fact that millions of people do not even qualify for it, this is an area where much more could have been done from an early stage of the pandemic.

On vaccines, let us be clear that, as many Members have said, having the vaccine is the right thing to do—not just for oneself, but for other people. We thank the NHS staff and the many volunteers who have rolled out the vaccine and the booster jabs. It has been clear in recent weeks that the booster uptake has slowed. Areas such as Birmingham, Manchester and Northampton have had relatively low booster uptake in recent weeks. I know that the Minister is not the Health Minister, but if he can set out anything about how the Government intend to improve uptake levels, that would be appreciated.

The real substance of this debate is about the impact on the NHS workforce. Every Member has talked about their concerns in that regard. In particular, there was

[Justin Madders]

strong representation from hon. Members from my part of the world, who showed their commitment to and concern for the NHS. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said, we entered the pandemic with a staffing crisis in the NHS already. She highlighted the contribution that NHS staff have made over the last two years, and brought home very well the anxiety that many of them feel about the position that they are in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) rightly paid tribute to his local vaccination team, who have done an excellent job. He raised the fact that people have different reasons for declining to have the jab; it may be a lack of trust, a conspiracy theory they have read on the internet, or health concerns. Those are all legitimate concerns in the minds of those individuals, and the best way to deal with them is through engagement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead showed commitment to his principles by resigning from the Front Bench because of this issue, as did my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who has huge experience in the NHS and has a long-standing commitment to the workforce. She laid out in startling detail the impact on services that the removal of so many staff will have, and described how the royal colleges and trade unions are resolute in their position on this. She also raised the important point that there is no long-term plan on vaccinations from the Government. If we are required to have another vaccine or a booster every three to six months, and the mandatory proposal continues, that will leave a lot of NHS staff on a knife edge. We certainly need greater clarity from the Government on what their strategy on vaccinations more generally is going to be.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) spoke about the impact from a local authority perspective. He raised an interesting question about how the Government are going to meet their pledge to have 50,000 more nurses in post. It is important to mention that, because over half of that pledge is generated through greater retention levels. Clearly, as Members have expressed, the ability to retain staff is going to be severely compromised by this proposal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) gave a passionate speech about the issue, saying that we are sleepwalking into a crisis, and rightly describing the debate as polarising. Sadly, many issues today are polarising. She also described how so many health workers were failed by the Government, with their failure to provide PPE in the first place, and was right to point out that the timing of this proposal sets out a confusing and conflicting message about the importance of getting vaccinated.

As Members have said, in recent days more bodies have joined the call for there to be a delay to the compulsory vaccination of NHS staff, with the Royal College of General Practitioners being the latest to add its voice. I accept that the Department of Health and Social Care is not the Minister's Department, but it has said that its view is that the policy continues. The Prime Minister said last week that it is the right thing to do to protect patients and that there is a professional responsibility to get vaccinated. That seems clear enough, but he also said:

"We will reflect on the way ahead."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 340.]

That led to various reports that a U-turn is in the pipeline. I know the Prime Minister is rather preoccupied with his own job at the moment, but it is no understatement to say that thousands of people's jobs are dependent on his reflections. Those comments should not be ignored, because they have been seized upon by many who do not wish to be vaccinated as a reason not to go ahead with a vaccination.

Those who are resistant to a compulsory vaccination have noted that the restrictions that were voted on by this House last month have been dropped, with the exception of the compulsory vaccination. They are questioning why this requirement is still in place if the worst is now over. I accept that the Minister here today is not the correct Minister to address this point to, but there needs to be clarity and a definitive statement one way or the other; that statement needs to be made this week. There are 10 days to go until the first deadline for vaccination. We do not want another inquiry, or a kicking of the can down the road. We need a clear common position, agreed with as many of the stakeholders, the royal colleges and the trade unions as possible, so that they can all have certainty.

If the decision is to press ahead, that needs to be accompanied by a credible plan for engagement with staff that also sets out how the inevitable staffing shortfall that we have heard about tonight will be dealt with. If the decision is to halt or pause, that needs to be accompanied by clear assurances that patients and service users will not be at any greater risk from unvaccinated staff. In either scenario, the scientific advice and professional opinions must be released simultaneously, so that there is no room for doubt that the decision has been taken for the right reasons, based on the most up-to-date advice available, and not for short-term political considerations. I accept that the Minister may not be able to answer all those points, but that is a very clear message that we would send to those who will make the decisions. We need clarity and we need it now.

I have spoken to a number of constituents who are currently unvaccinated and are required to receive a vaccination as part of their job. Regretfully, I have been unable to persuade them so far that it is the right thing for them to do. They are often young and may already have had a mild covid infection. They are well versed in the need for PPE when dealing with vulnerable people, but see little benefit for themselves individually, or collectively, in taking the vaccine. They are also well versed in the principles of informed consent, which we have touched on. Most are not covid deniers and do not dispute the importance of vaccines more generally, but they simply do not believe that there will be a reduction in risk for anyone by vaccination, and see this as an issue to take a stand on to the extent that they are prepared to lose their jobs over it.

Frankly, I find those conversations troubling. Those people have had 12-plus months of information fed to them that has been allowed to go unchallenged. To expect stretched employers to turn that around in a week or two in a meeting with the human resources manager, who may not have the same level of knowledge

that these people have, will be a tall order, particularly when there is evidence, as we have heard, that persuasion is usually a much more effective tool than coercion. More support should be given to employers to deal with the very tricky situation in which they find themselves.

Many in the care home sector, when provided with information of this nature, chose to be vaccinated. That was certainly a reason for some support on this matter, but, as has been alluded to, the mood music is different now. Restrictions are coming off. The worst of the predictions for omicron did not come to pass, so the task to persuade people is that little bit harder. I urge the Government to put on a united front with employers, the unions and the royal colleges, to persuade people that this is the right thing to do.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the Petitions Committee on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on the way that he presented it on the Committee's behalf. Clearly, this is an issue that can divide opinion, with people on both sides holding very strong views. I am grateful to everyone who contributed. As many Members will know, I sat on the Petitions Committee for a number of years. Now, as a Minister, I am sitting on the other side of the fence, accounting for the Government's position, so I understand how invaluable the work of the Committee is.

As we all know, today's debate was prompted by an online petition to prohibit employers from requiring staff to be vaccinated against covid-19. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked why I was present, and whether I was substituting. Although the petition referenced the public sector and the NHS, I am afraid that it is because of the wide-ranging wording of the petition that he has got me. However, I will clearly touch on many of the issues that have been raised, because the debate has been focused on the NHS, and understandably so. The petition has been signed by more than 190,000 people, which goes to show the strength of the issue.

There is concern among those who have signed the e-petition, and all MPs who have spoken, about the steps that the Government have taken to make vaccination a condition of deployment in certain settings. There is also concern more generally that some employers outside those sectors are seeking to mandate the covid-19 vaccines for their workforce. I will come to that, but the Government's starting point, as I think all Members have said today, is that vaccines are our best defence against covid-19.

The overwhelming majority of us have taken the positive step of accepting the offer of vaccination. Some 79% of eligible adults in England have now had a booster, including over 91% of over-50s, who are more vulnerable to the virus. We are the most boosted large country in the world. Recent data from the UK Health Security Agency shows that around three months after those aged 65 and over receive their booster, their protection against hospitalisation remains around 90%. The vaccines work.

However, those vaccines do not just protect us and our loved ones against covid-19. It is because of the vaccines that we have one of the most open economies in the world, so if we are to maintain the collective protection that we have built up, we need everybody to choose responsibly and get vaccinated. That will ensure greater freedom for us all.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I referred to the fact that a year ago, we were clapping NHS workers across the whole of the United Kingdom. Everybody, including the Prime Minister and everyone in this room, did that. Does the Minister not understand—I say this very respectfully—the deep feeling of hurt that those people have? We clapped them, and now we are telling them that we no longer need them unless they do what they are told.

Paul Scully: I will come to the issue of NHS workers in a second, and show what we are doing regarding non-patient-facing NHS workers and the moves we are taking to help people get vaccinated.

Paula Barker: I am interested in what the Minister is saying, but he has just referred to an economic argument. Does he not agree that sacking up to 126,000 NHS staff would have a severely detrimental effect on our economy?

Paul Scully: My economic argument was not specifically about the NHS. It was about the fact that vaccines are the way out of this, to get back to a sense of normality—a new normal, whatever that normal is—and allow people to protect businesses, livelihoods and jobs around the country as best we can. Clearly, the best way to work with the NHS is to make sure we can work with those who are unvaccinated to get them vaccinated and, eventually, boosted.

Rachael Maskell: I want to come back to the response I had from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash, to a parliamentary question I tabled. It said that after 10 weeks the efficacy of the vaccine against omicron is depleted to between 40% and 50%. That clearly means that, first of all, the vaccine does not give us the protection that we would hope it would give; secondly, it does not give us protection against transmissibility. How can the Minister make the statement that the vaccine is the best way out of the virus when, in 10 weeks' time, it clearly will not be?

Paul Scully: Preliminary evidence about the effectiveness of the vaccination against the omicron variant is still emerging, with data suggesting that vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic infection and hospitalisation both rise after a booster and, in the case of the latter, goes up to 88%.

For most people, whether to get vaccinated is a matter of personal choice, but there are some high-risk settings in which we believe it is proportionate to take further steps to protect the most vulnerable. Throughout the pandemic, the overriding concern for the Government, the NHS and the care sector has been to protect the workforce and patients. People working in health and care look after some of the most vulnerable in our society, and therefore carry a unique responsibility. Everybody working in health and social care with vulnerable people would accept a first responsibility to avoid preventable harm to the people they are caring for. That is why, following consultation, regulations were approved

[Paul Scully]

last year in the House that meant that from 11 November 2021, all people entering a care home needed to prove their covid-19 vaccination status, subject to certain exemptions. Following further consultations, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced that anyone working in health or wider social care activities regulated by the Care Quality Commission would need to be vaccinated against covid-19. That includes NHS hospitals, independent hospitals, and GP and dental practices, regardless of whether a provider is public or private.

That policy has two key exemptions: for those who do not have face-to-face contact with patients, and for those who—as we have heard—have not had a vaccination because they are medically exempt. Uptake of the vaccine among staff working in those settings over the past few months has been promising. Since the Government consulted on the policy in September, the proportion of NHS trust healthcare workers vaccinated with a first dose has increased from 92% to 95%—an increase of nearly 100,000 people.

Esther McVey: I have heard it said that the mandation policy is some sort of nudging exercise, a way to get as many NHS workers vaccinated as possible, but it will not be implemented. If that is true—well, even if it is not true—as distasteful a method as that is, it does provide the Government with a get-out, so please will the Minister take back to the Government all the powerful points that he has heard today and get this policy reversed, because it is not too late?

Paul Scully: Clearly, the Department of Health and Social Care will be listening to everything my right hon. Friend says here and in the main Chamber, and indeed all the contributions that we have heard today. But in terms of the policy, the NHS will continue—I will go through this in a second—to encourage and support staff who have not been vaccinated to take up the offer of the first and second doses.

The science is really clear about the benefits of the vaccination. It protects those at most risk from the virus and it has saved thousands of lives so far. Every unvaccinated healthcare worker increases the risk to themselves, their colleagues and the vulnerable people in their care. It is our responsibility to ensure that we give NHS patients and staff the best possible protection.

We recognise the concern about impacts on workforce capacity and the ability to deliver health and care services, particularly over the challenging winter period. I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government, in collaboration with the NHS and the adult social care sector, are taking steps to mitigate that risk and to continue to encourage workers to take up the vaccine. For example, we put in place a 12-week grace period, allowing time for workforce planning and for colleagues who are not vaccinated to make the positive choice to protect the people whom they care for and themselves. The enforcement of vaccination as a condition of deployment in health settings will not commence until 1 April, to assist providers over the winter period and to help to minimise workforce pressures. And we have increased the number and diversity of opportunities to receive the vaccine to make getting it as easy as possible.

Ben Bradley: I feel for the Minister to some extent, because obviously he is not a Health Minister; I am sure that he will forgive me for raising this point none the less. He talks about the work that is going on—loads of work is going on—to try to encourage people to be vaccinated. Many still will not be.

In the course of the debate, I have had the figures sent over to me from my county council. We lost 500 care home staff in November. We are currently set to lose 3,000 staff in the wider home care sector on 1 April. That is a huge proportion, 10%, of our workforce within the county. It will have a huge impact on our ability to deliver services: there could be up to 300 people whom we can no longer care for. We will do as much as we can to mitigate that, but will my hon. Friend take back to the Health Minister just how much of an impact it will have on our ability to deliver care services?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend. He talks about the impact, and we understand the concerns about that. That is why, apart from the measures that I outlined a second ago about making it as easy as possible to have the vaccine and giving the grace period and the ability to flex within that, the NHS is planning further increases in engagement with targeted communities, where the uptake is lowest. That includes extensive work with ethnic minority communities and faith networks to encourage healthcare workers to receive the vaccine.

We have obviously had an analysis of the equalities implications. That was published in the equalities impact assessment, alongside the consultation response. We are obviously engaging with colleagues such as my hon. Friend to hear about real-world results and impacts and respond accordingly. But as the chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, has rightly said,

"people who are looking after other people who are very vulnerable do have a professional responsibility to get vaccinated",

so we remain committed to bringing these measures in on 1 April.

Outside these specific settings—health and care—it is fair to say that there could be some other circumstances in which it may be lawful for an employer to require staff to be vaccinated. There is no general "Yes, it is lawful" or "No, it's not lawful" answer to that question. It will depend on the facts and details of each case. There is a lot for an employer to consider.

For example, what is the current evidence on the consequences of covid-19 both for the individuals and for the organisation? What are the employer's reasons for imposing a requirement to be vaccinated? Given the particular work being undertaken, are those reasonable? And what are the circumstances of the individual employee? Are there Equality Act 2010 considerations in play? An employer would need to weigh the answers to all those questions and more before being confident that it was lawful to require employees to be vaccinated.

I should be clear that there is a difference between how an employer might treat those who are already employed and those who are not. When it comes to those who are not already employed, there is more scope for an employer to establish a requirement to be vaccinated, subject to the employer satisfying themselves that they can pass relevant legal tests, such as on discrimination. The employer might make such a requirement a condition in the contract; it then becomes

more a matter of whether to accept the contract. It would then be a matter of personal choice, just as a prospective employee might consider a requirement to work a number of late or early shifts, or weekends.

For those already in employment, the issue is really about what might happen if they refuse to be vaccinated. After all, an employer cannot physically force someone to have a vaccination. There is the issue of the consequences of refusing to be vaccinated. Could an employee be suspended without pay, refused access to certain shifts, roles or tasks, or disadvantaged in some other way? Could they fairly be dismissed? Those are the key concerns that people will have. I do not believe that it is appropriate to make vaccination a special case. Such cases should be treated in the same way as other instances where an employee feels that they have been treated unfairly at work.

Employment law provides an extensive framework to protect employees from unfair treatment, including unfair dismissal. That framework applies to refusing to be vaccinated just as much as it does to other circumstances. This framework, rather than imposing a blanket set of prescriptive terms and conditions about when a dismissal is fair, allows the facts of each case to be weighed and considered, so that what is fair and what is not can be properly established in the light of any evidence, the employer's situation and the business circumstances. I strongly believe that the legal framework for employers around the country allows for the interrogation of all relevant facts, provides the right checks and balances, and ensures that employers can take action as a result of someone's refusal to be vaccinated, where that is appropriate.

I conclude by acknowledging that there is a fine balance to be struck. On the one hand, we obviously want people to recognise the benefits of the vaccine, and as a matter of choice, we want to ensure that they have all the injections and boosters needed to minimise the impact of the pandemic on them, their friends and neighbours, the health service and the economy. On the other hand, we want to ensure that vulnerable people are properly protected and do not face unnecessary risks. The employment law framework and the steps that we are taking to make vaccination a condition of employment in certain settings strike the right balance.

Once again, I thank those who contributed to the debate. It has been a valuable discussion. I also thank all the workers in the NHS, who have kept us safe throughout this period, and who continue to do so, despite the winter pressures. We will always make sure that we work with those valued workers, who serve our public so well.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Mr Day, would you like a minute or two to wind up? I would like to put the Question, though; I think that is important.

7.27 pm

Martyn Day: Thank you very much, Mr Paisley. It has been a great pleasure to take part in today's debate. On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I thank everyone who came along to take part. We had a well-informed, educated debate. The Minister said something in his summing up that I fully agree with: we need everyone to get vaccinated, but I hope that we can make that a choice for them, and can comply with the principle of informed consent.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) pointed out, if Argyll and Bute can reach the figure of 99.8% of people being vaccinated through a policy of education and engagement, that can be done without mandating. If we mandate, we risk what has been described as a serious act of self-sabotage. There are few policy decisions where we can look over the dyke and can see what is coming, but if we lose anywhere from 70,000 to 100,000 staff from NHS England, it will create a workforce crisis that could have been avoided. I hope that the Minister takes that message back to the Government.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Day, and I thank the Minister for taking five interventions, making the debate go so well, and giving everyone the opportunity to raise valuable points.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 599841, relating to requirements for employees to be vaccinated against covid-19.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 24 January 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Update

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): As part of our commitment to reducing the cases of hospitalisation and serious illness due to covid-19, the Government accepted the JCVI's recommendation on the 29 November that all young people aged 12 to 15 years old should be offered a second dose of covid-19 vaccination a minimum of 12 weeks after their first.

To ensure that 12 to 15 year olds were able to demonstrate their covid status for international travel prior to the Christmas holidays, on 13 December, the Government launched the NHS covid pass letter service for children who are double vaccinated.

From 3 February, the Government will ensure that all children aged 12 and over will also be able to get a digital NHS covid pass for international travel to support our efforts to open up travel. The digital NHS covid pass will provide a record of covid-19 vaccinations received and will show evidence of having recovered from covid-19 up to 180 days following a positive NHS PCR test. The steps that the Government have taken ensure that families are not prohibited from travelling where countries require children over the age of 12 to be able to digitally demonstrate their vaccination status or proof of prior infection.

The covid pass will be available via the NHS.UK website for those aged 12 and over and via the NHS app for those aged 13 and over. To request an NHS covid pass, the child will first need to register for an NHS login, which will require them to verify their identity using their passport.

The Government have also sought to ensure that this solution can be used by children in both Wales and the Isle of Man. In Wales, 12 to 15 year olds will be able to generate a digital pass via NHS.UK. In the Isle of Man, they will be able to use both NHS.UK and the NHS app. Further information will be available shortly from the Department of Health for citizens in Northern Ireland. Paper youth passes are already available for citizens in Scotland and further information on the digital solution will follow in due course.

[HCWS556]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules: Statement of Changes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (Priti Patel) is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

The Migration Advisory Committee are undertaking a review into the impact of the ending of free movement on the social care sector. While the MAC are not publishing their full report until the end of April 2022, they felt they had sufficient evidence with which to make a recommendation in their annual report to add care workers to the Health and Care visa and the shortage occupation list. Their recommendation was made in the context of increased demand for adult social services, increasing vacancies and issues with staff retention. They have re-asserted their position of the underlying cause of recruitment and retention problems being mainly due to pay, terms and conditions, and lack of progression in the sector. This is now coupled with pay in other competing sectors—such as catering, retail and cleaning—catching up to the adult social care sector, due to the rise in the national living wage.

In light of the clear evidence which the MAC have presented and the important role the sector is playing in face of the exceptional situation during the pandemic, the Government announced on 24 December that we were agreeing to their recommendation. As recommended by the MAC, the salary threshold will be in line with the rest of the shortage occupation list—with a reduced minimum salary threshold of £20,480 in place—compared with a general threshold of £25,600 for non-shortage occupations—and applicants will need to meet all of the other requirements, such as having a job offer from an approved Home Office sponsor and meeting English language requirements.

Taken together with the wider package of support measures for the adult social care workforce announced since September—including the £462.5 million to help local authorities and care providers retain and recruit staff over winter, on top of the £500 million for workforce training, qualifications and wellbeing announced as part of the health and social care levy, they will help us ensure sustainability and success for our long-term vision for this sector.

As the MAC do not believe immigration can solve all, or even most, of the problems associated with social care recruitment, but can help to alleviate difficulties in the short term, we are therefore creating an initial 12-month application window whereby workers can apply for visas in this occupation. During this time, successful applicants will have all the same rights, benefits and obligations as other health and care visa holders—including the right to bring dependents and to settle permanently in the UK. This decision will be reviewed by Government later this year to determine the success of this change in relation to wider changes in the sector to attract and retain staff, the position with regard to the impact of the pandemic and whether it remains appropriate for this occupation to remain on the shortage occupation list.

This does not signal a departure from the RQF 3 threshold and the points-based system more broadly, which the MAC agree strike the right balance between access to international talent and resident labour. Employers must continue to invest in training, opportunities and wages for the resident workforce to ensure the UK's hard-working care workers get the type of rewarding packages they deserve and which are common in other sectors.

[HCWS552]

TRANSPORT

High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill and Associated Documents

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Today the Government will introduce the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill—a key part

of building back better after the covid-19 pandemic. Alongside the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill and accompanying Environmental statement, the Government are also publishing:

the Government's response to the second Design Refinement Consultation; and

an update on the Strategic Outline Business Case.

The Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands (IRP) set out the Government's commitment to invest in rail infrastructure across the North and Midlands. Delivering the Western Leg of HS2 is a vital part of this commitment. This includes plans for the Crewe Hub and Crewe Northern Connection, allowing HS2 trains to call at Crewe and Manchester and enhancing connectivity to north-west England, Wales, and Scotland.

This next stage of HS2 from Crewe to Manchester will increase passenger capacity, improve connectivity, and reduce journey times. It is integral to delivering on the Government's commitment to level-up the country. HS2 will join up the North, Midlands, and London by effectively halving the journey times between the centres of the UK's three largest cities. The scheme will contribute towards sustainable growth in towns, cities, and regions across the country, spreading prosperity and opportunity more widely. It will act as a catalyst for job creation, the development of new homes and ultimately, the regeneration of major cities and towns along the HS2 route.

HS2 will help provide a cleaner and greener form of transport, offering significantly lower carbon emissions per passenger kilometre than long distance car journeys or domestic air travel. HS2 has the potential to deliver world-class low-carbon transport to bring our biggest cities closer together, spread opportunity and support the UK's transition to a 'net zero' economy.

The Bill includes the powers necessary to construct and operate the HS2 route between Crewe and Manchester. It is accompanied by an Environmental statement which describes the railway, alternatives considered, the environmental effects that are likely to arise from its construction and operation, and the measures proposed to avoid or reduce the negative effects. It has been informed by the consultation on the working draft Environmental statement held in autumn 2018 as well as through engagement with stakeholders. An equalities impact assessment is also being published.

The Government's response to the Western Leg Design Refinement Consultation is an important part of introducing this Bill. The October 2020 consultation set out four technical refinements to the Western Leg of Phase 2b: a new Crewe Northern Connection to support the vision for a Crewe Hub; changes to the rolling stock depot at Crewe; expansions to both Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport High Speed stations; and a new train depot at Annandale in Dumfries and Galloway. Having considered the feedback from all the respondents, the Government have decided to confirm these four changes.

The update on the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) sets out the clear, strategic case for the HS2 Crewe-Manchester scheme, together with up-to-date cost range for the programme of between £15 billion and £22 billion—2019 prices. This SOBC contains the first cost estimate that has been produced specifically for the scheme between Crewe and Manchester. As the project progresses in design maturity, the cost estimate will be further refined and will inform the full business case, which will be presented to Parliament in due course.

Copies of the Government's response to the second Design Refinement Consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and are also publicly accessible online through the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS551]

Active Travel England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): I am pleased to inform the House that the Department for Transport is to create a new Executive Agency, Active Travel England, with its headquarters in York. This builds on the Government's commitment to level up the country and locate more civil service roles outside of London and the south-east, as well as their commitment to boosting cycling and walking.

This Government are investing a record amount in active travel to help deliver our priorities for a healthy, safe and carbon-neutral transport system. Active Travel England will work to ensure that this, and wider transport investment, is well spent, and will help raise the standard of cycling and walking infrastructure.

Active Travel England will manage the national active travel budget, awarding funding for projects which meet the new national standards set out in 2020. It will inspect finished schemes and ask for funds to be returned for any which have not been completed as promised, or which have not started or finished by the stipulated times.

ATE will also begin to inspect, and publish reports on, highway authorities for their performance on active travel and identify particularly dangerous failings in their highways for cyclists and pedestrians.

In these regards, the commissioner and inspectorate will perform a similar role to Ofsted from the 1990s onwards in raising standards and challenging failure.

As well as approving and inspecting schemes, ATE will help local authorities, training staff and spreading good practice in design, implementation and public engagement. It will be a statutory consultee on major planning applications to ensure that the largest new developments properly cater for pedestrians and cyclists.

ATE's establishment follows the Government's unprecedented commitment of £2 billion for cycling and walking over this Parliament and comes in the wake of our ambitious "Gear Change" strategy to transform active travel.

The agency will become fully operational later in 2022.

I am also pleased to confirm the appointment of Chris Boardman MBE as the first Active Travel Commissioner for England. He will take the helm on an interim basis to spearhead the establishment of Active Travel England.

This underlines this Government's ongoing commitment to boosting cycling and walking and to building back greener from the pandemic.

[HCWS553]

Draft Air Navigation (Amendment) Order 2022

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I have today published the draft Air Navigation (Amendment) Order 2022 and an accompanying explanatory memorandum. This draft instrument amends the Air Navigation Order 2016 (S.I. 2016/765) ("the Air

Navigation Order") to update references to Regulation (EC) No. 216/2008 on common rules in the field of civil aviation, which has been repealed and replaced.

The Air Navigation Order implements the UK's obligations under the convention on international civil aviation and regulates aspects of aviation safety. It provides regulatory and enforcement powers for the Civil Aviation Authority needed in respect of retained aviation safety legislation. In a number of places, the Air Navigation Order cites provisions of the "Basic Regulation", which is defined in schedule 1 to the Air Navigation Order as Regulation (EC) No 216/2008. However, Regulation (EC) No 216/2008 was repealed and replaced by Regulation (EU) 2018/1139, which has been retained in UK domestic law.

Therefore, the Air Navigation Order currently contains outdated references to repealed legislation, which need to be amended. The draft instrument published today will ensure that the Air Navigation Order is able to operate as intended, by accurately citing the correct retained legislation.

This instrument is an Order in Council and will follow the negative (annulment) procedure. Paragraph 14 of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 requires a draft of this instrument to be published at least 28 days before it is laid. This is because the Air Navigation Order was originally made under powers that included the European Communities Act 1972. The draft instrument and accompanying explanatory memorandum can be found on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS555]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Supporting Terminally Ill Claimants

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): Today the Department for Work and Pensions is introducing an amendment to the Universal Credit Regulations 2013 and the Employment and Support Allowance Regulations 2013 to exempt people who are terminally ill from the requirement to accept a claimant commitment to be eligible for benefits.

A claimant commitment sets out what an individual agrees to do in return for benefit, including any work search requirements and a duty to report any changes in their circumstances. Anyone claiming benefits under the special rules for terminal illness would already be exempt from work search requirements. However, there is currently no blanket exemption for terminally ill claimants from the requirement to accept a claimant commitment more generally. This means that the requirement to accept a claimant commitment can only be waived on a case by case basis.

To streamline the process and provide certainty to those approaching the end of their lives, the statutory instrument laid on the 24 January will therefore create a specific exemption from claimant commitments for terminally ill people.

The regulations will apply in Great Britain and will come into force on 15 February 2022. The Northern Ireland Assembly intends to mirror the regulations and is in the process of putting this into place.

We are committed to ensuring the benefit system supports people nearing the end of their lives. Further to the changes we are making today, we will be bringing forward regulations shortly to replace the current six-month rule for determining eligibility for the special rules for terminal illness with a 12-month, end of life approach in universal credit and employment and support allowance with changes to personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance being made when parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS554]

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 24 January 2022

	Col. No.
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	703
Church of England: Real Estate	715
Increasing Devolution Across the UK	712
Increasing Home Ownership	707
Increasing Housing Supply: Local Communities	713
Infrastructure for New Homes: Sittingbourne and Sheppey	714
Levelling Up: Active Travel	716
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES—*continued*	
Levelling-up Fund	708
New Homes for Social Rent	704
Standards in Public Life: Local Authorities	703
Support for Town Centres and High Streets	705
Topical Questions	717
West Midlands Combined Authority: Further Devolution	715

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 24 January 2022

	Col. No.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	17WS
Covid-19 Update	17WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	17WS
Immigration Rules: Statement of Changes	17WS
TRANSPORT	18WS
Active Travel England	20WS
TRANSPORT—*continued*	
Draft Air Navigation (Amendment) Order 2022	20WS
High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill and Associated Documents	18WS
WORK AND PENSIONS	21WS
Supporting Terminally Ill Claimants	21WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Monday 31 January 2022

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

Volume 707
No. 106

Monday
24 January 2022

CONTENTS

Monday 24 January 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 703] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities

Tonga: Volcano Eruption and Tsunami [Col. 723]
Answer to urgent question—(Vicky Ford)

Covid-19: International Travel [Col. 730]
Statement—(Grant Shapps)

High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) [Col. 740]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Fire Safety Remediation Charges (Recovery and Enforcement) [Col. 740]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [9th allotted day, 2nd Part]

Cost of Living Increases [Col. 741]
Motion—(David Linden)—on a Division, agreed to

Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [*Lords*] [Col. 794]
Programme motion (No. 2)—Gareth Johnson)—agreed to
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

NHS Dentistry: Bristol and the South-west [Col. 819]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Throwline Stations [Col. 213WH]
Covid-19: Requirements for Employees to be Vaccinated [Col. 233WH]
E-petition Debates

Written Statements [Col. 17WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers]