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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 26 January 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to questions, I wish to make a short statement. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on sub judice matters to allow full reference to the challenge to the Northern Ireland protocol and to allow limited reference to active legal proceedings and open inquests in relation to historical troubles-related deaths. As before, reference to those cases should be limited to the context and to the events that led to the cases, but Members should not refer to the detail of cases, nor the names of those involved.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Veterans: Protection from Prosecution

1. **Johnny Mercer** (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on bringing forward legislative proposals to protect veterans from prosecution for actions taken during the troubles. [905208]

2. **Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on when legislative proposals will be brought forward against vexatious claims made regarding veterans who served in Northern Ireland. [905209]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): Before we begin, I would like to make some brief remarks regarding the upcoming anniversary of Bloody Sunday. This Sunday marks the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. The killing of 14 people on that day began what was the most brutal and tragic year of the troubles in terms of lives lost. I echo the words of the then Prime Minister David Cameron, who, following the publication of the Saville report in 2010, stood at this Dispatch Box and apologised on behalf of the British Government, describing the events of Bloody Sunday, rightly, as “unjustified and unjustifiable.” It is important that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, but remember these difficult moments in our history, and come together to help build a better shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland. My thoughts this weekend will be with all those affected.

The Government collectively believe that any system for addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's past must focus on delivering for those most impacted by the

troubles, including victims, survivors and veterans. We were very clear when publishing the Command Paper that we would engage intensively and widely with stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland parties, before introducing legislation, and that is what we have done and what we are doing. We are reflecting carefully on what we have heard, and we remain committed to addressing the issue through legislation.

Johnny Mercer: Does the Secretary of State agree that if he reflects carefully on the responses to his Command Paper and if he engages with the professionals who have worked on legacy over many years, there is a landing zone for victims and for veterans that will address the grievance industry that has been built up in Northern Ireland off the back of people's horrendous experiences and will deliver a lasting legacy agreement so that Northern Ireland can move forward?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I agree with what he says. It is important that we find a way forward that works for the people of Northern Ireland and, as I say, delivers for victims, survivors and veterans; has a lasting ability to move things forward; and ensures that those who still do not know the truth and do not have information about what happened to loved ones will have a chance to get to that truth in a reasonable timeframe.

Stuart Anderson: As a veteran who served in Op Banner, I welcome any legislation that comes forward on this issue. While we wait for that legislation, will the Secretary of State work with the Office for Veterans' Affairs to ensure that any Op Banner veterans have the support they need?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are unequivocal in our commitment to deliver for all those most impacted by the troubles, including those who served so bravely to protect life and country for people in Northern Ireland. As part of that process, I assure my hon. Friend that we will work closely—and we are working closely—with the Office for Veterans' Affairs and my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People and Veterans; in fact, we will be meeting this afternoon.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Can I welcome the Secretary of State's words at the outset? Fifty years ago this week, the Parachute Regiment were sent to my city to murder 14 people—people who were unarmed, marching for civil rights—[*Interruption.*] And I would condemn that as well, as well the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) knows. Last weekend, Parachute Regiment flags were flown on the outskirts of Derry. The Parachute Regiment rightly condemned the flying of those flags as a grossly offensive act against the victims of Bloody Sunday, but they have yet to apologise for and condemn the actions of their soldiers on Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972. Does the Secretary of State think they should?

Brandon Lewis: As I have outlined, as the Prime Minister said at the time and as I have said in responding to public inquiries recently, we as the Government must accept responsibility for what has happened in the past. When things are wrong, we need to be clear about that, as we have been. It is right that we have apologised for

that, and I have added my own personal apology to that of the Government. We also need to ensure that we all work together to find a way forward to ensure that people are clear that violence is not an answer to anything in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly made his comments about Bloody Sunday at the beginning of his remarks, but he will recognise that it took nearly 40 years for the Saville inquiry to clear the innocent victims who were murdered that day and those who were injured. Will he confirm that under the proposals that he will bring to the House a judicial inquiry will still be possible? If not, we condemn victims and their families to the accusation of guilt when an inquiry would prove their innocence.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman gives a powerful example. Ballymurphy, which I spoke about at the Dispatch Box not that long ago, is another powerful example of it taking far too long in these situations for families to get answers and to get to the truth. I can be very clear with the House, as I have been before, that I am determined that the legislation we bring forward will allow families to get to the truth and understand what happened quicker than we have seen before. People should not be waiting decades for information.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): British soldiers like myself were sent to Northern Ireland to keep the peace, and to put their lives on the line for the peace of everybody in Northern Ireland. I say to the Secretary of State that, while I welcome the Command Paper, we must not have any delay in the functions of Government getting to a conclusion on this, so that veterans—many of them have passed away already—can live their lives in peace, rather than in fear of being dragged before the courts.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, from the point of view of veterans. He is absolutely right: most people who went out there served their country to protect life, in quite a contrast to the terrorists in Northern Ireland who went out every day to do harm. It is important that we deal with the issue, so that we do not leave it to another generation, and that we do so before we lose a generation who not only have information but deserve to live their final years in peace.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Every life lost in Northern Ireland matters, and we remember the two very courageous Royal Ulster Constabulary officers murdered in Londonderry 50 years ago tomorrow. As a proud former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, I want to ensure that whatever proposals the Government bring forward do not create a moral equivalence between the brave men and women who served in our armed forces and the police service and those who took the law into their own hands, engaged in acts of terrorism and sought to bring Northern Ireland to its knees. Will the Secretary of State be clear that there will be no moral equivalence between our armed forces and police and the terrorists of the IRA and other paramilitary groups?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I can be very clear, and as a Government we are clear, that we will never accept any moral equivalence

between those who upheld the law in Northern Ireland—those who, as I say, went out every day to protect life and to do their service—and those who, from any point of view, went out every morning to destroy life and to destroy Northern Ireland. They must never be allowed to win, and there can be no moral equivalence.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: In bringing forward proposals on dealing with the legacy of our past, can the Secretary of State advise what discussions he has had with the representatives of innocent victims in Northern Ireland, and will he heed the very clear view, right across the community in Northern Ireland, from those innocent victims and their families that what they want out of the process is access to truth and justice? Justice must not be dispensed with.

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As we have said from the beginning, it is important that we engage with a wide range of stakeholders. I have done that myself, as have my Ministers. Indeed, in the last week I have been meeting with the very groups that he refers to—victims groups as well as veterans. It is clear that people have waited far too long for information. We also have to be honest with people about what is achievable and the reality of what we can do, bearing in mind the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 that followed the Good Friday agreement, decommissioning and other things that have happened since then. We must deliver a process and a structure of investigations and information recovery that helps people to get to the truth, while being clear that, as I have said before, there are so many people who did so much to keep Northern Ireland safe.

Stability

3. **Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support stability in Northern Ireland. [905210]

7. **Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP):** What steps his Department is taking to support stability in Northern Ireland. [905214]

Brandon Lewis: A stable Northern Ireland needs sustainable devolved institutions. We have progressed the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill to that end. Prosperity is another foundation stone of stability. We have been working with the Executive to deliver the city and growth deals, which my hon. Friend the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), is taking forward, and to invest in priority areas such as skills through the new deal for Northern Ireland. We will continue to support stability and co-operation in Northern Ireland throughout this important election year.

Julian Smith: We are absolutely right to recall David Cameron's apology in 2010, and I send my best wishes to the families and the people of Derry/Londonderry. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the measures in New Decade, New Approach to protect sustainability and to keep Stormont running will be put on the statute book at the earliest opportunity?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, absolutely. That is our focus, and we have been taking this through the House. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said a short while ago,

and no doubt he will be back here talking about it soon, taking this through is important for Northern Ireland and its people, who want a functioning Northern Ireland Executive.

Gavin Robinson: The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) brought forward New Decade, New Approach with commitments within it that would guarantee and protect the stability of our institutions. The Secretary of State knows that the commitment to protect the UK's internal market has not been delivered. He knows that some of the balanced commitments in that document are now being tinkered with, be they on legacy or on language. What steps will he take in the very short term to sincerely protect the institutions?

Brandon Lewis: On the cultural package, what we agreed to take forward is exactly what was agreed between the parties in New Decade, New Approach itself, and we will continue to look at that. It is important that we deliver on all of New Decade, New Approach. We have the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which is doing that work and has ensured that trade between GB and NI from the NI side is working in an unfettered way. We said we would bring forward further work to develop and deliver that, which we will do, but it is also important—this is why the work on the Northern Ireland protocol is so important—to ensure the same sort of effect in GB to NI as in NI to GB and that it is working for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that the thuggery and criminality of the self-styled paramilitaries add nothing to stability anywhere in Northern Ireland. What further steps can his Department take to disrupt their activity, in particular through unexplained wealth orders?

Brandon Lewis: We have been making progress in this area. We work in partnership with and support the Northern Ireland Department of Justice in the devolved areas, as well as with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other partners, who are doing phenomenal work. We have seen real success this year, and in the crackdown over the past 12 to 18 months on criminal gangs. My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee is right: these groups are criminal gangs and should be treated as such. They are nothing more than thugs who threaten people and try to destroy life in Northern Ireland. I support the PSNI and partners in their work to disrupt their activity and bring the people involved to justice.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's important words regarding Bloody Sunday. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) for skilfully negotiating the New Decade, New Approach in the first place. Part of that was legislation on identity, language and culture. When will that package of legislation be introduced?

Brandon Lewis: We are committed to bringing that forward within the mandate of the period for Stormont, as we said at the time, and that remains our commitment.

Peter Kyle: The statement to the House last June was that we would have it by October last year. There is a theme: we did not get that by October last year; legacy was promised by autumn, then by Christmas, and it is

still nowhere to be seen; and then the Secretary of State introduced double-jobbing to Parliament and, within the same week, withdrew it. A question constantly put to me by people in Northern Ireland is, "What's the point of Brandon Lewis?" Perhaps he can tell us.

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has been over to Northern Ireland once and so is basing his comments on some odd conversation. I find what he just said a bit rich, bearing in mind that he is part of a Labour Front-Bench team who over the past six to nine months have called for us to bring forward dual mandates, then argued against them when we did what we said we would do. They called for us to engage widely on legacy and to take into account what people say; then they complain when we do exactly that. Labour argues that it is a party of the Union, but does not get involved in Northern Ireland and then cannot get its Front Benchers to confirm that it supports the Union for Northern Ireland on live TV. Until Labour decides that it is a party for the Union in Northern Ireland, I will not take any lessons.

Mr Speaker: Come on, we have to get through these questions. I call Theresa Villiers.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Northern Ireland protocol is clearly causing political instability. Will the Secretary of State agree that it needs replacing, not just a few amendments?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The protocol is not working—that is clear. The feedback we get from businesses across Northern Ireland is that it is not sustainable in its current format. It needs to be dealt with. It needs to be fixed. That is what the Foreign Secretary and I are working on together to ensure we can do that and do well for the people of Northern Ireland.

Balance of Trade with Great Britain and the EU

4. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the balance of trade between Northern Ireland and (a) Great Britain and (b) the EU. [905211]

9. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the balance of trade between Northern Ireland and (a) Great Britain and (b) the EU. [905216]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): We are committed to boosting trade in Northern Ireland with both the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. The Northern Ireland protocol has, as I just said, impacted businesses. It is creating barriers to trade and causing disruption. It is the Government's priority to deal with those issues and make the protocol work better for business. That is essential to ensuring Northern Ireland continues to prosper as part of the Union.

Owen Thompson: Exports from Great Britain to the Republic of Ireland have crashed by more than 20% since Brexit, costing the GB economy more than £3 billion. Meanwhile, Northern Irish exports to the Republic,

which are benefiting from still being in the EU market, have soared by 64% in 2021 alone. Does the Secretary of State recognise the overwhelming benefits of being in a market seven times the size of the UK market?

Brandon Lewis: We are seeing 200-plus businesses in Northern Ireland stopping delivering to customers in Northern Ireland, medicines and drugs having issues and challenges getting to Northern Ireland, consumers having reduced choice on the shelves, and garden centres unable to get the plants and seeds they want from the rest of the UK. That is a farcical situation. It is not sustainable. It is not fair or right for the people of Northern Ireland and it is right that we focus on correcting that.

Joanna Cherry: I wonder if I could invite the Secretary of State to actually answer the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson). The most recent quarterly economic survey by the Northern Ireland chamber of commerce shows that 70% of Northern Ireland businesses believe that their unique trading position of being both within the UK and the EU single markets and the customs union presents opportunities for Northern Ireland. Does he agree with the vast majority of businesses in Northern Ireland? If so, why did his Government not fight for remain-voting Scotland to have the same benefits of dual access as Northern Ireland?

Brandon Lewis: I meet businesses across Northern Ireland representing all sectors of Northern Ireland on a regular basis, as does the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They are very clear: the protocol in its current format is not working. It is not sustainable. The EU offer is not good enough. They are very clear about that. That is something we are determined to fix. The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right that if the protocol works in the way it was envisaged, it does create opportunities for Northern Ireland. The problem is that the EU's requirements for implementation are failing Northern Ireland and we need to see that fixed.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Secretary of State says the Northern Ireland protocol is not working and he is right. Why don't we scrap it?

Brandon Lewis: The Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I are absolutely determined to ensure that we resolve the issues for Northern Ireland. We would obviously like to do that in a sustainable and agreed way with the EU. That is the best way to get legal certainty. That is our focus, but we do not rule out anything from the table to deliver for Northern Ireland.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that reducing barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain is not just desirable, but vital to protecting the integrity of the United Kingdom?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to ensure that consumers and businesses in any part of the UK can access products as they would anywhere else in the UK. That is what we are determined to deliver, and that is where our focus and work is.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I take this opportunity to associate my party with the Secretary of State's remarks about the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Our thoughts are very much with those who continue to grieve and who continue to be affected to this day.

When it comes to trade, the Government have not so much been ambushed by cake as by reality. While the Northern Ireland economy is thriving as part of the single market, the economy of the UK is labouring. Should the UK Government not, with the opportunities presented by the possibility of a change in Prime Minister, realign Great Britain with Northern Ireland in the single market and allow businesses across these islands to flourish?

Brandon Lewis: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to do a little more research. It is very good news that the Northern Ireland economy is moving forward, as is the whole UK economy. Of course, in Northern Ireland there are more factors, not least the scale of the public sector compared with anywhere else in the UK. However, it is also true that the UK is moving forward as one of the fastest-growing economies in the G7, if not the fastest, with employment going up from where it was even before covid. That is because the Government are focused on delivering for people across the United Kingdom. I am sure he understands why, as a Unionist, I support that. He should too.

Platinum Jubilee Celebrations

5. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What plans his Department has to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [905212]

8. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What plans his Department has to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [905215]

13. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What plans his Department has to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [905221]

14. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What plans his Department has to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. [905222]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Conor Burns): May I briefly associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State on the dreadful events in the city of the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) in 1972, the year of my birth in Belfast?

Officials in the Northern Ireland Office are working closely with officials in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the lead Government Department on the jubilee. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my noble Friend Lord Caine are working on a series of events in Northern Ireland to mark Her Majesty's jubilee, her immense contribution to life in Northern Ireland and to peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland.

Andrew Lewer: Will the Minister describe how he will encourage all parts of the NHS across Northern Ireland to celebrate the platinum jubilee as one great, unifying feature of the Union towards another?

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Everyone in every part of our United Kingdom is deeply proud of the national health service. People across Northern Ireland, whatever their allegiance, recognise the immense contribution of frontline NHS staff, whom I hope will be recognised in this jubilee year.

Antony Higginbotham: Her Majesty's platinum jubilee is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate our Union far and wide, with people around the Commonwealth and the world joining us in marking the occasion. Will the Secretary of State set out the Government's plans on using the jubilee to showcase the best of Northern Ireland?

Conor Burns: Whatever tradition or belief they come from in Northern Ireland, everyone recognises the immense contribution Her Majesty the Queen has made to this United Kingdom. As I alluded to, Her Majesty's contribution to reconciliation and mutual understanding on the island of Ireland has been beyond compare. This will be a fantastic opportunity to celebrate her amazing life and achievements.

Mike Wood: This summer, Her Majesty will award jubilee medals to members of the armed forces and emergency services and to prison officers. As things stand, frontline paramedics working for ambulance services will rightly be recognised, but those working in hospital A&E departments and private ambulances might not be. Will my right hon. Friend work with ministerial colleagues to ensure that all frontline paramedics get the recognition their work so richly deserves?

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully, as ever. I am sure it will be heard. If it is not, I will make sure that it is by making it on his behalf to relevant Ministers.

Andrew Rosindell: As we begin the 70th year of Her Majesty's reign, the Northern Ireland protocol still seems to threaten the free movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Minister take urgent action to stand up to the bureaucratic posturing of the European Union and ensure that oak tree saplings can be traded freely between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom for the platinum jubilee?

Conor Burns: I am immensely grateful to my hon. Friend. He makes that point incredibly powerfully. Members from across the House will look forward to planting oak saplings in their constituencies to mark this amazing achievement of Her Majesty's platinum jubilee. The Foreign Secretary is on the Front Bench. I know her well; I served with her in International Trade. She is on the case. There is absolutely no reason why oak tree saplings should not be planted in Northern Ireland as they are in every other part of the United Kingdom.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Queen's Green Canopy is a wonderful way to both celebrate the jubilee and promote the environment. Tomorrow, in Dervock, Bushmills, Ballymoney and Ballymena, a number of primary schools will plant trees to mark Her Majesty's jubilee. I encourage the Secretary of State, the Minister and, indeed, the Foreign Secretary, who will be in

Northern Ireland tomorrow, to take the opportunity to visit one of those schools and encourage young people as they promote the environment, honour Her Majesty the Queen and encourage our country to look positively to its future.

Conor Burns: I entirely agree that all Members across the House will look forward to planting trees on the amazing anniversary of Her Majesty's reign. I was in the hon. Gentleman's constituency just before Christmas, at my grandfather's former primary school in Armoy. The event is cross-community and cross-tradition, and we are all looking forward to celebrating it. I will happily accept an invitation, as I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would, to join the hon. Gentleman in his constituency and plant a tree.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As hon. Members on the Benches behind me know, my wife hails from County Armagh. There is a tremendous link between Scotland and Northern Ireland through music; recently, the Kiltarn Fiddlers from my constituency have played in Northern Ireland as the guests of Ulster University. Would it not be splendid if we could celebrate Her Majesty's jubilee by having musical events the length and breadth of our United Kingdom?

Conor Burns: I totally agree, and what a wonderful, harmonious note on which to end Northern Ireland questions.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): People in Newport West and across Northern Ireland know that Her Majesty has always led by example and demonstrated the highest standards in public life, so can the Minister confirm that this Government will be following her example as they mark her platinum jubilee?

Conor Burns: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that Her Majesty is an example to us all. The House should unite in thanking her for her decades of dedicated service to our country and the Commonwealth.

Engagement with Businesses: Northern Ireland Protocol

6. **Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance):** What engagement the Government has had with Northern Ireland businesses on the Northern Ireland protocol since 1 January 2022. [905213]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): My engagement with the Northern Ireland business community is extensive. Just this week I have been in Northern Ireland engaging directly with businesses, as I do every week, to discuss the impacts of the protocol as well as any wider concerns or issues.

Stephen Farry: The Government published their Command Paper last July, the European Union published four papers last October, and I understand that the Government have tabled a revised legal text in the negotiations. Does the Secretary of State recognise that there is a desire among businesses in Northern Ireland for much greater transparency around the UK Government's negotiating objectives?

Brandon Lewis: We have been very transparent and clear with businesses. The Minister for Europe and I, and indeed the Foreign Secretary, have met and engaged with businesses, as we will be doing tomorrow, and outlined exactly what our objectives are: to deliver what businesses in Northern Ireland want, which is to rectify the problems that are hampering businesses in Northern Ireland. We need to correct the protocol, and the EU needs to show some flexibility to make that work.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister for a final question.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): When it comes to negotiations with the European Union, this Government told us that we could have our cake and eat it, but we face a harsh reality: a Prime Minister ambushed by cake while businesses in Northern Ireland are crying out for certainty. When will the Government finally bake off and deliver a veterinary agreement?

Brandon Lewis: I will ignore the cakeism directed from the Opposition Front Bench and just say that it is good to see the hon. Lady finally supporting the UK Government, which Labour has failed to do while we are focused on delivering for Northern Ireland, rectifying the protocol and fixing the problem. Get on board!

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— **Engagements**

1. [905270] **Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 26 January.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland remarked to the House earlier this morning, this Sunday marks a tragic day in our history, one of the darkest days of the troubles: the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. I echo his call to learn from the past, to reconcile and to build a shared, peaceful and prosperous future.

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

Kate Osamor: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks on Bloody Sunday.

Did the Prime Minister agree to the Chancellor of the Exchequer writing off £4.3 billion of fraud? That is £154 from every household in the country that went directly into the pockets of fraudsters.

The Prime Minister: No, of course not. We do not support fraudsters or those who steal from the public purse, but what I can tell the hon. Lady is that everybody

in this country should be very proud of the huge effort that was made by Lord Agnew and others to secure ventilators and personal protective equipment. At the time, Captain Hindsight and others were calling for us to go faster.

2. [905271] **Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con):** My local hospital, the George Eliot, has recently issued all of its staff, helpers and volunteers with a medal in recognition of the work that they have done and continue to do throughout the covid pandemic. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking them all for the incredible work they have done, including the specialist teams such as palliative care, who have had to act as surrogate families for patients whose relatives have been unable to attend because of restrictions? Will he consider following their lead in issuing a national service medal for all our key workers, who have done such an outstanding job in keeping our country going throughout the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. I thank my hon. Friend, and I am pleased that so many of the volunteers and staff at George Eliot Hospital have been recognised in the Queen's new year honours list. I have seen the medal that the hospital is proposing, and I think it is lovely. As I have told the House before, we are establishing a UK commission on covid commemoration to consider how we can commemorate everything that we have all been through, and the commission will also consider how we can recognise the courage of frontline workers.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in his comments in relation to Bloody Sunday.

The ministerial code says that:

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

Does the Prime Minister believe that applies to him?

The Prime Minister: Of course, but let me tell the House that I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman is inviting a question about an investigation on which, as you know, Mr Speaker, I cannot comment, and on which he, as a lawyer, will know that I cannot comment. What I am focused on is delivering the fastest recovery from covid of any European economy, the fastest booster roll-out, and 400,000 more people on the payrolls now than there were before the pandemic began. We are launching a policy tomorrow. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about people being out of work—in my case, I understand why he wants it. We are launching a plan tomorrow to get half a million people off welfare and into work. It is a fantastic idea, and I hope he supports it.

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister said yes, he agrees that the code does apply to him. Therefore, if he misled Parliament, he must resign.

On 1 December, the Prime Minister told this House from the Dispatch Box, in relation to parties during lockdown, that

"all guidance was followed completely in No. 10."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2021; Vol. 704, c. 909.]

He looks quizzical, but he said it. On 8 December, the Prime Minister told this House that

“I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party”.—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

Since he acknowledges that the ministerial code applies to him, will he now resign?

The Prime Minister: No. But since the right hon. and learned Gentleman asks about covid restrictions, let me just remind the House and, indeed, the country that he has been relentlessly opportunistic throughout. He has flip-flopped from one side to the other. He would have kept us in lockdown in the summer. He would have taken us back into lockdown at Christmas. It is precisely because we did not listen to Captain Hindsight that we have the fastest-growing economy in the G7, and we have got all the big calls right.

Keir Starmer: This is the guy who said that, in hindsight, he now appreciates it was a party. We have discovered the real Captain Hindsight, have we not? Let me spell out the—[*Interruption.*] They shout now, but they are going to have to go out and defend some of this nonsense. Let me spell out the significance of yesterday's developments. Sue Gray reported the matter to the police, having found evidence of behaviour that is potentially a criminal offence. Prime Minister, if you do not understand the significance of what happened yesterday, I really do despair. The police, having got that material from Sue Gray, subjected it to a test to decide whether to investigate. That test was whether it was the “most serious and flagrant” type of breach in the rules. The police spelled out what they meant by that: that those involved knew, or ought to have known, that what they were doing was an offence and that there was “little ambiguity” about the

“absence of any reasonable defence”.

Does the Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This question will continue, and I will hear the question. Members might not believe this, but our constituents are very interested in the questions and the answers. If some Members do not wish to hear it, please leave quietly.

Keir Starmer: Having got the material from Sue Gray, the police had to take a decision as to whether what they had before them were the “most serious and flagrant” types of breaches of the rules—[*Interruption.*] If Members want to laugh at that, they can laugh. The police spelled out what they meant. They decided, from the material that they already had, that those involved knew, or ought to have known, that what they were doing was an offence, and that there was “little ambiguity” around the

“absence of any reasonable defence”.

Does the Prime Minister really not understand the damage his behaviour is doing to our country?

The Prime Minister: I hope the right hon. and learned Gentleman understands that, although the issue he raises is important, there is simply no way—as he knows, as a lawyer—that I can comment on the investigation that is currently taking place. He talks about the most serious issue before the public and the world today. It is

almost as though he was in ignorance of the fact that we have a crisis on the borders of Ukraine. I can tell him that in the Cabinet Room of this country, the UK Government are bringing the west together. Led by this Government and this Prime Minister and our Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary, we are bringing the west together to have the toughest possible package of sanctions to deter President Putin from what I think would be a reckless and catastrophic invasion. That is what this Government are doing. We are getting on with the job, and I think he needs to raise his game, frankly.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to both sides that our constituents are watching this. Tensions are running high, but we need to allow the people out there who are bothered about their futures to hear what is said on both sides. Please, let us give our constituents the respect they deserve.

Keir Starmer: This was the Prime Minister who went into hiding for five days because of these allegations. He should not talk to me about being around for the allegations—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to do this, but I am determined to make sure our constituents can hear. The next person that stops me hearing will not continue in this debate.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister's continual defence is, “Wait for the Sue Gray report.” On 8 December, he told this House:

“I will place a copy of the...report in the Library of the House of Commons.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 374.]

His spokesperson has repeatedly stated that that means the full report—not parts of the report, not a summary of the report and not an edited copy—so can the Prime Minister confirm that he will publish the full Sue Gray report as he receives it?

The Prime Minister: What I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that we have to leave the report to the independent investigator, as he knows. When I receive it, of course I will do exactly what I said. In the meantime, the people of this country want to hear what we are doing to tackle the issues that matter to all of us: fixing the cost of living; helping people across the country by lifting the living wage; helping people with their fuel costs, as this Government are doing; and cutting the tax of people on universal credit by £1,000. The party opposite is committed to abolishing universal credit. That is their policy.

Keir Starmer: Cutting the tax? [*Laughter.*]

The police say the evidence meets the test. Frankly, the public have made up their minds. They know the Prime Minister is not fit for the job. That is what really matters here. Throughout this scandal, the Tories have done immense damage to public trust. When the leader of the Scottish Conservatives said that the Prime Minister should resign, the Leader of the House called him “a lightweight”—English Conservatives publicly undermining

the Union by treating Scotland with utter disdain. How much damage are the Prime Minister and his Cabinet prepared to do to save his skin?

The Prime Minister: Well, I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman was offering yet more general criticism of what has been going on in Downing Street, so let me just remind the House of what has been going on in Downing Street. We have been prioritising the covid backlogs, investing massively in 9 million more scans, so that people get the treatment that they need and that they have been waiting for, and making sure that we have 44,000 more people in our—*[Interruption.]* They say it is rubbish, but they did not vote for it; they do not support it. We have 44,000 more people in our NHS now than in 2020, and we are fixing social care, which Governments have neglected for decades, with Labour doing absolutely nothing. They have no plan at all to fix the NHS or to fix social care. Vote Labour, wait longer.

Keir Starmer: The reality is that we now have the shameful spectacle of a Prime Minister of the United Kingdom being subject to a police investigation, unable to lead the country and incapable of doing the right thing. Every day his Cabinet fail to speak out, they become more and more complicit. What is utterly damning, despite the huff and puff, is that this is all happening when petrol prices, the weekly shop and energy bills are going through the roof. Three months ago, Labour suggested cutting VAT from energy bills. Still the Government have failed to act. Instead of getting on with their jobs, they are wheeled out to save his. Whatever he says in his statement later today or tomorrow will not change the facts. Is this not a Prime Minister and a Government who have shown nothing but contempt for the decency, honesty and respect that define this country?

The Prime Minister: No, we love this country and we are doing everything in our power to help this country. Of course he wants me out of the way. He does, and—I will not deny it—for all sorts of reasons many people may want me out of the way, but the reason he wants me out of the way is that he knows that this Government can be trusted to deliver, and we did. We delivered on Brexit. He voted 48 times to take this country back into the European Union. We delivered the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, and we will deliver on our plan to unite and level up across the whole of the UK.

Crime down 10%, job vacancies at a record high, colossal investment—we are delivering, and Labour has no plan. Tech investment in this country is three times that in France, and twice as much as Germany. We have a vision for this country as the most prosperous and successful economy in Europe, because we are going to unite and level up. The problem with the Labour party today is that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is lawyer, not a leader. That is the truth—

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear what the Prime Minister has to say. He is the Prime Minister from the Government side, so I am surprised that that side does not want to listen to him, because I do.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I only wanted to add the point that we have taken the tough decisions, we have got the big calls right and we are, and in particular I am, getting on with the job.

5. [905274] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): In Clwyd South, the Welsh Government have been dragging their feet on urgent repairs to the Newbridge Road, while in contrast the Prime Minister and his Government have delivered record levelling-up fund investment of £13.3 million along the Dee Valley, from the Trevor basin to Llangollen and Chirk, and on to Corwen. Will the Prime Minister comment on how the next phase of the levelling-up fund will bring hope and prosperity to other communities right across our proud Union of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and what pleasure it gives me to address the Member for Clwyd South, where I tried unsuccessfully so many years ago. I am delighted that a Conservative Government are now investing so massively in levelling up in Clwyd South and across the whole of Wales.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister about Bloody Sunday?

I am sure that you and the entire House will want to commemorate tomorrow Holocaust Memorial Day, when we remember the 6 million Jews who lost their lives at the hands of the regime of Hitler, and of course, we remember other genocides, not least more recently in Bosnia—we all pray for continued peace in that country.

At the heart of this matter, we have a Prime Minister who is being investigated by the police for breaking his own laws—it is absolutely unprecedented. This is a man who demeans the office of Prime Minister. This is the latest in a rap sheet that is already a mile long: illegally proroguing Parliament; misleading the House; decorating with dodgy cash; and partying while the public suffered. Every moment he stays, he is dragging out the agony for families who remind him of the sacrifices they made and dragging his party further through the dirt. The public know it, the House knows it, even his own MPs know it—when will the Prime Minister cop on and go?

The Prime Minister: I want to join the right hon. Gentleman and echo his sentiments about Holocaust Memorial Day, where I think he is completely right.

I must say that the right hon. Gentleman made the same point last week, and he was wrong then and he is wrong now. It is precisely because I enjoy co-operating with him so much, and with all his Scottish colleagues, that I have absolutely no intention of doing what he suggests.

Ian Blackford: Every moment that the Prime Minister lingers, every nick in this death by a thousand cuts, is sucking attention from the real issues facing the public; Tory cuts, Brexit and the soaring cost of living have pushed millions of families into poverty. The impending national insurance tax hike hangs like a guillotine, while they eat cake. This is nothing short of a crisis, and the only route out—the only route to restore public trust—is for the Prime Minister to go. How much longer will Tory MPs let this go on for? How much more damage are they willing to do? It is time to get this over with—show the Prime Minister the door!

The Prime Minister: I do not know who has been eating more cake. [*Interruption.*] People do not get this, but behind the scenes the right hon. Gentleman and I co-operate well, and I want to continue to do so.

6. [905275] **Jesse Norman** (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): As the Prime Minister will know from personal experience, the River Wye is one of the most beautiful rivers in Europe, yet its fragile ecosystem is being destroyed by phosphate and other pollution. The river crosses the border between England and Wales, but so far it has proven impossible to get the Environment Agency, Natural England and Natural Resources Wales even to begin planning a single, integrated, long-term strategy to clean up the river. Will the Prime Minister now press those agencies, and the Welsh Government, at last to come to the table? Will he ask Ministers to look at the idea of a new, ringfenced national rivers recovery fund, using fines paid by the water companies, so that we can clean the Wye and other rivers up properly, once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I once had a memorable swim in the Wye—I think at about 5 o'clock in the morning—and it tasted like nectar. I understand the problems that my right hon. Friend raises: it is important that our beautiful rivers should be clean. My right hon. Friend the Environment Minister will visit the Wye area shortly, with or without his swimming trunks, and we are urging the Welsh Government to take the matter as seriously as this Government are.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Prime Minister will know that many families throughout the United Kingdom are struggling with the increased cost of living and rising energy costs, but in Northern Ireland that is compounded by the protocol. The cost of bringing goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland has increased by 27%—when we can get access to those goods. It is costing business £2.5 million every day, which is almost £1 billion a year. That is the cost of the protocol. The Prime Minister talks about uniting this nation and levelling up; he could do that by removing the Irish sea border and fully restoring Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market.

The Prime Minister: I support passionately the right hon. Gentleman's indignation. Yes, I never thought, when we negotiated, that it would mean 200 businesses would stop supplying Northern Ireland, foods being blocked and Christmas cards being surcharged. Frankly, the EU is implementing the protocol in an insane and pettifogging way. We need to sort it out and I completely support what the right hon. Gentleman says.

7. [905276] **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister seen the report published earlier this month by the Environmental Audit Committee that makes recommendations about what else should be done, in addition to the welcome measures in the Environment Act 2021, to clean up all our rivers, including the River Wye? One recommendation was that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should give guidance to Ofwat to require water companies to invest much more in water treatment in the next round of capital spending approvals. Will my right hon.

Friend encourage his Secretary of State to give that guidance to Ofwat in the strategic policy statement that is expected shortly?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my right hon. Friend is completely right, and I welcome the report by his Committee. This Government are going further and faster than any other Government hitherto to protect and improve the health of our rivers and seas.

3. [905272] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Happy unbirthday to him! Just like the Mad Hatter, the Prime Minister did not need the excuse of a birthday to have a party—but it did help, didn't it? Given that he had groups of people singing to him when gatherings indoors were illegal and communal singing was banned, my constituents think that he has lied. My constituents think that he lied to this House and my constituents think he lied to them when he was partying and telling them all—

Mr Speaker: Order. You can say in passing what your constituents say, but you cannot continue to labour that one point.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: So, I would prefer to be led by a lawyer than by a liar. Will the Prime Minister now resign?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will be withdrawing that last comment.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I withdraw it. That is what my constituents think, not my view.

Mr Speaker: You are right to—we'll have less of that.

The Prime Minister: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman, in everything he said just now, plainly does not know what he is talking about. What I can tell him and his constituents is that, irrespective of what they want to focus on—and I understand why they do—this Government are going to get on with the job and deliver for the people of this country.

8. [905277] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): The great people of Cornwall voted in our Prime Minister on a promise to get Brexit done; he was successful. Faced with the global pandemic, our Prime Minister set out to build a world-beating vaccination programme to save lives; he was successful. He has now lifted covid restrictions against huge pressure not to do so, and he has got the economy back on track. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister continue to deliver on the priorities of my constituents and the millions across the country who voted for him in 2019?

The Prime Minister: I really cannot improve on that brilliant question. The people of South East Cornwall are lucky to have my hon. Friend as their representative, and she is right in what she says.

4. [905273] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Tomorrow is the second anniversary of the murder of my constituent Mike O'Leary, whose body was desecrated in an attempt to cover up the crime. Will the Prime Minister meet campaigners and

me to discuss the need for a new offence or amended sentencing guidelines to reflect the extra suffering faced by the families of murdered victims whose bodies were concealed or desecrated?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for drawing this appalling case to the attention of the House. I can certainly assure him that he will be getting the meeting that he needs at the earliest opportunity.

9. [905278] **Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On 24 November, I asked the Prime Minister if he would meet me and my constituents to discuss the future—or lack of future—of a new hospital in Hemel Hempstead. When I secured this question today, I thought that I would have to ask the same question, but last night I was offered the meeting—[*Laughter.*] So on another note, Prime Minister: many children in this country are suffering from a special form of seizure, and medical cannabis prescribed by a consultant helps them to live. Only two children in this country get that free on the NHS. The rest of those children's families have to beg, borrow and scrape to try to pay for that prescription issued by a consultant. Will the Prime Minister please use the political will—I know that the Health Secretary has the political will—to push this matter forward so that these children live?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has the meeting he wanted. We have already changed the law to allow doctors to prescribe cannabis products where clinically appropriate, but we are very keen to support this, provided that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is happy as well.

11. [905280] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Threats and intimidation, bribery and blackmail, racism and Islamophobia: that is the character of the Prime Minister's Government. Every day, the Prime Minister lurches from scandal to scandal. Meanwhile, his Government have written off £4.3 billion to fraudsters. Instead of writing off loans to fraudsters, why will the Prime Minister not write his resignation letter to the Queen?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about racism and Islamophobia. She should look at this Government; look at the modern Conservative party. We are the party of hope and opportunity for people across this country, irrespective of race or religion. We do not care what religion people affirm. All we care about is whether they are interested in ideas of aspiration and opportunity; that is what we are about.

10. [905279] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The recruitment of 20,000 police officers is a fantastic commitment to law and order by this Government. Bedfordshire, in common with many other police forces, has lost out on about 95 officers as a result of the imposition of damping in 2004. So that we do not have to rely on one-off special grants to stay solvent, will the Prime Minister recommit to the reformation of the police funding formula in this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the policing Minister has assured me that we will be introducing a new funding formula before the end of the Parliament, but I am pleased that Bedfordshire police have already recruited 100 additional officers as part of our uplift programme. That is part of the 11,000 more officers that this Government have put on the streets.

14. [905283] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): Twice in recent months, I have asked the Prime Minister about his and his Transport Secretary's commitment to delivering the Prime Minister's pledge to invest in UK-built ZEBs—zero-emission buses. I did not receive a clear answer. Worrying reports in the media of Treasury cuts to bus-buying plans highlight a conflict between the Prime Minister and his Chancellor. Is the current Chancellor denying the current Prime Minister the right to fulfil his pledge to buy 4,000 zero-emission buses?

The Prime Minister: There has never in the history of this country been such a bonanza for buses. I am personally a bus fanatic. We are putting £5 billion into buses and cycling during this Parliament, and there is £355 million of new funding for zero-emission buses—and yes of course we want to see the benefits of that funding spread right across the whole of the United Kingdom.

12. [905281] **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Securing extra health services at Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup is a key priority for local residents, as it is for me, as the first home-grown MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup. Will the Prime Minister support me in delivering this extra investment for our local hospital and join me in thanking all the staff at Queen Mary's for their incredible efforts?

The Prime Minister: What a joy it is to welcome my hon. Friend to his place; the joy seems a bit confined on the Opposition Benches. I thank him for his work and support for everybody at Queen Mary's Hospital, which he and I campaigned for, for many years. Last year Queen Mary's received £800,000 of funding and I hope that it will benefit further from the £1 million funding awarded to Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust to improve technology services across its estate.

15. [905284] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): A nurse who organised a small socially distanced demonstration against this Government's pay cuts was fined £10,000. People out there are sick to the back teeth of it being one rule for the Tories and another for everyone else. The Prime Minister, for once, needs to do the decent thing—for God's sake, resign!

The Prime Minister: I do not think there was a question there. There was an invitation for me to do what of course the Labour party wants me to do, but I am not going to do it. We are going to carry on with our agenda of uniting and levelling up across the country, and they fundamentally know that they have no answer to that. We have a plan and a vision for this country; they have absolutely nothing to say, and that is the difference between our side and their side.

13. [905282] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Alongside the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine there are real fears of China invading Taiwan. On Sunday,

Beijing staged the largest incursion into Taiwan's airspace since October. Does my right hon. Friend agree that military aggression and threat of occupation are never acceptable anywhere in the world, and will he confirm that under this Conservative Government the UK will always be at the forefront of standing up forcefully for freedom and democracy, security and stability?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. The Chinese military flights that have taken place near Taiwan in recent days are not conducive to peace and stability in the region. What we need is a peaceful and constructive dialogue by people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. I know that that is what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and all colleagues are working for.

Economic Crime: Planned Government Bill

12.38 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement on the Government's plans to bring forward an economic crime Bill.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but, as I am sure he will appreciate, I am not going to speculate about the content of any future Queen's Speech, which is the correct moment for the Government to be setting out their legislative agenda for the next parliamentary Session.

However, I can confirm that the Government remain committed to tackling economic crime, which is why my colleagues in the Home Office and the Treasury take the lead on this. In recent years we have taken a number of actions, including creating the new National Economic Crime Centre to co-ordinate the law enforcement response to economic crime and establishing the Office for Professional Body Anti-Money Laundering Supervision to improve oversight of anti-money laundering compliance in the legal and accountancy sectors. We delivered the Criminal Finances Act 2017, which introduced new powers including unexplained wealth orders and account freezing orders. We are determined to go further to crack down on dirty money to protect our security and our prosperity. With the publication of the fraud strategy and second economic crime plan this year, we will further level up the response to crack down on crimes of this type.

My Department is playing its part. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced plans to reform Companies House in September 2020. In 2021 we consulted on more detailed aspects of the reforms, and we will respond to the consultation soon. Investment in new capabilities at Companies House is already under way, with £20 million being invested in this financial year and a further £63 million announced in the spending review. The draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill has undergone pre-legislative scrutiny. We are amending the Bill in line with the Committee's recommendations, and in line with comments that the Prime Minister made to the House just yesterday. We will introduce the Bill and the broader reforms of Companies House when parliamentary time allows.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. As he knows, economic crime costs the people of this country £100 billion per annum, according to the National Crime Agency. The Government have committed themselves repeatedly to legislation to give our agencies the tools that they need to tackle this problem, and it was therefore concerning to hear from my noble Friend Lord Agnew—who recently resigned from his role as Minister responsible for countering fraud—that a decision had been made to drop the economic crime Bill from the legislation that is due in the next parliamentary Session.

This is not a notional white-collar offence; it affects real people in very tangible ways. Terrorists and drug dealers depend on it to launder and legitimise their

money through UK banks, companies and properties. Up to 50% of moneys flowing through Russian laundromats, often used for tax avoidance, for stolen public funds and to launder moneys derived from organised crime, flow through UK shell companies. UK corporate structures were involved in arms deals which breached sanctions in Sudan. HSBC and NatWest have been fined hundreds of millions of pounds for allowing criminals and Mexican drug cartels to launder their money through accounts held at their banks. An estimated £5 billion or so of taxpayers' money, in the form of bounce back loans, has been taken fraudulently because some banks have not applied the most basic of checks. Criminals, despots and terrorists involved in people trafficking, illegal immigration, drug dealing, extortion, kleptocracy, the impoverishment of nations, and fraud—including what is taken directly from the public purse, to the tune of £30 billion per annum—are all facilitated by some of the lax rules that we have in this country.

The Government have promised to tackle this issue—as my hon. Friend the Minister has said—by means of Companies House reform; to fund regulation by applying a small surcharge to the current cost of establishing a company in the UK so that we can close down those shell companies and trusts; and to introduce a register of overseas entities to reveal the real beneficial owners of UK property, and a corporate offence of failing to prevent economic crime so that, for example, banks can be properly held to account for granting those fraudulent bounce back loans.

All this, plus more resources for our agencies and new whistleblower protections, will boost this country's reputation, tackle crime, and help to reduce our tax burden. Every Minister I have spoken to wants us to do this. The Treasury Committee wants us to do it, all our crime agencies want us to do it, and campaigners want us to do it. I urge the Government to introduce the legislation as soon as possible.

Paul Scully: Let me first acknowledge my hon. Friend's work on Companies House reform, on whistleblowing, and on general economic crime. He really has a handle on this issue, and his thoughts are always well received.

My hon. Friend is right to say that economic crimes are a significant cost to the economy. It should also be borne in mind that there are victims at the end of these crimes, and that they experience significant distress. We also recognise the national security implications of allowing dirty money from overseas into our financial system. We acknowledge the need for action on economic crime, and the Government have acted. My colleagues in the Home Office and the Treasury have begun reforms to the suspicious activity reporting regime, created the National Economic Crime Centre to co-ordinate the law enforcement response, and reviewed our money laundering regulations and supervisory regime. That review will produce a report by June 2022. We are legislating for the economic crime levy in the current Finance (No. 2) Bill. We are committed to building a framework that will deter such crimes from happening and to providing a framework that will ensure that those who commit such crimes can be held to account.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for his urgent question today.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was widespread recognition of the urgent need to get money out to support businesses as soon as possible, but what made Lord Agnew's resignation statement this week so alarming was his criticism of how the Government are handling cases of fraud now we know about them, and the news that the Government may no longer be intending to bring forward an economic crime Bill.

Lord Agnew described the performance of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy as "nothing less than woeful", and added that it has

"been assisted by the Treasury, which appears to have no knowledge of, or little interest in, the consequences of fraud to our economy or society."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 January 2022; Vol. 818, c. 20.]

To be honest, it is one of the few times in this Parliament that the two Departments have been consistent with each other. These are very serious allegations for a serving Minister to make, and I am worried by what the Minister has just had to say about the economic crime Bill, so let me ask him however about the Government's intentions in his area and whether its commitments still apply.

First, is it still Government policy to legislate for a register of beneficial ownership of property in the UK, so that we can find out who really owns property in this country? Secondly, will the Government still legislate to prevent abuses of Scottish limited partnerships? Thirdly, will the Government still legislate to prevent the shortcomings in the unexplained wealth order regime highlighted by the recent case in the High Court of *NCA v. Baker* and others? Fourthly, will the Government still reform Companies House? If the register of British companies was more rigorously checked and policed, there would not have been as many fraudulent companies as there were to engage in fraud when the crisis began. Finally, can the Minister confirm that his Department's latest estimate of the value of fraudulent bounce back loans is £4.9 billion, and that it is the Department's intention to write off £4.3 billion of that?

This sorry episode reveals a Government far too casual with wasting taxpayers' money, but there is also an aspect to economic crime that relates to the probity and integrity of our financial and political systems. I hope the Minister can provide me, and the House, with some much needed reassurance today.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Our appetite for tackling economic crime remains undiminished, as it does with Companies House reform, which has been well trailed and well considered. We will continue to work in this area, but I cannot pre-empt what Her Majesty will say in the Queen's Speech.

In terms of the bounce back loans, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), made it clear in the House that HMRC did not produce the figure of £4.3 billion, and the money has not been written off. The figure was an inference by journalists, who subtracted £1.5 billion—the estimate of the amount to be recovered by taxpayer protection—from the £5.8 billion that was estimated as error and fraud in 2020-21. It was publicised before Christmas. Our Department continues to work with our

fraud measures with partners in Government, the British Business Bank and all the partner banks who issued this money in the first place.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I appreciate that the Minister cannot be tempted to comment on what might or might not be in the Queen's Speech, but based on what Lord Agnew said, if it were to be true, I please urge the Minister to consider that it will be about as popular as a cup of cold sick with anyone out there who is concerned about the fight against corruption or the fight for transparency. The well of excuses after three or four years of promising this piece of legislation or its related pieces has now run dry. This legislation is essential for the credibility of this country and this Government, particularly when we have a crisis in Ukraine and all sorts of Russian oligarchs waiting to move money into this country if they can, and when there are fundamental questions, as we heard in Prime Minister's questions, about Westminster today. It is essential that we do not back away from this central piece of legislation, which is a touchstone issue for many stakeholders out there.

Paul Scully: I appreciate my hon. Friend's work in tackling corruption and encouraging further transparency, which we have had several conversations about. We remain undiminished in our approach to tackling economic crime, for the reasons that he has given, and to Companies House reform, too. We will work with the Home Office and the Treasury to make sure we can get these measures in place as soon as possible.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): "Lamentable", "woeful", "arrogance, indolence and ignorance" were just some of the words that Lord Agnew used to describe the Government's action on economic crime. In resigning at the Dispatch Box in the Lords, he has shown a lot more courage than anybody on the Front Bench in this place.

Some £4.3 billion was lost in the covid schemes and as-yet-unknown sums were lost in Government-backed loan schemes to crooks and fraudsters, while some in this country got no support. For example, it was deemed too difficult to redress support for parents in the self-employment income support scheme. Lord Agnew also said that it was a foolish decision to kill off the economic crime Bill, and given the evidence that I have heard at the Treasury Committee during our inquiry on it, I wholeheartedly agree.

Many cases of economic crime could be halted if the Government tightened up Companies House, because reform is well overdue. They have huge volumes of evidence on that. There is no verification, it costs only a tiny sum to set up a company and the information on the Companies House register is—politely—utter guff. If the Minister looks at Graham Barrow's account on Twitter, he will see some of the absolute nonsense that is entered on to the Companies House register and somehow accepted. All that has led to an open door through which crooks and fraudsters have been allowed to waltz off with public money and Government-backed loans. UK corporate structures, such as Scottish limited partnerships, allow that to happen—and have done for years.

When, on what date, will we see an economic crime Bill? When, on what date, will we see the registration of overseas entities Bill, for which I sat on the Joint Committee

[*Alison Thewliss*]

years ago and on which the Government have failed to act? Why are the Government so unconcerned that the UK is deemed Londongrad and notorious for the laundering of dirty money? Who benefits from that—is it Tory donors and their pals?

Paul Scully: I think the last comment is beneath the debate. The hon. Lady talks about Companies House reform. Clearly, a lot of work is already happening in Companies House and it supports law enforcement on hundreds of cases each month. We want to get the balance right to ensure that new entrepreneurs can set up businesses through Companies House easily and affordably. There is much more reform to be done, however, which is why our appetite remains undiminished. She talked about Lord Agnew, who I thank for his work on this area. I worked closely with him to put measures in place to tackle fraud in bounce back loans and other areas of Government. He was a great servant of the Government and I regret the fact that he has gone.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on raising the matter? I point out to the Minister that, over the last 10 years, the Government have made a lot of progress on this area but many hon. Members have put a lot of time and effort into working across the House to try to advance what is an important British agenda, not least at the G8 under David Cameron's leadership. Companies House remains a good library, but it does not have investigatory powers, and it is there that we want progress to be made. Will he agree to meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton and others who are concerned about progress in that area, together with those who run Companies House, to see whether we can make some progress?

Paul Scully: My right hon. Friend raises some interesting and important points. I will ask the relevant Minister, likely Lord Callanan from the other place, to meet him, but I am happy to meet him either way.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sorry—the Minister is a nice chap—but we have been calling for this Bill for ages and ages. Time after time, Ministers come back to the House to say, “Yes, there’s going to be a public register of beneficial ownership,” but it still has not happened. They say they will do it in the overseas territories, but it still has not happened. They say that they will stop giving out golden visas to Russians with dodgy money coming into the UK, but it still has not happened. We in this country are a soft touch. If we want to send a strong message to Russia, particularly at the moment, we have to move swiftly and not say, “Oh, I can’t possibly comment on what legislation we might be thinking of in the future.”

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that—it was a shame he did not stop at his first sentence, but it was very kind of him. I appreciate all of those measures that he wants to put in place and, as I say, we remain undiminished on that. In the meantime, we have sanctions to tackle corruption from other countries. We already have very robust procedures in place, but we know we need to go further. That is why these measures will come, but I cannot pre-empt Her Majesty.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks of praise for my noble Friend Lord Agnew, an outstanding Minister who asked searching questions of government at all times. It was a pleasure to work with him. May I press my hon. Friend about the work the Law Commission is undertaking on corporate criminal liability. It is due to present options early this year and I urge him, first, to use all expedition to get on with the job of legislating on economic crime and, secondly, to incorporate what I hope will be sensible recommendations from the Law Commission so that we can get corporate criminal liability in this country right? At the moment, the law is just not working and action is needed.

Paul Scully: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his work in this area as well. Because there has been no consensus, it is important that the Law Commission looks at this matter, because we are dealing with a very technical crime and if we are going to get the answers to it right, we have to get this right first time. We will, absolutely, consider that report in its fullest when it comes to us.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing this urgent question and thank him for backing my Bill, which would have brought in that register of beneficial interests. When I mentioned this to the Prime Minister just this week, he pointed to the Leader of the House and said it would be introduced as soon as possible, but now look what has happened: the vehicle we would have used to do that is gone. So I ask the Minister: how can he say that he is taking this seriously, given that this Government say one thing and do the complete opposite, do they not?

Paul Scully: I am afraid the hon. Lady is pre-empting the Queen's Speech—Her Majesty will present this. There has been nothing pulled at all; Her Majesty will set out the Government's programme in due course.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton on securing this important urgent question. The National Crime Agency, using figures supplied by the national fraud indicator, estimates that up to £190 billion is lost to fraud, with £140 billion of that coming in the private sector and £40 billion coming in the public sector. That is a huge amount, which could be best invested in our economies. Does the Minister agree that we need to reward and protect whistleblowers who are at the forefront of this? We are talking about the informed insiders who bring these issues to light; more than 40% of this crime is uncovered by whistleblowers. Does he agree that the current legislation, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, is not fit for purpose and needs to be looked at again, and that we need an office of the whistleblower, which would bring together all of these areas?

Paul Scully: I congratulate my hon. Friend and thank her for the work she does in this area. We have had a number of conversations and we will always look to see what more we can do to strengthen the whistleblowing framework in legislation. We do not necessarily agree on the end result, but, again, it is a complicated area

that we do want to get right, for the reasons she set out. I will continue to work with her and with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): While the Minister wrings his hands, London has become the jurisdiction of choice for dirty money. The levels of fraud are soaring upwards in the wrong direction. We have waited years and years for the open register of beneficial ownership of companies and it has not appeared, and we have waited years and years for corporate liability reform. How much longer do we have to wait? How much worse are this Government going to let fraud and money laundering get before they get off their collective backside and do something?

Paul Scully: What I am not going to do is pre-empt Her Majesty.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): May I associate myself with the remarks praising Lord Agnew, who has done great service in government? Will the Minister ensure that, at the same time as he develops this policy, we ensure that the UK is also home to new innovations such as fintech and the extraordinary growth of cryptocurrencies? Those innovations have the potential to disrupt finance just as social media has disrupted communications and online shopping has changed retail. Post Brexit, the UK has the chance to be the home of fintech, which not only can be an economic driver, but can help to cut fraud and financial crime because of the transparency it brings. Will he make sure that we get this right and that new legislation is fit for the future, so that Britain can be the home of this revolution?

Paul Scully: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to get the legislation right, not only because we want to tackle economic crime, but because we do not want to stifle innovation and the investment in this country that makes us the highest receiver of foreign direct investment in Europe and one of the highest across the world. This is a great place to do business, to set up, grow and scale up.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The whole House would love to believe the Minister's words, as would Northern Ireland, where paramilitary money has been turned into a vast empire, especially along the border, and economic crime is rife. The evidence is not great, though, given the casual writing off of £4.3 billion-worth of bounce back loans; the fact that Companies House is in such chaos that people can avoid paying debts by going bankrupt one day and starting a company the next; the fact that in the middle of the Ukraine crisis we have threatened sanctions on Russia yet we are not taking action on the dirty money from Russia, which flows into London and props up the Putin regime; and the fact that the former fraud Minister said this week that the Treasury has little interest in or little knowledge of fraud. The evidence is not great for the assurances that the Government are serious about tackling fraud.

Paul Scully: As I said, the £4.3 billion figure cited is an inference by journalists; that money has not been written off by this Government. We are working with partners to ensure that we tackle the fraud that is clearly in the system, having given the money out at a crucial

stage in the pandemic to enable businesses to survive. On the phoenix companies that the right hon. Gentleman talked about, that is exactly why we introduced the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Act 2021, which tackles such directors, but there is clearly more that we need to do, and we will do it when parliamentary time allows.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and endorse everything he asked for. I know the Minister cannot anticipate the Queen's Speech, but may I ask him to read the debate the House had on lawfare last Thursday, to which the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, our hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), responded? Right now in our courts, in cases that are being investigated, litigants are outgunning the Serious Fraud Office. Oligarchs are basically waging lawfare in judicial review against our regulators and preventing these cases from being prosecuted properly. Will the Minister speak to our hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Justice and make sure that any future legislation takes into account the threat of lawfare?

Paul Scully: I agree that the lawfare debate was incredibly interesting and enlightening. We will make sure that we work together across Government to take all those matters into consideration when drawing up future legislation.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The former Minister Lord Agnew said that fraud in government is rampant—it is estimated to be approximately £30 billion a year—with a complete lack of focus on the cost to society or indeed the taxpayer, yet what we have heard so far from the Minister today is complacency. We need action now, because criminal fraud and money laundering are financing organised crime, drug trafficking, prostitution and much of society's ills. The Minister needs to step up and get on with the job, legislate and go after the fraudsters who have stolen taxpayers' money.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is right about tackling fraudsters. That is why our determination to introduce legislation in this area is undiminished. At the other end of the scale but still adding up to a lot of money, universal credit, as well as being more responsive to claimants, was itself an anti-fraud measure. One of Lord Agnew's great qualities was his attention to detail—to the small acts that had big implications but were often missed. We will bring that learning to bear across government.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The Department uses the National Investigation Service for frauds worth more than £100,000. The National Audit Office has reported that the service received 2,100 intelligence reports last year, but only 50 were investigated. The NAO has identified that as a lack of capacity, so rather than waiting for the Queen's Speech, why does the Minister not speak to the Chancellor and ask for some extra funding for the service to pursue those frauds?

Paul Scully: We have invested in a number of schemes, including an investment in the National Investigation Service to boost its capacity to investigate cases of serious fraud, especially within the bounce back loan

[Paul Scully]

scheme. It received £5 million in the 2020 spending review and made recoveries worth £3.1 million in 2021-22, exceeding its targets. It has investigations into bounce back loan frauds and other areas, and we will continue to work with it.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I know that the Minister will agree that my constituents have the right to expect that victims of economic crime will get the same redress as for other crimes, including where the victims are taxpayers. He will also welcome the many comments that I have had from businesses in my constituency about the speed of the support that was made available to prevent failures. In respect of Government-backed loans during the pandemic, does he think it would be helpful for the British Business Bank to be required to release performance data on the lenders to provide transparency on banks' activities at the time?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work throughout the pandemic. In his position as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, he has been asking probing questions. With the British Business Bank, we have tried to get the balance right between the transparency required to tackle the issue and the speed at which we can act, so that we are not consuming too much of its resources. It is early days in terms of fraud and recovery, but yes, data will become available.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): How can the Minister reassure us when one of the reasons for the Government's reluctance to act was highlighted in the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on Russian interference in our democracy as the large amounts of Russian and other dirty money that flow into Conservative party coffers?

Paul Scully: I come back to this point: there is no reluctance to act. What I cannot do is pre-empt Her Majesty. Our appetite, as I say, remains undiminished. It is just a shame that the right hon. Gentleman hides behind Intelligence and Security Committee papers to throw political accusations when what we are trying to do is make sure that the taxpayers of this country get value for money and are not losing money, that the number of victims of economic crime is reduced and that they get their recoveries. Let us not make it a party political issue.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with the recommendation of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill that online platforms such as Facebook should not be allowed to profit from the advertising of known frauds and scams? As part of the online safety regime, they should be required to proactively block and withdraw advertising that promotes known frauds and scams.

Paul Scully: We are really aware of the issues and we appreciate the comments in that report. As that Bill progresses, we will consider them with all due process.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The introduction of universal credit has led to a big increase in fraud. The current growth of economic crime and corruption poses an existential threat to financial services—one of our

biggest and most successful business sectors—and therefore to the UK economy as a whole. Does the Minister accept that effectively tackling this scourge urgently requires an economic crime Bill?

Paul Scully: I dispute the right hon. Gentleman's comments about universal credit, but yes, tackling economic crime requires legislation. That is why we remain undiminished in our appetite to push this forward.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) has very eloquently described the reason for and priority of bringing forward new legislation, but that opens the door to questions about the effectiveness of, and the force with which, existing legislation will be brought to bear on the key issue that Lord Agnew raised: fraud within the BBLs and CBILs during covid. We know from Lord Agnew that there were issues with fraudsters because of processes in the British Business Bank that were not up to scratch. We know from Lord Agnew that there were some banks—maybe two out of seven—where fraud was a priority.

The Minister has a choice to make. Will he come down on the fraudsters with a slap on the wrist or with a mighty hammer? I know which I would choose. What is he going to do?

Paul Scully: I suspect that we have the same choice, frankly, with that mighty hammer. But what we have to do first is make sure that we have those processes in place. The British Business Bank obviously had to scale up very quickly in the pandemic, but we are working with it and the banks, which are our first port of call in this, as it is a delegated scheme. We want to make sure that the worst-performing banks scale up to the best-performing banks in tackling this, and we will continue to work on that endeavour.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The lawfare debate, which the Minister described as “interesting”, identified how money launderers use UK courts to cover up unlawful activity, so the term that he has used is a slight underestimate. The Minister responding to that debate said:

“the Government are poised to act.”—[*Official Report*, 20 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 603.]

Given that they have abandoned their economic crime Bill, given that the Attorney General is investigating malpractice at the Serious Fraud Office, which she is supposed to supervise, and given that too much oligarch money flows into the Tory party, how poised are they?

Paul Scully: Very.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): May I ask the Minister just how bad the level of economic crime has to be before the Government bring the Bill forward? Can he also set out to the House how well worked our legislation is? Many of the proposals have been promised for years and years. I think he will find that there is quite a lot of support across the House to bring those measures forward piecemeal. We still have three months of this Session, so why wait for the Queen? Let us bring some forward and get on with them.

Paul Scully: I agree with my hon. Friend that we want to get this right. It is a technical and complex issue, and we will continue to work with people who are experts and knowledgeable in this field to make sure that we can get that legislation totally in place so that we can push it through in good time.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister will be aware, and certainly his Treasury colleagues are aware, of the activities of Patrick McCreesh and Philip Nunn, of Blackmore Bond notoriety. Nearly five years after their dodgy and probably illegal sales tactics were first brought to the attention of regulators, those two are still allowed to continue in operation at the helm of a veritable spider's web of companies, collecting scores of yellow cards, and some red cards, for breaches of statutory obligations. They are subject to no personal sanction, other than the occasional closure of one of the companies that they wanted to close down anyway. How much longer are we supposed to be satisfied with a regulator that, in one case, accepted the registration of a 10-year-old as a company officer? When are we going to have a regulator with teeth to drag dodgy directors out from hiding behind company nameplates in order for them to be held personally responsible, in a way that correctly reflects the fortunes that they have made and the financial misery they have inflicted on their victims?

Paul Scully: I know the hon. Gentleman has used that example on a number of occasions. It is a particularly pertinent example but, as I say, Companies House reform is foremost among our priorities and it will come as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing the urgent question.

From migrant boats to county lines, the golden thread that runs between them is illicit money flows. Although the national cyber-security strategy and the economic crime plan, and the measures in them, are welcome, what we really need is a Bill to bring this forward. May I urge my hon. Friend to use his good offices to make that case, in order to deal with not only some of the big issues but the low-level frauds that are affecting so many of our constituents? Let us not forget that it is the No. 1 crime in this country at the moment.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area and those comments. He is absolutely right: the theme in this is economic crime—county lines and those kinds of things. That is why the Business Department, the Treasury and the Home Office are working together to get this right and to tackle all of that in the round.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Fraud is a traumatic experience, which makes reports that victims are having their details collated and sold on the dark web as part of a so-called “suckers list” extremely worrying. What can be done to protect victims from being targeted a second time, and will the Minister ensure that this is a particular focus of the Government's work moving forward?

Paul Scully: First, we need to do lots of work on awareness of scams and those kinds of areas, which fall into my direct remit. Action Fraud is taking more and

more of a position here to support victims and—the hon. Gentleman rightly referred to this—to tackle the immediacy after the event and to make sure that it cannot happen again.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Cyber-criminals prey on vulnerable people in all our communities. Yesterday's launch of the very first cyber security strategy was an important step forward, but will my hon. Friend the Minister continue to work with Ministers on further measures that will strengthen the UK's resistance to cyber-fraud?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the Government's cyber strategy. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of this area, which the Government are tackling. We will continue to do more as time allows and as we get more and more information. The legislation needs to be right for the 21st century. It needs to keep up with the areas—cyber, the dark web and so on—that criminals are using.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers so far, but after the recent resignation of Lord Agnew following a lack of consideration for an economic crime Bill, there have been many calls for that decision to be reconsidered or reviewed. The Bill was set to protect and better manage the UK's economic prosperity. May I gently remind the Minister of the £26 million robbery of the Northern Bank in Northern Ireland by the IRA? Experts state that moneys have been laundered through legitimate businesses. Alongside that, there is the £396 million of fuel duty that has been lost to the Chancellor. Through an economic crime Bill, we can address the issues relating to the IRA's illegal and murderous activities. Will the Minister confirm to the House that every action will be taken to ensure the Bill is introduced as soon as possible to take on those who live off the backs of others?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Member, as ever. He raises the really good point that not all economic crime is international. There is a lot of home-grown economic crime and he cites just one of a number of crimes happening in Northern Ireland and across the UK. Yes, we will ensure that we bring forward measures to this place to be scrutinised and pushed through as soon as possible.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Fraudsters, criminals and bad people take advantage of measures introduced in response to crises, whether financial or otherwise. This is an incredibly complex area. Every Member will have had constituents who have lost out one way or another through fraud over the years, so I hope the Minister will take the sentiments from across the House—I think every party in the House has spoken today—expressing concern about this issue and the delay that has come about. May I urge him to take two things into account? He says he is learning lessons. Will he learn the lessons from the response to the financial crisis, when our banks introduced measures that led to the virtual confiscation of, for example, more than 16,000 customers from the Global Restructuring Group within RBS? And can he please learn lessons to try to ensure proper corporate behaviour by lenders? Secondly, he mentions Action Fraud. The threshold for Action Fraud to

[Philip Dunne]

investigate, or urge the police to investigate in various forces, is incredibly high. As a consequence, while we all urge our constituents to make contact with Action Fraud, invariably nothing follows.

Paul Scully: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We recognise those constraints, which is why we are looking at replacing Action Fraud with a new organisation based with City of London police to try to tackle the areas he raises. We will also learn the lessons. He is absolutely right. We want to get the balance right, so that we are confiscating the right amount of money from the right people—the criminals.

Points of Order

1.18 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Northern Ireland Office questions, the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) made the extremely incendiary allegation that British troops went to his constituency in the '70s with the express purpose of murdering the people who lived in Derry. We all have a responsibility in this place for the language we use. Legacy is extremely difficult to deal with. What guidance can you give me, Mr Speaker, so that when a Member repeatedly makes such claims—to generate whatever online presence he may have—that are clearly incendiary to people across the House and across the country, we can put a stop to that behaviour and behave in this place with the dignity that our offices demand?

Mr Speaker: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. These are very sensitive issues and, as I set out in my opening remarks ahead of Northern Ireland questions, Members should exercise caution in referring to historical troubles-related deaths. In this case, the details of the case and the names of those involved have not been referred to and nothing disorderly has occurred, but Members' views are now on the record. May I take this opportunity to remind the House that good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language? Perhaps we can learn from this point of order.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you will know, during the evacuation from Afghanistan many hon. Members were concerned about constituents who had loved ones stuck in Afghanistan. One issue that arose was how it came to be that Pen Farthing and Nowzad were allowed to evacuate animals while there were still people stuck in Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister said on 26 August that he had “no influence” on that particular case and nor would it be right. On 7 December, he was asked “Did you intervene to get Pen Farthing’s animals out?” He said, “No, that is complete nonsense.” And the Downing Street spokesperson said, “Neither the Prime Minister nor Mrs Johnson was involved.” Yet today, as I think you are aware, Mr Speaker, the Foreign Affairs Committee has published a letter from Lord Goldsmith’s office saying,

“the PM has just authorised their staff and animals to be evacuated”.
How can I get to the bottom of who is telling the truth?

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Members will know how much correspondence we had on this. In the light of what is happening at the moment, people are very interested in the discrepancies between what the Prime Minister says to journalists versus what is revealed in this House. I seek your advice on how we can ensure that such discrepancies are clarified to Members of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I thank both hon. Members for giving me notice of this point of order. Ministers themselves are responsible for their answers at the Dispatch Box.

However, they are encouraged to correct, as quickly as possible, inadvertently incorrect statements made to the House, if such a mistake has occurred. We know the Treasury Bench will have heard this and, if what has been stated is correct, I would expect them to come to the House to put it right.

I know that for both Members this will not be the end, and quite rightly they will use their best endeavours and the different resources available within the House to ensure this is looked into. I presume the Foreign Affairs Committee may wish to do so, too.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you and the House have been concerned about major Government announcements being leaked to the press. With the Sue Gray report, we think, about to be given to the Prime Minister, have you had assurances that the first that people will know about the report will be when this House has a statement? If the report is delivered on Thursday evening, will you ensure that there is a statement on Friday? The House is sitting on Friday to consider private Members' Bills, and a statement might encourage more people to turn up.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I have not been given notice of the date or time of any statement. However, the Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order. As I have said repeatedly, I expect all statements to be made first to this House to allow Members to question Ministers properly. As we know, the Prime Minister has promised to make a statement.

I would expect that Members will be able to see the report, and I would hope time will be given for them to digest it. I have not had any indication of when it will be

coming, but I will work with the House to ensure that Members are aware of that statement. Hopefully, good notice will be given, but I am more than happy to suspend the sitting and leave it until later tonight if the report arrives. I am happy to work with the Leader of the House to ensure that the House is treated correctly, fairly and in the right manner. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that conversations between my office, the Leader of the House's office and Downing Street are taking place in order to do the right thing by this House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your direction in relation to the point of order from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). Like him and others in this House, the DUP is deeply concerned by allegations made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), alleging that paratroopers left here to go and murder. However, he totally ignores the issue that at the same time 50 years ago two police officers were murdered by the IRA, which set out to do that. How can I make sure that there is balance in the comments in this House?

Mr Speaker: I think you just did and, as balance goes, you far outweigh any other Member in all your contributions. However, you did name the constituency and the Member, so I presume that you gave notice to that Member.

Jim Shannon: I did not.

Mr Speaker: When Members name a particular person or mention a constituency, please ensure that they are given notice. It is unfair if they do not know that they will be mentioned. You have been here long enough, and I am sure that you would like to speak to the relevant Member privately.

Spiking (Offence)

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

1.27 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create an offence of administering or attempting to administer drugs or alcohol to a person without their consent; and for connected purposes.

The subject of my Bill today, spiking, is both an old and a new issue, and one that causes considerable anxiety among the young, particularly teenagers, and their parents. Although drinks have been spiked for a long time, and chemicals were first used to poison and kill a soviet dissident in this country almost 50 years ago, the term “spiking” is relatively new, and spiking drinks happens much more frequently than it did. The phenomenon of spiking by injection at social events is both new and still mysterious.

Let me start with the context, go on to what is known, highlight what is less well known, and then lay out what the Government, Parliament, local police forces and local authorities are already doing and might do. Lastly, I will suggest what more could be done by Government. Our aim in this House is, as always, to protect our young and reassure the public. We can also send a clear message to those who think that spiking is fun. It is not. Spiking has a deeply unpleasant impact on many lives, and it is a crime that should be punishable in its own right.

For the context, I am grateful to many people: my constituent Rosie Farmer and her daughter Maisy; my own young office; colleagues, especially the former Lord Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), and others here today with their own experiences and constituent cases; organisations in Gloucestershire; the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who is in her place, and her Committee and team; and Dawn Dines of “Stamp Out Spiking”, who has been on this case for a decade.

Spiking is not a far-away country of which we know little. It is happening all around us, and even to us. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) was spiked not long ago, as have been several other Members over time. Of course, many of us have children who have also been spiked. One colleague’s daughter was spiked twice in a nightclub. On both occasions, she collapsed and was carried outside by a bouncer and dumped unceremoniously on the pavement. We can all agree that that is not good enough, as would licensed victuallers associations around the country. There is much good practice to recommend, as I will go on to mention, but such incidents highlight both the grisly experience for a young woman and the frustrated feelings of her mother.

We can all relate to that, too, because where neither colleagues nor anyone in our or their immediate families have been spiked, our mailboxes tell us that our constituents have been. One colleague said:

“I know from my inbox that people of all ages and areas will be very pleased that this is being highlighted as it’s awful, can be embarrassing and is often very grim”.

She speaks for us all, as does another colleague, who wrote that

“speaking to police they find that most cases are young women with an unexpected response to drinks...I really worry about the fear that our young live under, and wonder whether this is another type of control of women.”

This not just about young women, although what data we have does suggest that in the vast majority of cases those affected are females. The worst spiking offender of all so far is Reynhard Sinaga—I am sorry to say, an Indonesian national—who was sentenced to a minimum of 30 years for using spiked drinks to sexually assault at least 48 males, many of whom did not know they had been assaulted until Mr Sinaga’s videos were discovered by the police. That confirms that there are male victims, and that there may be many more serious incidents, both on men and women, that we do not know about.

Colleagues from five parties are supporting my Bill today, and I hope the whole House will share my view that this is not a party political but an all-party and all-country issue on which reaching broad consensus inside and outside Parliament is the key to future success. We know already that there have been about 2,600 reported cases over the last five years and we suspect that that is the visible part of the iceberg, which means there is work to be done.

The last case in Manchester shows that there are laws that can be used to prosecute, and they have been used successfully in some cases. The two most relevant laws are the Offences against the Person Act 1861, which covers the use of noxious substances, and the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which covers spiking for sexual gratification. They are, as it were, the two bookends of the issue, but much in between is not covered, especially where it is not clear or cannot be proved what the purpose of spiking was or where the drug used cannot be identified, including because its effects have already worn off.

Most importantly, because spiking itself is not a specific crime, no one can be arrested simply for the act of spiking itself, nor is there enough data on spiking for adequate analysis and response, and at the moment it is not mandatory for hospitals automatically to report suspected spiking incidents to the police, as the National Police Chiefs’ Council lead on drugs confirmed to the Home Affairs Committee this morning. He and I, and I suspect all of us, would like that to change.

That is the context, those are the experiences and that is the gap in the law, which I think will surprise many of our constituents, and that is the main reason for making spiking a crime and therefore for proposing the Bill. As the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee recently said:

“There is not a specific criminal offence. If a drink is spiked or if an injection takes place, it is rolled into a different criminal offence.”

We need something more.

There is a conundrum about spiking to highlight. Spiking by injection is a relatively new phenomenon, but anecdotally, it is growing. Gloucestershire constabulary estimates that its usual historical number of reported spiking incidents of 10 to 12 cases a month rose to 48 in October, of which 10 were spiking by injection. That month coincided with the full reopening of universities, and I believe that is not a coincidence.

My constituent Maisy Farmer—I hope I will not do long-term damage to her reputation by describing her as a very sensible university student of criminology and policing—was behaving manically and completely out of character when recently returning home with friends from a nightclub in Worcester, and the next morning she found a needle mark on her arm that she suspected was evidence of having been spiked. Her mother, Rosie, contacted both her surgery and the Gloucester Royal Hospital A&E, but was told it was too late for tests. Maisy was signposted to sexual health services, which took some tests, and she received preventive inoculation against hepatitis B and HIV. The police, in turn, were very supportive, but without evidence of any substance in Maisy's body or any known secondary offence, they could not do more. The point is that all these services reacted as they could and should, but if, as seems likely, spiking by needle had taken place, that is wrong and something must be done. The emotional stress alone is considerable. The question is what should be done.

If there is no evidence of a needle or substance and nothing on CCTV to follow up, it is difficult to know exactly what is happening. I understand why my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said this morning that he is still confused by the prevalence of needle spiking without evidence; so, I believe, is the Policing Minister, who is in his place. However, that does not mean that nothing can be done—in fact, the opposite. Some of this is best done at a local level. The Gloucestershire police and crime commissioner's recent successful safer streets fund award has partly been used to provide testing kits in nightclubs, which can be used by victims and others.

Then there is the question of immediate medical help. Gloucester City Council's innovation of funding street medics means that immediate paramedic help is available.

The local police's Operation Nightingale, including an increased police presence, may be responsible for a sharp drop in incidents in December. Pooling the best local practice of such examples will be part of what the new national gold command incorporates in its recommendations to Ministers. I should mention that a drug often used in drink spiking, GHB, has been reclassified by the Government as a class B drug, meaning possession can result in a maximum five-year sentence. Last, but by no means least, is the work I referred to from the Home Affairs Committee. I hope that, should our constituents have more evidence to share, the Committee will welcome it, because we need all the possible light that we can shine, especially on spiking by needles.

Spiking is already a considerable issue and is getting worse. Spiking by injection needs more research and investigation. We could send a clear message today in support of the work of all local authorities and answer student groups from St Andrews to Truro, MPs from across the country, "Love Island" contestants and parents everywhere that we want to enlist in a more open partnership with communities by saying that we care and that we will do more. I hope the Bill will have the support of the nation.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Graham, Sir Robert Buckland, Siobhan Baillie, Wendy Chamberlain, Wera Hobhouse, Dr Rupa Huq, Cherilyn Mackrory, Mrs Maria Miller, Robbie Moore, Liz Saville Roberts, Jim Shannon and Valerie Vaz present the Bill.

Richard Graham accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 238).

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill

Second Reading

1.38 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the reasoned amendment.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time,

We are living in the digital age. It is not only our computers and smartphones; Brits young and old have an average of nine connected devices in their house, from smart speakers and TVs to baby monitors and doorbells. We are more connected than ever, and we need to make sure that those connections are fast and secure. The Bill will achieve both those aims. It will take our roll-out of gigabit broadband and 5G to the next level while boosting the protection of citizens across the UK.

If there is one thing we have learned from this pandemic, it is how central technology is to our everyday existence. We need technology to work remotely; we need it to reach our children and to drive scientific breakthroughs and business innovations; we need tech to be interoperable—I struggled to say that—because we are living in a world where our baby monitors, kettles and doorbells will all be able to talk to one another; and we need tech that is secure.

Underneath all that, we need the digital infrastructure to support all those connections—the ones that we make minute by minute, hour by hour and day after day. Such networks are vital for the UK's future prosperity. We cannot stay at the heart of the global economy if our connections are not world class, which is why the Government have made huge investments in digital infrastructure.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Unfortunately, my constituency has one of the slowest broadband speeds in the UK. In one area in particular, Cilycwm, a WeFibre gigabit scheme has been sitting on the Department's table for eight or nine months. Will the Department come to a determination quickly so that we can move forward with that scheme?

Ms Dorries: I certainly will. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, we are moving forward at an absolutely rocketing pace, but I will have a look at the situation in his constituency. I assure him that nothing sits on the Department's table—it has all gone out to the providers and those going through the procurement process—but I will check on where things are up to in his constituency. If he could contact me with some details after the debate, that would be helpful.

Because the Government have made huge investments, at least 97% of premises now have access to superfast broadband, which is fast enough for a family to stream five different Netflix films in five different rooms in the same house at the same time.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just talked about the ability to activate fast broadband in five different rooms, but constituents in

my Luton South constituency do not have five devices on which to watch five different Netflix films. Should the Government not be doing more on that basis?

Ms Dorries: We are. The roll out of superfast broadband and gigabit broadband, in respect of which we have covered 65% of the country in just a few years, is levelling up in practice. It is about making sure that anybody who wants access can have it. We are working with Ofcom and the providers to look at left-behind areas in terms of levelling up and how we can increase access to laptops and—this happened particularly during the pandemic, in the first lockdown—how children in particular can access the internet so that they have the same equal access and opportunity as everyone else.

As we have upgraded our networks, we have invested more than £4 billion in our cyber defences since 2016, including by setting up the National Cyber Security Centre. As we all know, the nature of tech is incredibly fast-paced and constantly changing and growing. Monthly broadband usage has doubled since 2018 and continues to rise year on year. But the more we log on, the more open we are to cyber-threats, particularly as new technology—including cutting-edge consumer products such as smart baby monitors—is not always secure by design. To stay ahead of the game we need to keep investing in tomorrow's networks and to secure ourselves against future threats, which is why we have introduced the Bill.

Let me explain the Bill's impact in our telecoms networks before I turn to its measures on product security. In 2019, the Prime Minister promised voters a “broadband revolution” and vowed to deliver fast, secure and reliable broadband to everyone in the country. That was an important promise in 2019 but it is even more vital today as we build back from a devastating global pandemic.

We are delivering on our promise. Under this Government, nationwide gigabit coverage has jumped from just 11% at the end of 2019 to 65% today. We have set ambitious targets for the rest of the roll-out and aim to reach a minimum of 85% of homes by 2025 and to get as close to 100% as we can as soon as possible. We are constantly looking for ways to go further and faster with that roll-out. For example, we have already legislated to address the problem of absent or unresponsive landowners, who can hold up the deployment of gigabit broadband in blocks of flats, and we are currently consulting on proposals to amend the building regulations to ensure that all new homes have gigabit from the outset.

At the same time, we are working hard to improve our mobile phone networks, so that people can enjoy world-class connectivity not just when they are at home or work, but when they are out and about. We have agreed a £1 billion deal with the industry to roll out the shared rural network, which is already delivering improved 4G coverage across the UK. Both the operators and the industry remain confident that they will reach 95% of the country by the end of 2025, and we are aiming for the majority of the population to have the next level of cutting-edge 5G mobile coverage by 2027.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents in Northolt are not able to access faster broadband through a fibre connection. I have repeatedly

pressed Openreach on this, and it admitted that one of its cabinets had not been upgraded as it did not meet the commercial criteria. Just last week, I also pressed Virgin Media, which said that it had installed broadband in on Islip Manor Road but not on Islip Manor estate, next door. Will the Secretary of State confirm when, under the Government's plans, all my constituents in Northolt will be able to access a decent broadband connection?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Member's question is quite detailed, right down to street names, so I will take it away and we will speak to Openreach. The Department will see what we can do and come back to him, although that is not a promise that we will suddenly be able to connect Northolt. I am interested to hear about individual constituencies, because it is useful to us to know that information. We have not said that everybody is going to have superfast or gigabit broadband tomorrow; we have set dates by which to reach our targets. We will do our very best for the hon. Member, if he lets me know the details of the case he mentioned.

Things like 5G and gigabit have the potential to be truly transformational for people and businesses. They are vital for innovation, and can unlock huge economic and social benefits across every single corner of the country—not just driving our recovery from covid, but boosting our generational mission to level up the UK. We therefore need to ensure that the legal framework underpinning our digital infrastructure encourages and enables the deployment of the latest networks. In 2017, we made changes to that legal framework, implementing reforms to the electronic communications code that regulate installation agreements between landowners and telecoms operators.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about ensuring that we have the infrastructure that we need for the 21st century, not the 20th century. But one of my constituents' concerns—I know that the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) have a similar concern—is that when private sector providers come in and install new equipment such as telegraph poles, dishes and things like that, if they do not properly engage with residents and the local community, that can blight some of our streets and add unnecessary infrastructure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when we encourage providers to install such equipment, they should engage with communities and residents, so that we carry people with us?

Ms Dorries: Community engagement and engagement with individual households is vital. People need to know that the connectivity is there. I will look into my hon. Friend's point and take it further.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): In a similar vein to the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham), I have received a number of concerns from site providers in my rural constituency that have hosted telecommunications infrastructure, in some cases for a decade or more. When the code was last before the House, we were led to believe that the rent reductions would be minimal. However, it has transpired that in some instances, rent offers have been reduced by about 90%. I am interested to know whether the Secretary of State has any comments on that point, and whether there is a way of rebalancing

things. We want to ensure that this infrastructure is there to benefit the community, but we do not want site providers to have to sacrifice what is, in many cases, very valuable agricultural land.

Ms Dorries: I am coming to the first point raised by the hon. Member. On his second point, which was about rebalancing, I am afraid that he is probably going to be disappointed.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly welcome massive private-led investment in proper broadband, which is what we all need. Could the Secretary of State give guidance to the companies doing it that it is not helpful if they bury cables under main roads, requiring the roads to be dug up again every time they want to improve or mend a cable? Could we not do better, either in ducts or by the side of the road?

Ms Dorries: An interesting point. I will certainly take that back to BDUK, Openreach and others. We need to ensure that the legal framework underpinning our digital infrastructure encourages and enables the deployment of the latest networks. In 2017, we made changes to that legal framework. Implementing reforms to the electronic communications code—this goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake)—requires installation agreements between landowners and telecom operators. The aim was to make it easier for digital networks to be installed, maintained and upgraded, and now we will go even further. The Bill will update the electronic communications code to deliver on the Government's ambitions for digital connectivity and levelling up. Specifically, it will do three things: make the most of existing infrastructure; encourage stronger and more collaborative relationships between telecom operators and site providers; and build on previous measures to tackle the issue of non-responsive landowners.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): In my constituency of St Albans there is the Highfield Park Trust, run by a group of volunteers. Since the 2017 reforms, it has lost 98% of its income from hosting a mast because of the telecoms company using its new powers to renegotiate the lease. Does the Secretary of State agree that that poses a real risk to the roll-out of 5G, because in some instances small site owners might decide that it is not worth their while anymore and just evict the telecoms companies? Is she willing to look at the issue again, and at the power imbalance that has arisen from the 2017 reforms?

Ms Dorries: In 2017, the prices were too high and they affected the overall roll-out. The new pricing regime is more closely aligned to those of utilities such as water, electricity and gas, which are fair. In order for us to roll out 5G to future-proof our digital economy and our telecoms, and to reach the targets of ensuring that we have 4G/5G coverage and 100% gigabit roll-out as soon as possible, we need to ensure that telecom providers can access land to establish both masts and the facilities that we need to make it happen. It has to be fair. We are not revisiting the code of 2017; the Bill does not do that. It will stay as it was, and there will not be a revision to the pricing regime. It is important that I make that clear straightaway.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Secretary of State highlighted that the prices were once too high. Now we have had multiple complaints that the prices are too low. Clearly, the question of valuation is at the heart of the matter, so why did the Government explicitly exclude valuation from the scope of the consultation that preceded the Bill?

Ms Dorries: We have listened to landowners. We have not introduced the legislation without involving them in its development. We have included measures in the Bill that make it easier for landowners and operators to use a dispute resolution if landowners feel that they are not getting a fair price. That means greater collaboration, and it makes preposterously low offers less likely. Hopefully, a fair and reasonable price would be agreed. If landowners were not happy with it, it would go to independent arbitration. If they were then unhappy with that, they would have recourse to the courts, which we know would look very dimly on a situation where the telecom providers had been neither reasonable nor fair to landowners. We think that that is a fair and reasonable process.

Making the most of existing infrastructure can play a key role in upgrading services and increasing competition. Under the Bill, operators will have the automatic right to upgrade or share apparatus installed before the 2017 reforms. That will be subject to specific conditions to ensure that the work does not negatively impact landowners. The measures have been considered carefully to deliver significant benefits, while ensuring that there will be little impact on landowners. The Bill also rationalises the way that certain older code agreements are renewed so that they reflect the code as reformed in 2017. This means that there will be greater consistency in how agreements are renewed across the UK. On that basis, the 2017 coding agreements will not be revisited.

All those things will make much better use of existing infrastructure, reducing the need for new installations. That means less disruption with fewer street works and fewer mast installations in both rural and urban settings—something that, I am sure, will be welcomed in all parts of the House. We will take away that community disruption. In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I will take away his point about cables being laid under roads. In the area where I live, it is done under the pavement right outside my house. I would imagine that there is a good reason why that has to happen in some areas, but I will get back to him with what it is.

Secondly, we want to build stronger, more constructive relationships between network operators and potential site providers. We are introducing measures to make it easier for those two parties, when negotiating agreements to install telecoms apparatus, to use an alternative form of dispute resolution if a disagreement arises such as I have set out. This will encourage constructive dialogue between networks, operators and potential site providers. It will help new agreements be reached more quickly and address situations where landowners may feel compelled to accept terms offered by operators.

Finally, we are creating a new court process to address situations where landowners are not responsive. This process will provide a quick and inexpensive route for operators to gain access to certain types of land. Again, these measures have been developed to strike the balance

between protecting landowners and ensuring that everyone across the UK has access to reliable and quick digital infrastructure.

We need this infrastructure because of the sheer demand on our networks. Just think of all the devices that are in use at this very moment. Millions of people will be switching on their smart TVs to stream a film or a series box-set, unlocking their phones or tablets to call a friend or a relative, or asking their smart speakers to play music or give information. Around this Chamber, right now, many wrists are sporting smartwatches that keep us up to date with the latest news or alert us to the fact that we have a new message from those infamous WhatsApp groups. *[Laughter.]* Sorry—I just couldn't resist.

But with every connectable product that enters our lives, the risk of cyber-attack grows. In the first half of 2021 alone, we saw 1.5 billion attacks on connectable products—double the figure for the same period in 2020. Most of us assume that if a product is for sale in the UK it is safe and secure, but thousands of people in the UK have been victims of cyber-attacks. Many of them have lost significant amounts of money or have had their private data hacked and shared, and they have lost trust in the idea that they can connect with one another and go about their daily lives with confidence. This is not just damaging on a personal level; it also has serious implications for our national security. Cyber-criminals now have the ability to use compromised connectable products to attack large infrastructure. We saw this with the 2016 Mirai attack, which targeted anything from baby monitors to medical devices to home appliances to disable internet access across much of the US east coast.

In the past few years, this Government have made significant progress to strengthen the UK's cyber-security. In 2018, we published a code for manufacturers to improve the security of their own consumer devices. We led the world on this, and that code has since been used by countries such as Australia and India to inform their own product security principles. However, the cyber landscape is constantly evolving and our approach needs to evolve with it if we want to stay safe.

We have reached the point at which legislation is required to protect citizens and networks from the harm posed by cyber-criminals. Packaged together, the telecoms and product safety measures in the Bill will work in tandem to do just that, creating a reliable, fast broadband while supporting the growth of more secure consumer connectable products.

The Bill will enable the Government to specify a number of mandatory security requirements for smart devices. They will be set out in regulations, but manufacturers are already on notice regarding what the initial three requirements will be. The first is a ban on universal default passwords. Too often, consumer connectable products come with easy-to-guess passwords as their default setting, such as “password”, “admin” or four zeros. That makes them vulnerable to hacking, and risks compromising a user's privacy and security right from the get-go. Under this new security requirement, all passwords that come with a new device will need to be unique and not easily guessable.

The second mandatory requirement is for manufactured consumer connectable products to provide a public point of contact so that security researchers and others

can easily report when they discover security vulnerabilities, flaws and bugs in their devices. Manufacturers can then quickly identify and address any shortcomings in their products. At present, nearly 80% of firms have no such system in place.

Finally, manufacturers will be required to be completely transparent about how often, and for how long, their products will receive security updates and patches. According to the current guidance that is being commonly issued, if we update our computers regularly when asked to do so and use two-step verification, 90% of cyber-attacks can be avoided. The requirement for manufacturers to be transparent about how often their product will receive security updates is intended to help consumers to know at which point they will need to do that.¹

Businesses will have to give customers that information at the point of sale, and keep them updated throughout. If a product will not be covered by security updates, that must be disclosed. That will enable consumers to have all the facts that they need to make an informed decision about their purchase, to understand when the product they buy could become vulnerable, and to base their decision on whether or not to buy on that information. When the security requirements have not been complied with, businesses will not be allowed to make these products available in the UK. We will be able to monitor, investigate and take enforcement action against non-compliant businesses.

We have been setting consumer standards of this kind for decades. Every product on our shelves has met all sorts of minimum requirements, whether to ensure that it is fire-resistant or to ensure that it is not a choking or suffocation hazard. It should be no different in the digital age. The Bill allows us to protect people across the UK even as the world around us changes. It allows us to keep pace with technology as it transforms our everyday lives. Combined with the measures on the telecoms infrastructure, it will do a huge amount in the coming years to benefit our constituents and society at large.

I hope that Members will show their support for the Bill, and that the benefits can be realised as quickly as possible. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I do not think there could be a better birthday present than being in the Chamber today and listening to this Second Reading debate. Happy birthday, Jeff Smith!

2.3 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I extend those congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith)? I think he is 21 again.

Once again, I congratulate the Secretary of State on her continuing blind loyalty to the Prime Minister. Last week she threw Big Dog a bone with her vendetta against the BBC to distract from the Prime Minister's partying antics. How is that going? This week she has continued her role as dog-walker-in-chief, trying to tidy up Big Dog's mess after the latest revelations about his lockdown-breaking birthday party antics. She might have picked it up and put it in a plastic bag but, as the saying goes, even she cannot polish this one! *[Laughter.]* We are lightening the load today, because this is a very technical Bill and we all need lifting.

1. *[Official Report, 4 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 5MC.]*

Ms Dorries: It is a very serious Bill—

Lucy Powell: It is a very serious Bill, yes—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is just as well I am in a generous mood today, is it not?

Lucy Powell: It is just as well you are in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker!

We have here another infrastructure Bill. As with every big infrastructure project this Government oversee, from the northern rail betrayal to the disastrous green homes schemes, the broadband and 5G roll-out has been beset with piecemeal, short-term thinking. The Government try to get British infrastructure built on the cheap, relying on the private sector, which more often than not means foreign state-run companies. On the broadband roll-out, the Government have wasted a decade and squandered the world-leading position left by the last Labour Government. This Government's legacy over 10 years has seen huge delays in the superfast broadband roll-out, and a widening in the digital divide. Why were we not, 10 years ago, investing in a public-private partnership, so that home-grown British businesses could develop our own 5G network? Instead of looking towards the future, and building up British capacity and resilience, the Government have left us reliant on Huawei and other foreign state-backed companies for our 5G, with all the security complications that that entails.

This Bill deals with a couple of specific aspects of the broadband and 5G roll-out: part 1 places security requirements on manufacturers of smart devices and part 2 amends the electronic communications code, which governs the rules on how rent is set for community groups and others to host phone masts on their land.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The hon. Lady is no Stalinist. Given that the underlying principle of part 2 of the Bill is the Stalinist principle that property is theft, will she be opposing it on Second Reading?

Lucy Powell: I must object to that suggestion that I am a Stalinist. I am, however, someone who believes that there should be a fair —

Sir Desmond Swayne: No Stalinist!

Lucy Powell: Oh, no Stalinist. I am someone who believes that there should be a fair valuation, and a fair and balanced approach taken to those who put masts on their land in good faith, expecting that income to come in the future. I will say more on that shortly.

We support the measures in part 1. Smart devices have increasingly become targets for fraud, surveillance and other forms of cyber-attack. We have some concerns that these measures have not come sooner and do not go further. In 2016, the Government promised that “the majority of online products and services coming into use” would be

“secure by default” by 2021”.

Why are the Government only just bringing this legislation in, given that previous commitment? These requirements should and could have been mandatory from the start, as opposed to our spending four years with a voluntary code. I have real concerns that we are always behind the technology curve. These devices are already being used in ways beyond the scope of this Bill—for example, by stalkers and abusive partners in tracking those they are

[Lucy Powell]

abusing, as well as in fraud and criminal activity. There is nothing in this Bill about that, let alone measures to address new waves of technology that are already making their way into people's homes and lives, such as virtual reality.

Moving to part 2, our main concern with this Bill is that it is likely to slow down, rather than speed up, the broadband and 5G roll-out.

John Redwood: I was very interested in the hon. Lady's comment about virtual reality. Does she think we need to change the legislation now to deal with the metaverse, which is meant to be a great opportunity of bringing together various technologies in something new?

Lucy Powell: I do. I share the right hon. Gentleman's concern about the metaverse; we are constantly considerably behind the curve on legislating for the regulation of some of these issues, and of course that will not even be covered by the forthcoming Online Safety Bill either. The pandemic has demonstrated more than ever the importance of broadband to our prosperity, but the Government's failure to deliver the roll-out is hampering creative industries, businesses and those attempting to work from home.

The Government have consistently rolled back on their commitments. The Secretary of State mentioned that the Prime Minister originally promised full-fibre broadband to every household by 2025. He then downgraded that pledge to universal gigabit-capable broadband to every home. The commitment is now that at least 85% of UK premises will have access to gigabit broadband by 2025. That is downgrade after downgrade, which sells our capacity short.

The National Audit Office expressed serious reservations that even the watered-down target would be met. The main barrier is the Government-funded roll-out to harder-to-reach areas. The unequal roll-out of next generation gigabit broadband will mean that the same households that do not have superfast or, in many cases, as we have already heard, any functioning broadband at all, will continue to fall behind—for years, if not decades, to come. As the Public Accounts Committee said last week, the Government have no detailed plan in place for reaching communities where it is not commercially viable to do so, and there is little in the Bill to address that key issue.

The Bill does make further changes to the electronic communications code, which governs the agreements between telecoms companies and the landowners who host their masts. The code was last updated as recently as 2017, but those changes have not had the desired effect of speeding up roll-out.

Despite promises that rent would not reduce by more than 40%, many community sports grounds, churches and local authorities that host phone masts have had their rents cut by up to 90% or even 95% in some of the cases that we have already heard about today. That will be further exacerbated by the Bill, which hands more power to the telecoms companies in court and disincentivises people from coming forward to have phone masts put on their land in the first place. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) looks like he is itching to come in on that point.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) intimated that people would want to take their land back as a consequence of the changes. I hope that she has identified that that is not possible. People will not get their land back unless they are going to develop it, and even then, they would have to go to court to get it.

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the Bill and the previous code mean that those cricket grounds, sport clubs and churches in all hon. Members' constituencies that had phone masts put on their property in good faith to give them income that they would not otherwise have, which in many cases keeps them going, have been offered dramatically reduced rents but are forbidden by law from taking the masts down. They are between a rock and a hard place. It will put many of those community groups, and the roll-out, at risk.

There is a real risk that the Bill will hamper, rather than support, faster broadband and 5G roll-out, so what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect of the 2017 changes on rent levels and on the speed of roll-out? Given that previous reforms to the code have resulted in no demonstrable improvement, what makes her think that strengthening the hand of telecoms firms will speed up the roll-out, rather than simply allowing them to increase their profits further? I think that is the thinking behind the now not-selected reasoned amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for New Forest West, with which I have a great deal of sympathy.

The Opposition support the broad approach of the Bill, but the security measures are too little, too late and are behind the technology curve rather than in front of it.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Lady with interest and I think that security is an issue on which we can work across the House. What specific measures from the 2018 "Secure by Design" guidance does she think should be included in the Bill but are not at the moment?

Lucy Powell: I am coming to the end of my speech, but there are a number of issues that could have been included in the Bill, some of which I have outlined. There are security issues, and there are new waves of technologies that are not in the Bill's scope; as the Secretary of State rightly pointed out, they are coming on us really quickly. Bills like this one tend to come three or four years behind the technology, rather than ahead of it. That is what I would like us to work together to address.

In conclusion, we fear that these telecommunications infrastructure measures could further hamper the Government's pretty woeful record on broadband and 5G infrastructure.

2.15 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have been asked to vote for some pretty awful stuff over the past couple of years, but this has to be the most profoundly un-Conservative measure. It will compound the damage that was done to rights of property in 2017, and the proposal to amend the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 will extend that damage to other walks of our national life, fundamentally undermining our position as a stable and predictable place in which to invest.

The digital roll-out has been stymied by changes that have brought about the very reverse of what was originally intended with the changes to the code in 2017. As a consequence, our constituents have been intimidated and bullied.

I have a constituent who refused a survey—she did not want a mast, because it would compromise her existing enterprise—but caved in when she was threatened with court action. Then, when she refused the terms of the mast, she was presented with statutory orders requiring access for both a temporary and a permanent mast. Of course, getting legal advice comes at an enormous cost. Happily, New Forest national park authority has thrown out the applications for both masts, but the battle, the uncertainty and the cost continue.

I have a group of constituents in a block who have let their collective roof for an antenna over the past few years and received an income, but have now received a demand with menace for a dramatic reduction in the income. They are having to deal with a demand for a 30-year lease of their entire roof. It is really quite extraordinary how the terms of trade have been rigged against landowners.

The Secretary of State presented the matter as if the problem were the landowners—as if we have to find ways of getting landowners to become more reasonable. When I had a meeting with the Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure, she reassured me with the alternative dispute resolution process, which we have heard about from the Secretary of State today. The problem with that procedure is that it is not mandatory. The telecom companies know that they do not need to engage with it, because they can afford to go to court and their victims cannot. That is the difficulty—that is the outrage that we have created.

It is no wonder that the whole roll-out has stalled and that no one wants to give access for a mast, because the income is not worth it and the consequences are frankly deplorable. Small farms, churches and small sports clubs used to have an income, but it has now crashed and they have all the uncertainty and inconvenience of continuing to host a mast. As I pointed out in an intervention on the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), there is no prospect of getting their land back without court action and development.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Sports clubs, parish halls, village halls and the like have seen a real depreciation in their income because of non-use as a result of covid, so does my right hon. Friend agree that this is precisely the worst possible time for an enforced reduction in their income? Many of them will have hard-baked an expectation into their future financial forecasts.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Of course, and these are the very people—the hearts of our community—who are now identified as the villains whom the Bill creates more power to bring to heel. It is the most monstrous piece of legislation that has been brought before us, and we should deal with it accordingly. We had a functioning market in 2016, and in 2017 we brought in measures. Whitehall has destroyed that market, egged on by rapacious telecom companies, and this Bill will make it even worse.

2.20 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): In 2016, the need for regulation on product security became undeniable when huge swathes of the internet went down. This included websites such as Netflix, Amazon, Twitter, Reddit and Airbnb. The attack was conducted by a botnet, an interconnected series of programs running on a huge number of hacked devices, which overloaded the web providers with requests for access. However, unlike previous or more conventional attacks, this one did not emerge through laptops and computers. This attack came through domestic appliances. I am sure that this will sound completely ridiculous to the many people gripped by this debate: the revenge of the malevolent toaster.

The internet of things is a term given to physical objects that either have processing power or are connected to the internet, such as home security measures or even lighting. When we think of cyber-security, it is natural to think of the precautions we take when using our phones and computers, especially around personal data and online transactions. What is less well known is the risk that poor product security can have. Attacks on internet-of-things devices rose 100% in the first half of last year, and it is a worldwide problem. In the UK since the beginning of the pandemic, 49% of people have purchased an individual smart device and 57% have increased their use of internet-connected devices, yet worryingly, only one in five internet-of-things manufacturers is believed to have embedded strong security into their devices. I want to praise *Which?* for the excellent work it has done for consumers in investigating this sector.

As we have seen in our inquiries into tech in relation to the Online Safety Bill, it is necessary for Government to intervene, as companies will often do the bare minimum to protect users. As with online safety, one of the core solutions to product security is the principle of secure by design. It is good to see the UK Government acting to embed this principle in law, following on from the Scottish Government's cyber resilience strategy's aim to enshrine security by design as a foundation principle of Scotland's cyber landscape. On the SNP Benches, we are glad that the UK Government have finally taken action on this, but there are some areas where the Bill falls short, and there is the potential to make some aspects of product security less effective.

One area of concern is that the Bill will require manufacturers to declare security flaws in their products publicly, without having a mechanism in place for automatic fixes or requiring that a fix be in place when the flaw is announced. This could make users less, not more, secure. The requirement could in effect alert hackers and malicious users to flaws without giving users the tools to fix the weaknesses, thereby ringing a bell for hackers to target those products. It has been highlighted that a majority of users will likely not have the skills to implement patching, so the benefit of the disclosure mandate, without automatic patching in place, would be without value. The Minister should look to implement requirements for automatic patching or for manufacturers to put solutions in place before the time of a public flaw disclosure.

Another oversight in the Bill is the exclusion of certain types of products, leaving millions out of scope. Internet-connected ovens, which have been targeted by malware, shutting down entire businesses, medical devices, routers and second-hand products, are all excluded

[John Nicolson]

from the scope of the Bill. The Bill should clarify which products are in or out of scope. Additionally, the Bill does not cover laptops or desktops, due to the existence of a developed antivirus and security software market. However, a mere 58% of people in the UK use antivirus software. Martin Tyley, head of cyber-security at KPMG UK, has called for the inclusion of laptops and desktops in the scope of the Bill, to protect the increasing number of home workers who have been targeted since the pandemic began. Even with its current flaws, which I hope the Government will be able to iron out, the Bill attempts to tackle an important aspect of cyber-security. However, this should be part of an holistic IT security approach that is taken to defend the UK's cyber-security landscape.

I would like to mention the enforcement mechanism in the Bill. Section 26(5) makes it clear that the Secretary of State will not be able to bring proceedings in Scotland, but the Bill will still establish enforcement mechanisms and a body to carry out enforcement actions under it. As the Scottish courts and legal system will have to manage enforcement action brought in Scotland, and oversight of the Scottish legal system is devolved, it is only right that the Scottish Government have a role in developing the enforcement mechanism. Therefore, I ask the Minister to consider amending the Bill to include a duty to consult the relevant Scottish Ministers when developing the enforcement mechanism and the security requirements that are to be enforced, so as to account for the requirements of the Scottish legal system.

I also seek clarity from the UK Government on what impact the passage of the Bill will have on the powers of the Scottish Government to regulate products in Scotland. We welcome, in principle, reform of the code. We are working with civil society partners to identify ways in which the Bill can be improved in its passage.

I would like to raise one further issue. BT has highlighted Openreach's commercial plan to upgrade 6 million properties, all of which will need agreement in order to upgrade them from the copper network. Without more ambitious reform, Openreach risks not being able to access up to 1.5 million flats, even in cases where residents want full fibre. According to BT, the Bill as it stands will not support improved connectivity to flats or rural areas, where most of the network is built above ground.

The need for a fast roll-out must be balanced with the rights of landowners, such as farmers. As we have heard, some campaigners have raised concerns about the rapid drop in rents faced by businesses hosting masts—some by as much as 90%. On this and other issues raised, I look forward to the Minister's answers.

2.27 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in another debate on improving the nation's connectivity. My hon. Friend the Minister is well aware of connectivity issues in places such as Ilfracombe in my constituency, as has been so well documented recently, so I very much welcome the steps that the Bill is taking to begin to address some of the issues that have slowed down infrastructure deployment.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on broadband and digital communications. We produced our own inquiry into the electronic communications code in November last year, and we are so pleased to see some of our recommendations materialising in part 2 of the Bill, focusing on telecommunications infrastructure. It is on part 2 that I will focus my comments.

The Government set a manifesto commitment to improve the UK's broadband connectivity—a manifesto that I was proud to stand on, having heard on far too many doorsteps back in 2019 about my constituents' connectivity concerns. The telecoms sector has experienced lengthy delays in securing access agreements since the electronic communications code was reformed back in 2017, and the Bill clearly intends to help speed up the deployment of this vital infrastructure. It is therefore warmly welcomed, in the main, by me, industry and the APPG alike.

One of the asks from our inquiry was to have a clear distinction between fibre and mobile infrastructure. It is important that the code works for both, and mobile operators welcome the Bill, which will accelerate the deployment of 4G and 5G. The new code had led to significant delays in reaching agreements with landlords, particularly where operators need to renegotiate leases as they expire, or where additional equipment needs to be added in order to upgrade or share sites to improve the service. The Bill before us seeks compromise between industry and landlords, while noting concerns in rural Britain among organisations such as the NFU, so well articulated by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne).

Sir Desmond Swayne: Does my hon. Friend support making the alternative dispute resolution procedure mandatory?

Selaine Saxby: My right hon. Friend makes a noble point, to which I will allow our hon. Friend the Minister to respond.

I recognise the need to balance competing interests carefully. The single greatest barrier the fixed infrastructure sector faces in the code is obtaining wayleaves and protracted negotiations with unresponsive landlords. To deliver in rural constituencies such as mine, large numbers of wayleaves to cross private land will be needed, which is seen as a risk to Project Gigabit's success in rural Britain. Landlord negotiations to gain access to multi-dwelling units have also been problematic. The industry warmly welcomes the provisions of the Bill that would fast track wayleave negotiations via the alternative dispute resolution scheme, which will help to level up islands of poor digital connectivity, which too often centre on social housing stock.

Sharing historical wayleave agreements and the underground duct network is also warmly welcomed, although concerns remain about whether the Bill is intended to address the problem of accessing poles situated above ground on private land, which is a particular concern in rural communities, where much of the network is built overhead on poles. I hope that clarity on that point will be given as the Bill proceeds. There is also concern that the Bill does not address automatic upgrade and sharing rights of existing infrastructure, either inside blocks or flats, or overground on poles.

The pandemic has clearly showed how vital connectivity is to all our communities, as those without good broadband have struggled with so much during the pandemic. Too many schoolchildren have explained to me the problems of the circle of doom, so I thank Openreach again for coming to the aid of some of my more rural primary schools and expediting their broadband connection; but I remain concerned that this piecemeal approach to connectivity and the focus on competition in urban conurbations is reducing fibre access altogether in rural Britain. If we are truly to level up our rural communities, speeding up our digital roll-out to them is vital.

Given that my constituency resides at position 607 out of 650, I am sure the Minister is not surprised to find me here again, asking for more to be done across the north, and indeed the whole, of Devon. In this day and age, fibre broadband is a utility, and there should be universal provision. Rural constituencies such as mine should not be left behind to facilitate market competition in our towns and cities. The Bill is a great step forward, and I hope that some of the industry's concerns will be addressed as it proceeds. The Secretary of State has clearly noted my campaigning, as has the Minister, so I very much hope it will be rewarded with faster rural roll-out than is currently planned in North Devon, before any other visitors to my lovely constituency find themselves in an all-too-readily-available North Devon notspot.

2.33 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I start by declaring my interests. Much of my previous career was spent in the cyber-security industry, and in the four years before being elected to Parliament, I led commercial strategy and public policy for BT's cyber-security team. BT was one of the companies that helped to design the Secure by Design code of practice, some of which we are putting into law through the Bill. Also, I have recently undertaken cyber-security work for MHR, which is set out in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, although the company does not produce consumer devices, connected or otherwise.

In some ways, cyber-security was good preparation for politics—for example, waking up to nightmare headlines such as,

“Attack of the refrigerators! The cyber-threats lurking in your home”

and

“Is your smart TV too wise? The FBI warns your screen is watching you”

and

“HACKED IN THE HOME: Your entire home could be HACKED with these simple mistakes, cyber-experts warn”.

Perhaps the most disturbing one I have seen is:

“Hacker who stole nude self-portraits of George W. Bush jailed for four years”.

I am all for being tough on crime, but surely in that case the perpetrator had already suffered enough.

Alarmist headlines aside, the Bill is very much needed to protect our constituents. The average UK household has nine connected devices, and the security on most of them will be poor. Information about how secure the devices are, or how long they will receive security updates

for, is unlikely to have been provided when they were sold. What are the risks? There is a huge impact on our constituents' privacy. Your TV really could be watching you. Two years ago, footage stolen by hackers from home security cameras in Hong Kong was sold to pornographic websites—a huge invasion of people's intimate private moments. There are numerous reports of baby monitors being hacked by paedophiles.

There is also the danger of hackers using a fairly innocuous connected device as a gateway to jump to other devices and steal valuable information. An infamous example from the business world is the attack in 2013 on Target, one of the top five retailers in the US. Criminals gained access to its network through a supplier connected to an external vendor portal. They then stole the details of 40 million customer credit and debit cards. The supplier just provided air-conditioning. The total cost of the cyber-attack was more than \$200 million. That is one hell of an expensive air-conditioning bill. There was also an attack on a casino, where hackers gained entry to the network through the thermometer of a fish tank.

Once they have a foothold in the home, hackers can access other devices that are not properly secured. There is a real danger that sensitive information relating to a constituent's health or their financial information could be compromised, but how common is that really? Is it just a case of a few alarmist headlines? The consumer watchdog Which? ran an interesting experiment last year. It set up a smart home with a range of consumer devices, from kettles to thermostats, televisions and security devices, all connected to the internet. It experienced 12,000 hacking or scanning attempts in a week. At one stage, it experienced up to 14 hacking attempts an hour. We have a problem, therefore, but not a problem of which many people are aware. A recent report that surveyed 2,000 UK consumers found that people were largely unaware of the risks. Some 48% of respondents were not aware that hackers could hijack their connected devices.

Unsecured consumer devices are also a real risk to our digital infrastructure. Hackers who control connected devices can harness their collective power into a botnet—a network of devices that can be used to launch denial of service attacks on our digital infrastructure. The Secretary of State referred earlier to the Mirai botnet. What is interesting is that it is thought to be the first botnet to harness the power of insecure consumer devices or the internet of things. At its peak, it had about 600,000 devices—baby monitors, radios, cameras—at its beck and call. You and I would not necessarily have noticed it, Mr Deputy Speaker, until the day it launched an attack on the domain name service provider Dyn in 2016. In doing so, it took out Netflix, PayPal, Amazon, Visa, Reddit and Airbnb for the best part of a day.

Contrary to some of the claims we have heard from those on the Opposition Benches, the UK has always been a world-leading cyber-power. Back in 2011, we were one of the first countries in the world to publish a cyber-security strategy. It recognised the risks and opportunities that cyber-security brought to nation state relationships, critical infrastructure, business, consumers and society as a whole. We have always been out in front when it comes to protecting people, businesses and critical infrastructure.

[Ruth Edwards]

In the 2016 refresh of the national cyber-security strategy, the Government moved from relying on a market-based approach to protect consumers, to a more active role through the UK's active cyber defence programme, which makes the infrastructure of the UK's internet more difficult for cyber-criminals to exploit. It does that through measures such as improving the security of internet protocols—the method by which data is sent from one computer to another—and domain name system filtering that blocks access to sites known to host malware, such as phishing sites. The 2016 strategy also committed to publishing guidance on how to improve the default security of consumer products. There are three measures on that in the Bill. As we know, it forms the basis of similar codes used in India and Australia, but it also forms the basis of the first global technical standard for consumer cyber-security products. So far from being behind, the UK is the leading country in the world on this issue.

As has been set out, the three measures put forward are: banning default passwords; implementing a vulnerability reporting scheme; and informing consumers how long a product will receive security updates for at the point of sale. They are really necessary because, I am sorry to say, we have not seen the response from industry that we should have. Too many manufacturers are still not taking responsibility for ensuring their products have the basic security that our constituents need. Too many still shunt their security responsibilities on to the users of their products.

We need to call time on this. The digital economy is growing and holds huge opportunities, but those who benefit from its growth should also be investing in the safety and security of its users. We are still, in my view, only on the cusp of the fourth industrial revolution, the fusing of our digital and physical worlds. Cyber-security needs to be a part of that revolution to ensure that the inevitable risks are outweighed by the opportunities.

2.41 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): As the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), said, this is a technical Bill, but it is hugely important and will make a real difference. It will build on the incredible speed of the gigabit roll-out programme—up to 65% from just 11% two years ago. That is, whether she likes it or not, the fastest roll-out in the world, delivered under the Minister, and indeed under her predecessor—but I will leave that to the rest of the House to judge. She is right, however, to say that we should be doing everything we can to go as fast as we possibly can. I humbly submit that setting the large number of broadband providers that operate in this country in competition against each other to get as much of the country connected as possible, is one of the ways that is delivering that incredible roll-out speed and I think she should welcome that.

None the less, it is important to make sure that the operators that seek to deliver the roll-out are able to access the land they need. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a passionate speech, possibly one that none of us was expecting in this kind of debate, in defence of landowners. Landowners are a crucial part of getting

the roll-out right, but I say gently to him that there has been an incredibly successful lobbying campaign on behalf of those landowners, who, for a very long time, have had a very good deal. The 2017 proposals to cut the amount of money they receive, bringing it in line with other utilities—we could argue about whether broadband is technically a utility—was absolutely the right thing to do. It is what will speed up the roll-out programme.

Sir Desmond Swayne *rose*—

Matt Warman: I will let my right hon. Friend intervene in a minute. He talked about the benefit to landowners. When we get the roll-out right and get masts at as many locations as possible, the benefit accrues not to landowners primarily but to all the communities that live around them. That is where we should be focusing, not primarily on the small number of landowners who are concerned.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am only interested in the lobbying of my constituents who have been so harshly affected. We have heard the stories of the 90% and 95% reductions in income. This has made things very much less expensive for the companies concerned. Where has that money gone? It has certainly not been invested in the programme.

Matt Warman: My right hon. Friend does not make a wholly unreasonable point, but ultimately that money is going into an incredibly rapid roll-out of 5G. In rural areas in particular, we are seeing the industry putting in half a billion pounds of its own money alongside half a billion pounds of Government money to get to some of those hardest to reach places, so I fundamentally do not accept his premise, which is that the industry is not investing as it should. I would like the Government to go even further to see even more investment. He is right to focus on some of the small areas that rely on this income. However, that cannot be the main economic driver for the roll-out of 5G.

Simon Hoare: Does my hon. Friend accept that the reverse seems to be happening and that the roll-out seems to be slowing down? Does he also accept that this is a rather mature market of providers in an increasingly profitable arena, with ever-greater demand for their services from a growing population? Therefore, it may be worthwhile revisiting this de-incentivisation—obviously that was not the intention but it seems to be the result—to see whether restoring the proper remuneration that people had expected may speed up this much-needed roll-out.

Matt Warman: Ultimately, I think reducing it in the predictable and long-announced way is what will speed up the roll-out. However, to give my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West, who is no longer in his place, a little succour, the industry should be on notice that if the currently voluntary dispute resolution system does not work and does not deliver fair settlements, perhaps the Government will think about giving the system some more teeth. There is a balance to be struck, and this Bill strikes it in the right way. However, there is another step that one could take.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is being characteristically generous with his time. We had this sort of debate about the water companies and sewage. Unless their toes are

held to the fire, they will exploit a system—I do not criticise them for so doing—for as long as they can. If the Government were more robust in bringing this forward as a clear commitment and making it binding and obligatory, that might help unblock the logjam.

Matt Warman: Ultimately, I simply say, from a Conservative standpoint, that I would like regulation to be as light touch as possible. This is the right step down that road. It may be necessary to be more robust, but we are not there yet.

Moving on to “secure by design”, my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) asked the Opposition which of the other 13 points they would bring in. This Bill introduces three of them, and they are immensely welcome, but they are the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to cyber-security. I would not jump immediately to all 13, and the world has somewhat moved on since the 2017 report to which she referred, but there is a clear direction of travel. I welcome how the Government are introducing the proposal, but the industry should be looking at what more there might be to do.

Finally, my hon. Friend also talked about cyber-security in a much broader sense than this Bill. A huge number of businesses will rely on cyber-security professionals in future to ensure that they are provided with the kind of security that they need and that which their insurance companies’ policies might require to guard them against the potential costs of hacking. In due course, some of the people operating in that profession will require greater regulation. The UK Cyber Security Council, which the Minister oversees, is welcome, but further regulation, perhaps in the manner of the Bar Council, is what will allow the cyber-security profession to grow, flourish and continue to preserve Britain’s place as a world-leading cyber-power, which we all want. This Bill helps us to get ever closer to that goal, and I commend it to the House.

2.49 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I applaud the Government for the energy they are putting into trying to improve our connectivity. There are undoubtedly still notspots in my rural constituency. Having Zoomed constantly in my River Severn village throughout the pandemic, I find that the pizza wheel of doom—when the tinternet is struggling and people freeze in strange positions—is no longer funny; it is just annoying. I recognise that improvements are needed, and I see what the Government are trying to do, but many of my constituents are experiencing a David and Goliath situation, which I am worried about. That is where I will focus my comments.

Trying to deal with the might of the telecommunications companies is a pretty scary feat for any constituent, even before some of the tactics that I have sadly seen deployed. In my short tenure as Stroud’s MP, since the 2019 election, I have dealt with a number of mast issues; some people are amazed by how many mast issues have come up locally. I will summarise a couple. The Minister has been kind enough to look at case studies in my area. There have been issues with masts in Painswick village, where, sadly, Stroud District Council infamously missed a deadline that effectively led to permission being given by default on a controversial site. That matter rumbles

on and has caused a lot of upset and stress for neighbours and the landowner. I understand other councils in the country have faced this issue.

There have been local applications in little villages in areas of outstanding natural beauty that effectively rely on terrifying elderly landowners. A village clubbed together to get professional advice to support a landowner to deal with that. A Stroud farmer currently receives a £10,000 annual rent payment for an existing mast but has been offered a significantly lower amount. We know that farmers struggle to make ends meet and that the Government are telling them to diversify, so these incomes can be fundamental to getting food on their own tables, let alone putting food on ours. Negotiation is limited—this farmer is a big, burly guy who does not feel bullied and told the company to take the mast away—but it goes on and on, and he does not feel like he is in a strong position.

If the Bill relies on the courts for remedy, I believe the roll-out will continue to stall. Courts are the remedy only for those who can afford it. Disputes have drastically increased, as have stress, frustration and anger, since the 2017 changes, and I fear it will get worse. The electronic communications code—this is a bit more technical—grants code operators the right to access land to install and maintain apparatus and to seek such rights to be imposed by the courts where agreement cannot be reached. One key change introduced in 2017 was to modify the pricing mechanism that the court should apply; as we heard, there has not been a proper look at pricing and valuation, even in the consultation on the Bill. The pricing mechanism was changed from market value to realign it along similar principles to compulsory purchase—we all know how painful compulsory purchase has been for many of our communities, not just Stroud—with statutory assumptions to place the valuation in the no-scheme or network world. That change was against the findings and recommendations of the Law Commission, and effectively of Nordicity and Analysys Mason, which is beyond my pay grade but I am told is important.

We are now in a situation where code operators typically portray landlords as a grasping group who cause delay to hold them to ransom for more rent. That is not my experience. Where code operators seek to acquire new sites, there are a range of different reasons why challenges are put up by constituents, local villages and local communities. I will give a few of the common themes I have come across. High on the list is the potential effect on, or conflict with, the landlord’s own use of the wider landholding and other tenants’ activities. The potential impact on the landlord’s own future development aspirations and the visual impact of unsightly and often poorly designed electronic communications apparatus on the wider landholding or host building are high up the list before rent comes into it, along with: adverse impacts on neighbours or disputes with neighbours about a mast going up; adverse effects on the marketability of other land or buildings; adverse impacts on the investment value; structural issues and future maintenance of a building or structure on the site; the extent of extended health and safety or drop or fall zones; and the implications of further development granted as permitted development. All those are on the list. It is not just about rent or money.

Stroud constituents inform me that the code operators have sadly proved generally insensitive and unsympathetic to addressing such issues. Instead they have interpreted

[Siobhan Baillie]

the ECC changes as granting them rights over any third-party land almost for free and on terms that they can dictate, so that they can do almost anything at any time. It is that mindset of entitlement over private rights, and the blinkered belief that digital communications are the only important thing, that are influencing decisions.

The code operators are looking to acquire large numbers of sites and to renew hundreds of leases. Given the process-orientated targets internally, no doubt the resource is driven by objectives and milestones, and less by humans—the people it affects. I fully accept that we are thinking about humans all over the country when we are trying to improve connectivity, but I worry about the balance. Bullying local people is not acceptable. No matter how much my Stroud constituents want faster this, that and the other—and, in many cases, how much we need connectivity actually to work—they do not want their neighbours to be bullied and they expect Government legislation to protect the weaker party. By any analysis, it is usually the constituent landowner, not the telecommunications organisation, that is usually the weaker party.

Local councillors tell me that they feel pretty impotent on this issue. Constituents do not feel that their local councils have any power, so there is a disconnect between who they feel protected by and the changes with the legislation. I will give the House a bit of an overview of the process that constituents have outlined. Mr Deputy Speaker, please shout or nod at me if you want me to wind up, because I realise that I am taking some time, but these are important points.

The process starts with a landlord being approached by a site acquisition agent—not necessarily a well-known company—seeking access to land to undertake a survey. That request is then accompanied by a threat, effectively, to gain access via an application to the upper tribunal, and this is pointed out as almost impossible to resist, with the likely cost of a vast sum of money to the landowner in the case of resistance. I am thinking not about my big burly farmer, but about the elderly landowner who is worrying about this. Access is often granted unwillingly, which confuses neighbours and starts arguments locally. A survey is then undertaken and the landlord is sent a set of heads of terms, sometimes with an imploding offer of capital payment if they are agreed within a short period. Without any real attempts to negotiate or listen to concerns raised, notices are then served under the ECC, which cock the gun for reference to an upper tribunal again for the imposition of an agreement.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I thank my hon. Friend for so clearly summing up the process of what the Secretary of State called “community engagement”.

Siobhan Baillie: I only wish I was as beautifully dramatic and exciting as my right hon. Friend when I spoke. I am conscious that I am reading a list to the Chamber, but it is an important list because it shows the experience of so many constituents. It may be dull, but it is scary, and it is a very worrying time for our constituents.

If residents and businesses are lucky—some of my constituents have been—it is usually at around this stage that they instruct professional support, because

they are so worried. They start to think about how to object to the application. It is pretty late in the game—a long way down the track—but often people do not realise that it is an option and a lot cannot afford it. However, I am being told that people are successful in getting the applications refused in most cases where professional support is provided.

The lack of investment by the code operators in good-quality design, and the lack of mitigating features such as screening or structural landscaping, reflect the arrogant assumption that they can simply pass on societal costs of their development to the public at large, while simultaneously claiming that planning is a barrier to deployment. All those things are often lost in that long process before we get help to understand what really should be brought into the planning applications.

It is clear that, where planning permission is granted, landlords come under the real threat of a reference to the upper tribunal, and given the extremely high costs of litigation, quite a lot of people will fold at that point, regardless of the merits of their case. I have to believe that the code operators do not set out to behave in an egregious manner. I have met so many staff from telecommunications companies who come to consultations, and they are good people who want to find solutions, but time and again, these are programmes that the agents, acting on their behalf, are running through. My fear is that the totality of the changes we are looking at now, far from redressing the balance of power, will tip the scales further in favour of the code operators. As a consequence, the proposed changes in the Bill will actually exacerbate the marketplace issues being experienced, even if they try to resolve some of the legal anomalies.

I fear that we have lost sight of the mission, which is how best to deploy networks in the most appropriate places. We are trying to fix the issues we have experienced since 2017 with a piece of misused and, in effect, abused legislation that was supposed to be used as a last resort, but is now very much used *de rigueur* by the companies. I do not think that is the way to make improvements for the landowners and the companies, nor is it a way to roll out the improvements the country wants to see.

I want to know from the Minister how the Bill addresses what has become the main issue with the framework, which is the way costs fall on landowners and have in effect become the latest bludgeon to beat them with. The cost of seeking advice is high and will often far outweigh any consideration that is offered, even over a 10-year period. Whatever the merits of the landlord's position, to contest any matter in the courts is very costly, and the extreme costs associated with losing mean that few but the largest with much at stake will be able to take that step, as I have mentioned. However, I think we have to keep hammering the point home.

I want to know, given that we have the experiences of things such as the water companies and the environmental fights happening all over the country, and given that we know that the Human Rights Act 1998 and article 6 provide the right to a fair hearing, why we are not seeking to strengthen the alternative dispute resolution option and thinking about making it mandatory. I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who is learned, in that I

do not see why we should wait to see if the measure fails before we make improvements that will support everybody to achieve the goals.

Finally, I was really disappointed that we have not worked harder to think carefully about the valuations. The information coming forward is that it is not about a slight chunk off what there is already or even an attempt to rebalance the ability to look at utility companies; the offers coming out to people with masts on their land is a dramatic change. It does not feel fair and will not achieve the goals, and I would like to hear from the Minister whether we can take another look at the valuation structure.

This has been a negative speech, but I thank the Government for the work they are doing. However, I think we can do better for everybody involved, and by doing better we will achieve some serious connectivity throughout the country, particularly in rural areas.

3.3 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I am conscious that I am the last Back-Bench speaker in the debate, and I see a number of hon. Members who have shown a late curiosity in it over the past few minutes, so I will try to keep my remarks as pithy as I possibly can.

I will confine my contribution to part 2 of the Bill, on the changes to the electronic communications code and, in particular, the Government's measures to improve digital connectivity and meet their target of delivering gigabit-capable broadband to 85% of UK premises by 2025. I think it is fair to say that we have made real strides in that direction, underpinned by the universal service obligation. Locally, we have Connecting Cheshire, the BDUK delivery partner, working to ensure that that is being met; the gigabit broadband voucher scheme, which I know many of my constituents have taken advantage of; and more recently the addition of Cheshire to Project Gigabit, which will hopefully mean that we secure more of the significant funding that has been committed to that project.

I argue that Eddisbury is a good test bed from which to judge the success of the Government's commitment. It is the 92nd largest constituency geographically, and 57.9% of it is classed as rural. It is 599th out of 650 constituencies for superfast broadband coverage. Some 23.5% of my constituents are aged 65 and over, against the national average of 18.6%. As we know, isolation is an issue for that age group, and therefore digital connectivity is particularly crucial. We also have a high number of small businesses scattered across the constituency. Some are run by people from their home, not least the many farmers in Eddisbury, or from a local commercial building, so the roll-out of gigabit-capable broadband is fundamental to the whole of my constituency and the local economy moving forward.

For all those local residents and businesses, reliable and resilient broadband and mobile coverage of a more than decent speed has become ever more essential, accelerated, as we know, by the covid pandemic. Simply put, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) said, it is now one of life's necessary utilities. It is therefore pleasing to report that in Eddisbury we have seen significant improvements in our broadband infrastructure. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who did some sterling work to try to make those figures

move in a very positive direction. We now have 89.7% of premises with superfast broadband availability. Some 56.2% are gigabit capable, which is up 15% in the last year alone, and I think up from just 7% in 2018.

However, as we have heard, there is still much to do, particularly in the many villages and rural areas of south Cheshire. For example, 9.4% of premises in Eddisbury receive broadband speeds of under 10 megabits per second, compared with 6.4% across the whole of the north-west. Since my election in December 2019, I and my staff have dealt with more than 100 cases of poor connectivity raised by frustrated constituents. The local survey that we carried out on the issue revealed that 55% of those who took part felt that their broadband provider did not meet the level of internet speeds that it had advertised in its plan. Respondents also fed back frustration about the real difficulty, and exasperating delay, in reaching agreements that allow for fibre cables to be laid across private land to connect properties—a frustration that the Bill seeks to address.

To give the House a short local example, there are 12 properties in a semi-rural location that sit between two areas where fibre has already been installed. Their broadband is delivered through copper telephone lines at very slow speeds of between 1 megabit and 5 megabits per second. In 2019, BT Openreach considered installing fibre as part of a wider project in the local area, but subsequently withdrew because of the incessant delays in obtaining wayleaves. To compound the problem, Openreach has estimated the cost of installing fibre via trench in fields adjacent to the lane that the properties are located on to be £55,000—a sum well beyond the amount that could be raised through the gigabit voucher scheme. In any event, both BT Openreach and Connecting Cheshire have, for some as yet unexplained reason, deemed that the 12 properties are not eligible for the vouchers. As a consequence, we have a stalemate. My team and I are doing all that we can to unlock the impasse, including on potential top-up funding and inclusion in the Airband project. I ask the Minister what assistance she and her team may be able to provide to ensure that those in the properties get the broadband that they want, although it may well be that without this legislation a solution may be a long way down the track.

I support the proposed reforms to the electronic communications code that include the introduction of a faster procedure to allow telecom operators to get temporary rights to access and install infrastructure on land, as well as the sharing of equipment as part of any upgrade. In doing so, I am of course mindful of, and have sympathy with, the concerns raised by a number of Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), off the back of the 2017 reforms that resulted, in some cases, in reductions in rents for hosting infrastructure, which can affect the resolution timeframe.

As we have heard, those issues were not revisited in the 2021 consultation, and I think that many of us would like some reassurance from the Minister that the Government will continue to monitor the issues of both valuation and dispute resolution in order to understand the consequences of the changes in the code arrangements. That will ensure that my landowner constituents feel they are getting the right value for their commitment, while my local residents can expect to have their gigabit broadband as quickly as possible.

[Edward Timpson]

Overall, this is an important Bill, bringing about the ever more pressing digital connection of our entire country. In Eddisbury we are taking significant steps in that direction, but there remains much more to do, and to that that end—with the help of the Bill— I will continue to do all I can to make it happen.

3.10 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close this Second Reading debate. The first job of any Government is to keep their citizens safe, and I am glad that the security elements of the Bill were developed in conjunction with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Department. Her Majesty's Opposition have the utmost confidence in our national security services, which go to such incredible lengths to keep us all safe in an increasingly difficult online world.

A number of speeches have been made by Members on both sides of the House, but let me deal first with what was said by my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (James Murray) and for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), both of whom spoke about the notspots in their constituencies and the increasing problems with access to tech. People may have the “plumbing” that can provide a good standard of broadband, but they may not have, indeed may not be able to afford, the equipment that would give them access to it.

We in the Labour party put security at the heart of everything we do, and it is owing to that desire to see people in this country safe in cyber-space that we will not oppose the Bill. However, there are issues that we feel should be addressed in it, some of which have already been mentioned today.

The product security measures in part 1 contain proposals that Labour fully supports. They include a ban on devices that come with easy-to-guess passwords such as “default” and “admin”, and oblige firms to make such vulnerabilities public knowledge, with those failing to comply being threatened with large fines. That is especially prudent as it institutes common-sense rules for sellers to follow, and ensures that consumers are more engaged in cyber-security. Basic cyber-hygiene is paramount, and measures such as changing default passwords would do a great deal to improve devices' security by, in theory, adding an additional layer of protection. However, we agree with many in the industry that certain measures could have gone further, and we will continue to hold the Government to account in the areas where we believe that to be the case.

While the pursuit of increased security on devices is laudable, there are concerns about the practicality of such changes. If each device is now legally bound to have a private password, who will be responsible for managing it? Given the plethora of smart devices that we all use, I am sure that we have all forgotten a password or two; I certainly have. If a device needed to be repaired and the user had forgotten the password, how would the specialist repairing the phone gain access? Many in the industry believe that that could potentially lead to a situation in which manufacturers might have to provide “super-user accounts” or “backdoor access”.

The Bill also introduces the mandating of manufacturers to tell consumers at the point of sale about the product's lifespan and for how long it will receive security updates.

While we can all agree that more transparency is a good thing for customers, if security updates are available for a few years—as is the case with Android phones, for example—surely that will lead to built-in obsolescence, meaning, in this case, smart devices being excluded from key security updates after a relatively short lifespan.

Ruth Edwards: The point is that the companies providing the devices will stop giving out security updates anyway. All that the Bill is doing is ensuring that users are informed of when that will happen. It is not forcing in any obsolescence; it is merely giving consumers choice by enabling them to know when those security updates will be stopped.

Chris Elmore: I take the hon. Lady's point, but not everyone can afford simply to keep on replacing their technology. [Interruption.] I gave way to the hon. Lady, so she should at least give me the courtesy of allowing me to respond. It is quite simple, is it not? [Interruption.] Government Members do not like it, do they? Perhaps this is not an issue in her constituency, but I bet it is. If a company says, “You will not receive security updates after X amount of time”, people will naturally assume that they have to replace their device. We have heard from Members from across the House today that not everyone can afford to keep replacing devices based on the security that is put in front of them.

All I am asking of the Minister is to work with the industry to ensure that if updates could be taken over a longer period, it is not simply a binary issue of saying, “This device will no longer be updated.” It is as simple as that: we are just trying to make sure that people can afford to keep the devices they own. In many cases, people will save for years to pay for devices or do it through hire purchase.

Ruth Edwards: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Elmore: I will not, no, because the hon. Lady does not like the answer—that is the problem, is it not?

We must also consider the wider view that part 1 of Bill is limited in scope. However, it is clear to all of us here today that no one nation can legislate the internet. Part 1 does provide some desperately needed security responsibilities for the consumer, combined with giving them the necessary information to make informed choices about how they manage the basics of their own digital lives. The pandemic has only served to accelerate the shift to digital, and with that comes the question of increased security and safeguards online.

Now let us turn to part 2 of the Bill. I do not often say this, but I am in almost complete agreement with the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne)—that is an odd experience, after so many years in the House with him. A number of Members have spoken about constituency issues relating to the changes to the code in 2017, including the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and for St Albans (Daisy Cooper). It is a good job I am a Welsh MP, because the hon. Members for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) have also done so. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), who spoke honestly about what many community groups, farmers, landowners, churches and many other organisations across her constituency are facing, and I agree with her.

We are asking the Government for a review, for it to be fair and for it to provide assurance to those organisations, many of which were the backbone of supporting communities up and down the land during the pandemic, whether through feeding us, taking us in collective worship or offering support to our children and young people. These community organisations deserve our support and we need to ask the Government to follow through on their commitment to undertake a review this year, which was part of the original commitment from a number of years ago. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for saying that.

On part 2 and the current state of our country's telecommunications infrastructure, we do have some concerns, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the shadow Secretary of State. Having inherited a world-leading position from the last Labour Government, since 2010 the Conservatives have cultivated a culture of missed targets, stunted ambition, and ultimately, stagnation when it comes to our telecommunications infrastructure. The last Labour Government recognised the central role that connectivity would play in the economy of the future, and rightly placed the issue front and centre. As a result, we delivered first-generation broadband to about 13 million UK households by 2009, which shows that large digital infrastructure projects can be delivered at breakneck speed.

To put it simply, we had a vision that we made a reality. Ambitions can be delivered at this sort of speed only when there is real effort, action and long-term planning on behalf of Ministers. Unfortunately, we are not getting that from the current Administration. As has become the norm with this Government, bold and exciting-sounding targets are made in public, only to be quietly watered down at a later stage. The Prime Minister came into office promising full-fibre broadband “by 2025”. His Government then realised that they were not going to be able to deliver it, so they reduced the target to full gigabit broadband by 2025. Realising they also could not deliver that, they landed at the current target of 85% gigabit broadband by 2025. Several bodies, including the Public Accounts Committee, the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and many industry experts, now doubt that the Government are even going to achieve that. Dither, delay, disappointment—this has become the norm under this Conservative Government.

The primary concern is that this Bill fails to address the fundamental flaws introduced in the ECC. The code did not receive the necessary scrutiny, resulting in an imbalance between mobile operators and property owners. The Law Society's analysis makes it clear that the Bill fails to address fundamental flaws in the code that are holding back the roll-out across the country. We are now concerned that the measures in this Bill may slow the 5G roll-out further by disincentivising small building owners and landowners, such as churches, community groups, sports clubs and farmers, from hosting phone masts.

This all began when the Government introduced the ECC in 2017, permitting telecoms firms to renegotiate rents for phone masts down by as much as 90%. Despite promising that the reductions in rent would, in reality, be no more than 40%, this has not held true and the rent reductions have far exceeded that figure. It was deeply

disappointing to hear the Secretary of State say to the right hon. Member for New Forest West that there will be no review, despite there being promises to the contrary—yet another broken promise to the people of this country.

The Government have created a framework that allows telecoms companies to dramatically reduce their costs at the expense of businesses, sports clubs, farmers, small landowners and community organisations. I know the Minister will have heard at first hand from a number of organisations across the country that rely on this small but crucial source of income. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the Government review the Bill to make rental valuations for telecoms masts fairer.

We heard from the hon. Member for Stroud about the David and Goliath issue of a big telecoms company versus a church, sports club or scout hut. It surely cannot be in the Conservative Government's interest simply to ignore all the groups across the country that are in desperate need of the regular income that has been ripped away from them for reasons they still do not really understand.

I finish with a couple of questions for the Minister. Will the Government stand by their 2017 commitment that rent reductions should be no more than an absolute maximum of 40%? Will she look to make a statement, or at least issue guidance, to establish a clear expectation of land valuation that removes the impasse between telecoms companies and site owners? Finally, will she commit to looking at the evidence base and undertake a full economic review of the code by the end of 2022, as was promised during the passage of the previous Bill?

The Opposition want to ensure that every community across the UK has the very best opportunities when it comes to connectivity, whether it be in people's homes or to allow small businesses to start up right across the United Kingdom. We want the Government to share in that ambition and to keep their promise to deliver improved digital infrastructure. We ask the Minister to step up and deliver these much-needed improvements across the UK.

3.22 pm

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): I thank all hon. Members for their valuable contributions to this debate. I am pleased that the Bill commands cross-party support, which underlines the commitment of this House to make sure that every household and business in our country can access faster digital connectivity and feel assured that our tech is secure. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for laying the foundations for this Bill and for bringing his expertise to bear in today's debate.

This Bill comes at an opportune time when cyber-attacks are on the rise and the pandemic has underlined the increasing importance of digital connectivity to how we live, work and socialise. The quality and security of that connectivity has an impact on people's life chances today and even more so in the future, so we have to grip these issues now. That is why we have to view fantastic telecoms infrastructure as more akin to a key utility, notwithstanding the need for different regulatory approaches.

In that way, this should not be seen as a dry debate about technology. I appreciate the valiant attempts to spice up this debate, which is about people and how we

[Julia Lopez]

give them and their communities the fundamental tools to live good lives and prosper. These networks are vital for the UK's future competitiveness. We cannot stay at the heart of the global economy if our connections are not world class, which is something we want not just for pockets of our nation but for every community.

We must not see a digital divide emerge between well-connected urban areas and poorly connected rural areas. I know how passionate Members are about the connectivity of their regions, and I welcome their highlighting of the challenges. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), who is tireless in her pursuit of better broadband for her county. I encourage ongoing engagement with my Department so that we get high-quality intelligence about what is really happening on the ground as our operators roll out new networks and upgrade existing. I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) to write to me in detail with some of his concerns about particular streets in his constituency.

As tech becomes a central driving force for our economy and our society, we have to be able to trust it without ordinary citizens needing deep expertise in cyber-security. That is why we want to make connected devices more secure by design, whether baby monitors or malevolent toasters, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson)—perhaps not as perilous a nightmare as that offered by my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), who discussed pictures of nude US Presidents. Cyber-attacks continue to be a serious and current threat to businesses and states, but this is also increasingly a phenomenon that is affecting all sorts of organisations, from local authorities and public bodies to individuals. The hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) raised an important point about the service of cyber officials and the tremendous work they do, and I echo his words.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a typically zesty contribution, but I am glad that he has at least accepted that we ought to be debating these issues, as yesterday he was considering not allowing that. He is very concerned about lowered rents for landlords who are hosting telecoms infrastructure. We have discussed these issues in person. As he knows, the electronic communications code was changed in 2017. I should make it clear again—I know this will disappoint hon. Members—that we are not seeking to alter that pricing structure again. In our view, the prices being paid for rights to install communications apparatus prior to 2017 were much too high, and with digital communications becoming an increasingly critical part of daily life, that really needed to be addressed.

The argument has been made that delays in digital deployment are primarily a result of changes to the code in 2017 because the amounts offered by some operators are reduced, thereby disincentivising landowners from letting land be used. We do not think this is the case. We maintain that the 2017 valuation provisions created the right balance between public need for digital communications and landowner rights.

But that is not to say that the valuation changes did not create challenges, and the Bill is designed to make a positive difference to some of the David and Goliath situations raised by my hon. Friend the Member for

Stroud (Siobhan Baillie). To help ensure that fair outcomes are reached, we are introducing changes to encourage more collaborative discussion. The alternative dispute resolution provision will offer a particularly useful means of tackling situations involving either unreasonably low offers or unrealistically high payments. I am none the less happy to continue this discussion as the Bill progresses through the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West suggested that the Government are on the side of rapacious telecoms operators over landlords. I wish to assure him that that is not the case. We are getting good digital infrastructure to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. I challenge the idea raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) that the telecoms operators are making a quick buck out of the networks they build. These are long-term investments, and the Government are pushing them very hard to deliver more, including by stripping high-risk vendors from their networks and rolling out infrastructure to communities that are not within easy reach.

I dare to suggest that some of the rarer and more emotive cases about community organisations receiving reduced rents are being used by certain lobbyists, some of whom are former Labour MPs, to obscure a larger, pretty hard-nosed commercial interest from companies that have bought up large numbers of telecoms sites and are concerned about receiving a lower return on their investment. Some of the same interest groups that oppose rent changes have written to me to express their support for better connectivity in rural areas. We should therefore not pretend that better connectivity does not rely on better access to sites and more realistic pricing for network operators who wish to deploy their services. Some hon. Members have pushed for the Bill to go further, particularly in relation to renewals and operator rights. Our policy aims align with that; we just need to make sure that the legislation is working as we hope. If amendments are required in Committee, we will actively consider them.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) mentioned the recent report by the Public Accounts Committee on gigabit roll-out.

I thank the PAC for its detailed work. It expressed concerns about the absence of legislation, but here is the legislation, which the Secretary of State and I have championed since our arrival in the Department, building on the fantastic work of my predecessor. We have also launched a series of procurements in the hardest-to-reach areas and Building Digital UK will soon be established as an executive agency to drive that work. I am glad that the impact is already being seen in areas such as Eddisbury.

On the product security part of the Bill, I welcome the expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and I encourage her to engage in the new national cyber strategy, because we would benefit from some of her points. The hon. Member for Manchester Central expressed concerns about whether we are taking future technological developments into account. There are a number of secondary provisions in the legislation. Technologies are changing all the time and it is important that the legislation can change with it.

Finally, the Bill is not a silver bullet to address all the cyber challenges that we face. It is an important tool in our arsenal. The UK has established global leadership

in the area and we are the first to develop domestic legislation that creates cyber-security requirements for consumer connectable products. The Bill will allow us to protect people across the UK, even as the world changes around us, and to keep pace with technology as it transforms our everyday lives. Combined with the measures on telecoms infrastructure, it will do a huge amount in the coming years to benefit our constituents and society at large.

I am sure that we can continue to work together to bring this important piece of legislation into law as soon as possible. We care passionately about connectivity for every community in our country and I am sure that the same spirit will continue as the Bill makes it passage through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PRODUCT SECURITY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 29 March 2022.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

PRODUCT SECURITY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

- (a) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown under or by virtue of the Act; and
- (b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided;

- (2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

PRODUCT SECURITY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, under the provisions of Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019, Ian Levy having resigned as a Parliamentary member of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, Robin Millar be appointed to the Body in his place.—(*Jacob Rees-Mogg.*)

3.32 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House has other things on his mind at the moment, but as a north Wales MP, I welcome the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) to the board. I am sure that he will play an important role.

3.33 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I thought it was better if I replied to the debate rather than speaking at length beforehand, but I promise that I will not detain the House long. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

The Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 established a sponsor body that has overall responsibility for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster and acts as a single client on behalf of both Houses. The body is comprised of parliamentarians and external members, including the chairman. The intention is to ensure the right balance between cross-party and cross-House parliamentary support for the works and the appropriate professionalism and expertise.

As required under the terms of the Act, the motion before the House today seeks to appoint a Member of this House to the board of the sponsor body. The vacancy arose from the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) to his position as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Cabinet Office. I thank him very much for his excellent work on the sponsor body. He worked exceptionally hard.

It is with equal pleasure that I propose, with the support, I hope, of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) who, although only recently elected to the House, will provide valuable insight and perspective to the sponsor body. We know that the work is important and that this House needs it, so I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

RATING AND VALUATION

That the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (Non-Domestic Rating Multipliers) (England) (No. 2) Order 2021, dated 13 December 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14 December 2021, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

TRADE UNIONS

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

That the draft Trade Union (Levy Payable to the Certification Officer) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 14 December 2021, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 176.

Division No. 176]

[3.34 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Courts, Robert
Afolami, Bim	Coutinho, Claire
Afriyie, Adam	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Aiken, Nickie	Crosbie, Virginia
Aldous, Peter	Crouch, Tracey
Allan, Lucy	Daly, James
Anderson, Lee	Davies, David T. C.
Anderson, Stuart	Davies, Gareth
Andrew, rh Stuart	Davies, Dr James
Ansell, Caroline	Davis, rh Mr David
Argar, Edward	Davison, Dehenna
Atherton, Sarah	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Bacon, Gareth	Dines, Miss Sarah
Bacon, Mr Richard	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Badenoch, Kemi	Docherty, Leo
Bailey, Shaun	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Baillie, Siobhan	Donelan, rh Michelle
Baker, Duncan	Double, Steve
Baker, Mr Steve	Dowden, rh Oliver
Barclay, rh Steve	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Baynes, Simon	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Bell, Aaron	Duguid, David
Benton, Scott	Dunne, rh Philip
Beresford, Sir Paul	Eastwood, Mark
Berry, rh Jake	Edwards, Ruth
Bhatti, Saqib	Ellis, rh Michael
Blackman, Bob	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Bone, Mr Peter	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Eustice, rh George
Bowie, Andrew	Evans, Dr Luke
Bradley, rh Karen	Evennett, rh Sir David
Brady, Sir Graham	Everitt, Ben
Braverman, rh Suella	Farris, Laura
Brereton, Jack	Fell, Simon
Bridgen, Andrew	Fletcher, Mark
Brine, Steve	Fletcher, Nick
Bristow, Paul	Foster, Kevin
Britcliffe, Sara	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Browne, Anthony	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bruce, Fiona	Frazer, rh Lucy
Buchan, Felicity	Freeman, George
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Freer, Mike
Burghart, Alex	French, Mr Louie
Burns, rh Conor	Fuller, Richard
Butler, Rob	Fysh, Mr Marcus
Carter, Andy	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Cartlidge, James	Garnier, Mark
Cash, Sir William	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Cates, Miriam	Gibb, rh Nick
Caulfield, Maria	Gibson, Peter
Chalk, Alex	Gideon, Jo
Chishti, Rehman	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Churchill, Jo	Gove, rh Michael
Clark, rh Greg	Graham, Richard
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Grant, Mrs Helen
Clarke, Theo	Gray, James
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Grayling, rh Chris
Clarkson, Chris	Green, Chris
Cleverly, rh James	Green, rh Damian
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Griffith, Andrew
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Griffiths, Kate
Colburn, Elliot	Grundy, James
Collins, Damian	Gullis, Jonathan
Costa, Alberto	Halfon, rh Robert

Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw

Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie

Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris

Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Craig Whittaker and
Gareth Johnson

NOES

Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu

Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Rayner, rh Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Jeff

Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeter, Wes
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Colleen Fletcher

Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishtil, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen

Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cheryl
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie

Question accordingly agreed to.

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

That the draft Trade Union (Power of the Certification Officer to Impose Financial Penalties) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 14 December 2021, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 182.

Division No. 177]

[3.48 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrayie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott

Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
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
Carter, Andy

Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary

Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Craig Whittaker and
Gareth Johnson

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre

Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette

Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hanvey, Neale
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly

Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete

Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Taiwo Owatemi and
Navendu Mishra

Question accordingly agreed to.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you or Mr Speaker could clarify whether he has received notification from the Prime Minister of when the Gray report will be published and whether we should expect a statement from the Prime Minister either this afternoon or tomorrow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. I have had no notice of a request for a statement. As Mr Speaker said earlier, he is insistent that important announcements are made first to this House. I know he will do everything he can to facilitate that, but, as I say, to date there has been no such request for a statement.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If we move to the Adjournment debate, which could of course go on for many hours and probably will, am I right in thinking that it would be impossible to have a statement tonight?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. As I understand it, if a request comes during the debate, it may be possible to suspend

the House and take a statement, but once the question has been put and the House is adjourned, it is not possible to have a statement tonight. If the hon. Gentleman recalls, at the end of the debate, the question is put about the House adjourning and that is the final decision on when it is adjourned.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Since we are doing hypotheticals, I wonder if we could elaborate a bit more. Obviously, we would all prefer a proper process where the Gray report is published in full and given to the public as soon as possible after the Prime Minister receives it. I think the House would also prefer an opportunity to be able to question the Prime Minister on it, and the Prime Minister himself has very generously said that he would come to the House, but we do need a decent amount of time between publication and the House being able to consider it. I just wonder what your thoughts are, Madam Deputy Speaker. It looks as if tomorrow may be difficult for us to have a statement. It is theoretically possible that we could have a statement on Friday, but would that not be rather inappropriate considering that the vast majority of Members do not anticipate being here on a Friday because they have constituency business?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. As I say, we have received no indication that a statement is to be made. My instinct would be that Mr Speaker would want any statements to be at a time when those Members who are interested in the statement were able to be here and participate. I think it is probably best if I just leave it at that.

Planning Permissions and Unauthorised Developments

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

4.4 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Speculation about how long I might speak for is rife in the Tea Room. I have been informed by the Government Whips Office that I could take almost three hours with my speech. Tempting though that is, I reassure the House that I will not detain it for as long as that—although I acknowledge that that is a shame.

This debate is a follow-up to the ten-minute rule Bill that I introduced to the House last autumn, which sought to make unauthorised development an offence and to prohibit retrospective planning applications. Sadly, there was insufficient parliamentary time for the Bill to proceed, but the problems with planning enforcements remain.

What is the problem? Rogue developers regularly exploit loopholes in our planning system to build unauthorised developments without planning permission. Sadly, they are getting away with it. Under the current planning rules, development without permission is generally not a criminal offence, whereas failing to comply with enforcement action is.

Local authorities have a range of enforcement powers in their arsenals. Enforcement notices can be issued and, at the extreme end, require demolition and restoration. If they are upheld, there can be a fine of up to £20,000 on summary conviction or an unlimited fine on indictment under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Other measures, such as contravention or stop notices, can be used depending on the circumstances.

Elements of the Localism Act 2011 made changes to the planning system, notably by removing an applicant's right to use two separate defences in a single case. In 2015, the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), outlined a policy to make intentional unauthorised development a material consideration for all applications, including retrospective ones.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill proposes a new offence for anyone who resides, or intends to reside, on land without permission and has caused, or is likely to cause, damage. The proposals are welcome, but the enforcement action I have outlined comes at a high cost to local authorities. It can take years to restore some sites because of the lengthy appeal processes involved. In any event, many rogue developers are eventually granted retrospective planning permission.

The planning portal goes as far as to state that in respect of breaches, local authorities

“often permit a retrospective application where planning permission has not been sought.”

Even when local authorities do not, the unauthorised development is often at such an advanced stage that the site is never fully restored. When such unauthorised developments have taken place on green-belt land or open land, they can lead to significant and permanent damage to areas that our planning system is supposed to protect.

That means a developer could show absolutely no regard for the legal process yet ultimately still be rewarded.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I did not intend to intervene but thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for allowing me to do so. Not just developers but private individuals take liberties in this matter, certainly in my constituency of Beckenham.

Gareth Bacon: My right hon. and gallant Friend is, of course, completely correct.

The consequence of the situation I have described is that many rogue developers bypass our planning system, gambling that enforcement action against them will be too slow and that, once built, their unauthorised development will be approved regardless. This is infuriating for the local residents who have to live alongside the developments. It is also frustrating for those who have played by the rules and sought planning permission themselves only to see others bypass the process.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, Staffordshire Waste Recycling Centre now has to apply for retrospective planning permission at its McGuinness scrap yard site, where the company is digging up an old landfill site, causing a terrible stink across the north Staffordshire area. Nearby, people are suffering because of Walley's Quarry in the neighbouring constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme. Does my hon. Friend agree that not just certain developers but companies are taking liberties and creating distress for the surrounding residents?

Gareth Bacon: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. That is precisely the sort of abuse of the system that I ask the Government to address. Such abuses have a material and long-lasting impact on local people. When people are seen to get away with it, that just encourages more of the same.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I might, if my hon. Friend will allow me, seek to catch the Chair's eye momentarily after his remarks. As he moves forward with this and as he, I hope, encourages the Government to take up his proposals, could he ensure that they include commercial operations? I have experience in my constituency; it is not just residential developers doing this, but commercial developers and businesses. I echo the points that have been made, but that must be a part of what he does.

Gareth Bacon: I thank my right hon. Friend for the intervention and I agree entirely. The point is very well made and I can see the Minister on the Treasury Bench paying close attention. It is a subject that he and I have discussed on many occasions, and I look forward to hearing what he says in a moment.

The impact of all of this goes beyond local areas, as local authorities that pursue enforcement action against rogue developers have to spend significant sums of taxpayers' cash on legal battles. When I introduced my Bill back in the autumn, I referred at length to a case in my constituency as an example of what can occur. That case is now subject to consideration by the courts, so I will not go into that detail again, save to make the observation that it has taken more than a year to get to

[Gareth Bacon]

this point and the end is still not in sight. However, it does not impact just my constituency—it is a national problem. Such incidents, as I have heard from my hon. Friends, are widespread.

In another example, in 2018, an unauthorised development was set up around Chelmsford on a Saturday morning, meaning that the planning enforcement team were able to visit the site only on the following Monday, by which time caravans, a digger and lorries carrying materials had all been brought on to the site in a pre-planned and co-ordinated attempt to build as much as possible so that it would become unviable for the council to dismantle the works. Neither of those incidents are easily resolvable. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) has spoken in this House about procedural battles on development sites in Guildford and Leatherhead that have lasted between 14 and 18 years. Green belt land has been acquired and built over without planning permission in both locations.

So what solutions might there be? When I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, I stated that I believed that the solution lay in legislative change to move unauthorised developments without permission from being a civil offence to being a criminal offence. I made the argument that that would prevent rogue developers from appealing enforcement action and block retrospective planning permission automatically. I stated that any change should not aim to remove certain permitted development rights for private households. Nor should it attempt to single out encampments by certain specific communities. Any fair planning system should recognise that developments could unintentionally stray from the approved plans when constructed. In order to avoid the danger of people who have inadvertently breached planning regulations being criminalised, for example, in cases where an extension is slightly too large or where someone implemented something erroneously, believing that they had permitted development rights, the Bill I drafted distinguished between more minor, accidental planning permission breaches, and egregious breaches where someone repeatedly attempted to bypass the planning system, or where the breach occurred on protected land such as the green belt. In such instances, the rules need to be flexible enough to consider the circumstances of the breach. However, I believe this should be balanced against the need to ensure the system is strong enough to close the loophole that rogue developers are currently exploiting.

There are a range of potential solutions. As I have stated, my solution was to change the law to make unauthorised development a criminal offence. An alternative might be to reform the pre-existing enforcement provisions, for example, by rapidly speeding up the process by which planning enforcement can take place, and perhaps vastly increasing the level of fines applicable and limiting the timescales and grounds for appeal.

Whatever solution we opt for, the case for change is substantial. I have seen at first hand local authorities' difficulties in deterring and stopping rogue developers from building without permission. I have seen the damage that that can cause. I have witnessed the frustration of local residents who find their local areas threatened and I have heard from local councillors and their officers

about the long drawn-out, inefficient and very expensive processes they are obliged to follow in attempting to deal with the problem.

We can strengthen councils' ability to act, protect the green belt and ensure that communities get their say on local developments by changing the law. When the planning Bill comes to the House, it will be a golden opportunity to take steps to protect local residents, stamp out these abuses of the planning process and right a very clear wrong. I urge the Government to pay heed to the issue. I very much look forward to hearing the comments of my right hon. Friend the Minister.

4.14 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I am very grateful to have caught your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to have the opportunity to make a contribution to this slightly extended Adjournment debate. I promise my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) that it will be a brief one.

I have a dreadful situation in my constituency. Over the past 12 months, a local chalk pit on green-belt land, which has historically been a combination of an overflow for the local car dealers and a transfer site for local skip dealers, has been transformed by one operator—a local firm, NJB Recycling—into a full recycling centre without planning consent. It is now applying retrospectively for planning consent; I have opposed the application and hope that it will be turned down.

The experience of the past 12 months has highlighted an issue to which I hope the Minister will give some thought in discussion with his colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Not only is there an unlawful use of the site, and not only is the operator applying for retrospective consent—I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that someone should not be allowed to set up a commercial operation without permission and get away with it—but the agencies involved do not have the powers to deal with a contravention of planning consent.

The facility is regulated by the Environment Agency, whose performance over the past 12 months has, I have to say, been lamentable. The site is causing massive noise nuisance to local residents; it is a few yards away from houses that are now being subjected to substantial noise all day long. We have had massive dust problems, and there have been huge traffic problems with the dramatic expansion in the use of the site. It is a shocking example of something that simply should not be able to happen.

Not only has the performance by the Environment Agency's team been lamentable, but it has not used the powers that it has to try to restrain things. Frankly, it has not followed its own assessment of the scale of the problem: it carried out an independent assessment, found out that the operator was in breach and then failed to act on that breach. It has said all along that it cannot act to close down, or withdraw a permit from, an operator that is operating a site unlawfully, even though the operator has changed the nature of its work and is now operating in a way that is unlawful in planning terms.

We need a joined-up approach to regulation. We should not have a situation in which the planning authority receives a retrospective application for an unlawful use of a site, but the regulations that apply to

the site's use under the auspices of the Environment Agency do not permit the Environment Agency to say "stop." My message to the Minister, to whom I am happy to speak in more detail as he prepares the planning Bill, is that two agencies should not have different enforcement powers and different abilities to intervene in a case of unlawful use and a retrospective planning application.

I would like the whole thing to be stopped. I would like all the agencies involved to act in unison and say, "You ain't got permission to use the site in this way. It's against planning law, you don't have consent, you're applying retrospectively—you should not be doing what you're doing." Everyone should have the power to step in and say, "You must stop." I am happy to share more detail with the Minister; I have been talking to DEFRA Ministers as well.

I want a joined-up approach so that all the agencies have the same power to intervene when a site is being used unlawfully and when a retrospective application is made. Actually, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington that a retrospective planning application simply should not be allowed anyway, but at the moment we have a disjointed situation among the different agencies. I encourage the Minister to work with me to address it in legislation.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): It is a great pleasure to speak in this important Adjournment debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) on raising an important issue on behalf of his and all our constituents, as well as our colleagues and partners in local government.

If we want our country to have a planning system that is prepared for the challenges of the future, we need to keep the conversation going about how the system will work in practice. I admire my hon. Friend's personal commitment to the issue. If I may say so, there is certainly nothing woke about this bloke, because last year he proposed several interesting changes to the enforcement regime in the private Member's Bill to which he alluded. We have had some constructive conversations about those changes, and I look forward to further such conversations to determine what we can take forward together. This matter may not generate as huge a number of column inches as other touchstone issues of our day, but I assure the House and my hon. Friend that the Government share his interest in and commitment to improving planning enforcement in this country.

I also share the interest shown by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and I am concerned by the ongoing issue he faces. He will appreciate that I should not say too much more about it because of my quasi-judicial role, but I am certainly happy to discuss his worries about inter-departmental connectivity—let us call it that—and how agencies work together to effect appropriate planning decisions. He will know that we propose to bring forward planning reform, and I will certainly talk to my colleagues at DEFRA and engage him in those conversations. He is a distinguished Member of this House with a distinguished ministerial career, and in his 21 years here he has been a doughty campaigner on his constituents' behalf. He has demonstrated that again this afternoon.

It goes without saying that the overwhelming majority of people across the country will need to engage with our planning system only when they are looking for planning permission prior to any works they may want done. While a small number of works will inevitably slip through the net, with people accidentally undertaking work without realising it requires planning permission—most people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington rightly said, want to play by the rules—some will try to bend the rules to their will by gambling that planning permission will be granted retrospectively.

That gamble should never be allowed to pay off. It shows contempt for the rules that hold the system together, and it is unacceptable to every person who approaches the planning regime with good faith. When the system is gamed, local authorities have an array of powers—my hon. Friend alluded to some of them—in their enforcement arsenal, including strong financial penalties for non-compliance. Councils can step in to suspend works on a site so that proper investigation can take place. Again, if an individual or companies try to subvert that process, they can find themselves facing an unlimited fine for non-compliance.

Bob Stewart: In support of my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), a close constituency neighbour, he and I both have a problem, because people gamble with the weekend. We must give local authorities the power to take immediate action when people start their work, as my hon. Friend said, on a Friday evening or Saturday morning and then work through the weekend before anyone can actually take enforcement action. Such action should be almost immediate, and the police should be given the power to evict people before they start building too much.

Christopher Pincher: My right hon. Friend makes a practical point, and I will come on to say something about the support we want to give local authorities so that they are better able to enforce the rules. It is all very well regulating, but regulations are only as good as the enforcement capability of those charges with that responsibility—[*Interruption.*] I note, as I look to my right, that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) appears to be about to get to his feet, so I shall pre-empt him by sitting down.

Jonathan Gullis: I thank my right hon. Friend. He will know that, when it comes to giving local authorities more powers, it is about tackling not just retrospective planning, but those who own buildings, especially heritage buildings, that they are allowing to fall into a state of disrepair by being either a rogue landowner or an absentee property owner. I have introduced the Planning (Proper Maintenance of Land) Bill—not a very sexy title, I accept—which seeks to increase the fines in section 216 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. I have obviously been lobbying the Minister relentlessly, and I could not waste this opportunity to ask him to confirm at the Dispatch Box that, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), my ten-minute rule Bill is certainly being considered as part of the planning reforms.

Christopher Pincher: I am never knowingly under-lobbied by my hon. Friend, and I salute not only his indefatigability in campaigning on this issue, but the elasticity with which he has shoehorned it into this particular debate.

[Christopher Pincher]

Let me assure him that the matter he raises is important, and we do want to address his concerns effectively when we bring forward our planning reform. I am sure we will be talking further with him about those matters.

I have said that councils can step in to suspend works and enforcement notices can be served, but if a council needs to go nuclear, it can apply for a planning injunction via a court order that would restrain any actual or expected breach of planning controls. The outcome of this sort of process can lead to jail time, assets being seized and fines being handed down.

Gareth Bacon: The Minister is completely correct in what he has just outlined. The problem, however, is that this all takes time. It takes time to get a court appearance and it takes time for the injunction to be issued. Injunctions can very often be ignored, and further legal action has to take place to issue stop notices or other such action. All the while, development continues and the landscape continues to get scarred, local residents continue to get very anxious, and more time and money is being spent by the council. Would the Minister acknowledge that this is in fact part of the problem, and would he concede that this could be looked at in future, potentially as part of the planning Bill when it comes to the House?

Christopher Pincher: I appreciate and recognise my hon. Friend's concern. We do want to ensure that the innocent are not caught up in a regime that pursues the guilty, but we also want to ensure that the system is more speedy and has much greater deterrent effects on those who attempt to gamble with the law, those who attempt to bend it and, indeed, those who choose to break it.

We all recognise that the reason why we need the important debate my hon. Friend has brought to the House today is that we believe—we genuinely believe—that there is more that we can do, and there is more that we shall do. As everyone in the House will appreciate, we are committed to improving our planning system and making it one that delivers better outcomes for people in all parts of the country. It is going to be the bedrock of one of our principal missions, which is to level up the United Kingdom and to help revive and regenerate those areas that have long felt forgotten by politicians of all stripes in Westminster. In our constituencies, however affluent they may be on the face of it, we all have areas of our constituency where there is deprivation and where residents feel left behind, and we have to fix that.

When it comes to pulling the handbrake on unauthorised developments in their areas, we want to make it even easier for local planning authorities to step in and make sure that retrospective planning permission is not exploited by those bent on gaming the system. Let me be clear: retrospective applications are only for individuals or businesses that have made a genuine mistake. As my hon. Friend alluded to, the enforcement process needs to work better. We make that happen by closing loopholes, and strengthening the existing powers and penalties at our disposal.

As we modernise our planning system in England, we plan to engage with communities and key stakeholders throughout the planning process. Our ambition is to ensure that the outdated system, which is essentially a

relic of the post-war period, is now made fit for the 21st century, with proper digitisation of applications so that residents can easily see the proposed development in their area at the touch of their smartphone screen. As my hon. Friend and others have said, we have all seen and read about egregious examples of people bending the rules on retrospective planning applications. My hon. Friend mentioned the situation of the caravan park in Chelmsford, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell mentioned the situation faced by his constituents in Epsom. We see such challenges from individuals and commercial organisations up and down the country.

The simple idea behind retrospective applications is that they give people who have failed to seek planning permission prior to building a structure a fair chance to get the necessary approvals.

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend made the important point that a retrospective application should only be for somebody who has made a genuine mistake. May I press him a little bit on that? Should a local authority—and, crucially, the inspectorate—disallow a retrospective application that is clearly not based on a genuine mistake?

Christopher Pincher: Essentially, it should, but of course there are legal interpretations that need to be considered. Therefore, we need to ensure that any rule changes that we make are right, that they do not allow the new system to be gamed and therefore brought into disrepute, and that they do not lead to unintended and unfair consequences for, shall we say, the innocent.

Over the years, the system has been deliberately gamed by cowboy builders creating large structures or even whole developments before trying their luck with the local council to see whether they can get retrospective planning permission. There is one infamous case in Bedfordshire, which saw a local business owner who was originally granted permission to make a modest improvement to his 1960s bungalow end up building a three-storey mega-mansion, complete with a turret and sweeping balconies. That is just not right; it is the sort of egregious development that should not be allowed.

In other cases, we have heard of, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has said, lorries and building equipment arriving on site in the dead of night or at the weekend, and people laying internal roads and hardstanding without planning permission. Retrospective planning permission is then sought soon afterwards, and wrongly so. Clamping down on such flagrant planning violations and abuses of the system is going to be a key focus of my Department. It is one of the reasons why we have made intentional unauthorised development a material planning consideration, meaning that local authorities can factor in intent behind the unauthorised development when considering a retrospective application. In other words, it is not enough for builders to plead ignorance when it is plain for all—not least the planning authority—to see that they were well aware that their structure needed planning permission right from the outset.

Legislation also states that retrospective applications must be assessed in the same way as standard planning applications, so that permission cannot be granted retrospectively if there was little or no prospect of it being approved in the first place.

People making small improvements to their own home or garden are human, like all of us. Our constituents might not always think that we are human, but, like them, we are, and we know that genuine mistakes can be made. They will happen, so it would be unfair, where someone built their rear extension a foot too high, for example, or erected a fence in the wrong place, to take a sledgehammer to that work when retrospective planning permission would do. We have to be fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington said in his remarks.

With that principle in mind, while also accounting for the natural frustration that people and communities can feel about unauthorised development, criminalisation for infringements that fall into the minor or unwitting camp would be disproportionate. That is why we need to make sure that any changes we make are right and do not lead to unintended and unfair consequences.

As the House will know, we are considering a whole suite of possible planning reforms. I reassure my hon. Friend that that includes consideration of whether the current scope of offences is fit for purpose. He mentioned some matters, including using such terms as “egregious” in the law. We would need to look closely at that to ensure that there is a fair and proper legal interpretation of that word. He mentioned the greater use of fines, and we will certainly look at that possibility. The fundamental must be that the system deters retrospective planning applications and also deters the activity that results in those retrospective applications—the building in the first place.

We recognise that these reforms will only be worth making if our local authorities and the wider planning sector have the right tools to implement them and are able to give our planning enforcement regime proper teeth. To that end, an additional £65 million was made available by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Budget last year. That will help build the skills and capability that we need at the local level to translate our words into deeds on the ground.

As we look beyond the here and now, our commitment in the long term is to digitisation. Digitisation will mean that local authorities and their planning officers have

much more space and much more time to focus on the things that really matter, rather than the administrative bumbf that goes along with the present planning system. By digitising the system, we can make it more effective, and we can also create the headroom for planning officers and other officials to be more effective in their own work.

I will say a few brief words on appeals, which I know are a bugbear for many communities that find themselves in protracted and exhausting disputes. We certainly want them speeded up. It is absolutely right that everyone should be able to make their case and to have that case heard. Our priority is to accelerate that process by closing loopholes through future planning reforms. We are undoubtedly making progress in that direction. In the 18-month stretch from March 2020—the height of the covid pandemic—the Planning Inspectorate issued some 3,300 appeal decisions on enforcement cases. However, as I set out, there is more to be done to improve how the fundamentals of our appeals process work, and that has to start with removing the incentive for those who set out deliberately to abuse the system to try to delay the appeals process. I will say more about that as we advance our planning reforms, and I am happy to discuss it further with my hon. Friend and other Members to ensure that we get this aspect of our reforms right.

I thank my hon. Friend for championing this issue on behalf of his constituents, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed. The concerns raised echo through local authorities around the country, and I assure the House that they echo through my Department. They will have been heard loudly and clearly, and we are determined to act on them. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House in the months to come to ensure that we get our planning reforms ready, right and on the statute book so that all our constituents are protected.

Question put and agreed to.

4.40 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 January 2022

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

Automatic Pension Enrolment

9.30 am

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate. This is in line with the current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a lateral flow test before coming on to the parliamentary estate. Please give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of automatic pension enrolment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. We are considering the matter of automatic pension enrolment, but let us not speak too loudly about it. For the past decade, this has been one of the most remarkable success stories, yet also somehow one of our best-kept secrets. It all began in 2005 with the pensions commission looking out on a bleak private pension market. It knew that we had to act to boost the number of savers and savings in the UK to give people greater security in their retirement. The commission formally proposed, as part of its work, that those over a certain age and income be automatically enrolled in a pension. The Labour party, the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats all agreed, and after the Pensions Act 2008 was passed the coalition Government carried this through.

The results have been remarkable, transforming the UK pension landscape. For example, whereas the rate of workplace pension participation fell to 55% between 2009 and 2012, that rate is now a remarkable 88%. Today, more than 19 million eligible employees participate in a workplace pension and, together, save more than £100 billion in a single year. More than 10 million people are now saving or saving more, increasing pension savings by an incredible £17 billion. Two million fewer people are under-saving for their retirement than would otherwise have been the case. There has been a 50% increase in participation among the young, between the ages of 20 and 29. The greatest increases in pension participation by earnings have come from low to moderate earners. Let me put it simply. Savers are up. Savings are up. Men and women are participating equally. And the lowest earners have benefited the most.

That is perhaps a sign of what we can do when we work together but other, indirect benefits have been seen. For example, studies have shown that auto-enrolment has eliminated the mental health participation gap. Our fight against climate change has been bolstered: with savings volumes increased, UK pension funds now have more assets to invest in high-growth technology that is green or in renewable energy.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the opportunity to invest that money exists and could be pushed further, into local communities—particularly ones such as Sedgefield?

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend is a great champion of Sedgefield. I am grateful for that intervention, and he is absolutely right. I have spoken before about the many ways in which we can use and mobilise private capital to pay for green technology and renewable energy, but decisions about where those infrastructure sites are have to be taken by local authorities wherever possible.

Today, though, the top point that I want to make in terms of all these benefits is that auto-enrolment has helped to bring about a cultural change in our society. When our economy does well, our savers do well. Automatic enrolment helps to democratise capital. It creates millions of new investors, millions of new capitalists. It is part of what, over many decades, people have called the property-owning democracy, ensuring that most of those who can vote have a stake in our economy. When they put an x in a box on a ballot paper, they have that in mind—they have skin in the game.

However, when a policy has such an impact and is so successful, it is right that we debate and discuss how we can build on that success. Many in this place have put forward suggestions—I pay great tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) for his excellent private Member's Bill—the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill—and to the work that Onward, in particular, has done—so let me add my name to those calls. Of all the options the Minister has in front of him, expanding automatic enrolment to those aged 18 to 21 will have the most material impact for our country. Automatic enrolment should be extended as a priority to young workers, because for them the potential compound interest is greatest, the pressures of demographic change are most acute, the challenges of mental health and climate change are especially relevant and the need for greater financial inclusion is most pressing.

The challenge for this age group is stark. Only 18% of eligible 18 to 21-year-olds are currently enrolled in a workplace pension.

Paul Howell: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure access to pensions for not just young people but those in multiple jobs who do not reach the £10,000 threshold in a particular occupation? In Sedgefield and the surrounding villages, there are many people in low-paid work who do multiple jobs to try to reach a certain earnings level.

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend makes an important point. For the purposes of my remarks I want to focus on young people because, as I said, that will have the most material impact, but I know that others will speak about the points he raises.

Today, over four out of five 18 to 21-year-olds are missing out on the benefit of compound interest, despite belonging to the very group for whom the potential for exponentially increasing savings is the greatest.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I agree with the principle of extending automatic enrolment to young people, and I realise that the 2017 review of

[Alan Brown]

automatic enrolment recommended extending it to 18-year-olds. What does the hon. Gentleman think about the merits of extending it further, to 16-year-olds, who might well have left school and be in full-time work? If we are talking about the benefits of compound interest, an extra two years could make a huge difference.

Gareth Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: the earlier one starts saving, the greater the impact of compound interest. However, for me, balancing all the factors—particularly the impact on businesses—I think we should start where we can, with 18 to 21-year-olds. But it is not the case that we should not discuss his point at a later stage.

Is it any wonder that we find ourselves in this situation, given the general lack of savings culture in this United Kingdom? We have a culture, developed over decades, of relying on quick cash, quick results and tangible output. Although many talk about the aspiration to own a home, few talk about securing their retirement through a pension. Auto-enrolment will help with this, but we must also look at other ways to ensure that the option of saving for the future is more apparent.

Preparing for today, I was shocked to find a study by the National Association of Pension Funds that found that just 12% of job adverts mention the employment pension scheme that is offered. That compares to 71% of ads that mention the salary—even though the pension contributions can amount to about a third of total take-home pay. We need to look at this more broadly.

There is so much potential for our pension system to effect change, whether addressing the need for long-term savings, as I have discussed today, the need to tackle the fact that 10 million people have less than £100 in short-term savings or the fact that so many young people today never even get close to building a deposit for their first home. I believe that our pension fund market could provide the answers to those challenges. As such, given that it is now nearly 17 years since the Turner commission, I would like us all to agree cross-party that whoever is in government in 2024, we will look to launch a new pensions commission, looking specifically at the long-term challenges I have discussed and the opportunities the UK pension fund market can provide to citizens across this country.

9.40 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak on these matters, and it was especially a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) set the scene so well. We are here to endorse his words, and we look to the Minister for a response on the issues that still concern us and on which we wish to see action taken. It is also a special pleasure to say that I am one of those who bought into a pension at an early age, and I want to emphasise the importance of pensions to young people who do not fully understand the necessity or the benefits of having one.

I am pleased to see the Scottish National party shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and the Labour shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), but I am especially pleased to see the Minister in his place. I had the opportunity to have him visit my constituency some

two and a half years ago, before covid. That visit was to the local credit union. George Proctor was the manager, and the staff were there. We are very pleased to have them there. We were also very pleased to welcome the Minister, and we invite him to come back and get an update, if at all possible—if he has space in his diary.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is an honour and a privilege to be able to intervene on the hon. Gentleman, who is a legend in this House for the fact that he intervenes every single night in the Adjournment debate. I well remember the trip in July 2018, I think it was, to Newtownards Credit Union. It is particularly memorable—colleagues will understand about ministerial visits—because when I arrived I was presented with a ginormous slice of home-made lemon drizzle cake, made by one of the team there. In my view, that is how all Ministers should be greeted.

Jim Shannon: I think I can say on behalf of Newtownards Credit Union that when the Minister does return, the slice of lemon drizzle cake will be even bigger than the last one he had. I will send today's copy of *Hansard* to the staff and let them know what his expectations are. Joking aside, the Minister understands these issues and is always keen to address the concerns we have. Before we have any debates, he will always come and say to me personally, "Is there anything at all you want to bring forward today?" and then he tries to address those issues, which is something I especially appreciate. I wish all Ministers were the same, but I congratulate this Minister on doing that.

Provisions in the Pensions Act 2008 placed a responsibility on employers to automatically enrol job holders into, and contribute to, either a qualifying pension scheme or a new personal account scheme. Those duties apply to all businesses, regardless of size, which I for one welcome because it is the right thing to do. In his introduction, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford encapsulated the thoughts of us all about the growth of pension enrolment and how it benefits people. It is crucial that those eligible to put small amounts of money aside into a pension pot, whether they work in a small local café or in a large mechanical chain company, do their bit.

That legislation has reversed the decline in workplace saving. There has been a drastic increase in the total membership of defined contribution occupational schemes, from 2.1 million in 2011 to an outstanding 21 million in 2019—if that does not take Members' breath away, I do not know what else would. I am of pension age, but at approximately the age of 20, I remember my mother saying to me, "Jim"—or James, as I am on my birth certificate—"we need to go and start a wee pension for you." I said, "Oh, Mum, I'm too young to deal with that. I am not going to bother." Mum insisted, and whenever your mother insists, you do not have any choice. We trotted down to the local place and I enrolled in a pension, some 45 years ago. At the time, I may not have understood that pension, but I understand the benefits of it today as it comes to its culmination.

So often, people find that they have been paying into a couple of pensions. Only a couple of years ago, I found out that I had been paying into four different pensions along the way. It is great way of saving. I may not have seen that at the time, but I see it now.

Paul Howell: I am an accountant by trade. I contributed to a pension for a long time. My wife also contributed to a pension for a short number of years before we had our daughter. When I came to retire aged 56, just before I came to this place, we looked at the balance of the pensions and found she had made a disproportionate contribution in relation to the time that she had spent working, because it was right at the start. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that communicating with people about the importance of early and continuous contributions is vital? It is not just a triviality, as it is so important to the outcome at the end. Personally, I am benefiting massively from what happened at that early stage. I do not think we get the message out about how important this is for people. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that communications are important?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is right that it is best to make contributions from an early age. I can speak to that and the benefits of it. Even though I may not have understood that at that time, my mother was insistent, so I enrolled. Today, we see the benefits of all the things we did in the past.

To be eligible for a compulsory pension scheme in Northern Ireland, a worker must be at least 22, under state pension age and earning more than the minimum earnings threshold. I know some young people who have been paying into pension pots from as young as 18, but that is down the employer and employee discretion. I do not see a reason why young people who are in consistent work should not be contributing to their future, as referred to by the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell).

As this subject is not taught in schools, young people feel unaware of the importance of taxes and pensions. I urge the respective Ministers to think about that in relation to schools. There may be a way of suggesting to young people at an earlier stage that they need to be making contributions, perhaps through an introduction provided while they are at school.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): I find it difficult to believe that the hon. Gentleman started his pension contributions 45 years ago, as he cannot possibly be of that advanced age. He reminisced about how his parents drilled into him the importance of starting early. In his opinion, what has happened since those years? How did we go from the point of saying that it was a personal responsibility? How did we go from the point of our parents drilling into us the importance of saving for deposits for a house, as we heard earlier, and for retirement? Is the situation we have now on automatic enrolment satisfactory in terms of getting us back to where we were before?

Jim Shannon: I think the figure gain tells it as it is. We went from 2.1 million people to 21 million people; the increase was massive. People from my generation were very responsive to what our parents told us and we did what they suggested because they knew best. Today the companies are trying hard and encouraging people but, as the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said in his introduction, education might be another way of helping us get even beyond where we need to be.

In February 2021, a report from the National Employment Savings Trust looked at the impact of the covid-19 outbreak on its 9.5 million members. It found no significant changes in average contribution levels;

the majority had continued to save, with around one fifth contributing more than the minimum contribution rate. That tells us that the scheme is successful for some—potentially, everyone—and helps people to save. I find those figures reassuring and proof that this legislation is beneficial, which may answer the question raised by the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts).

There is absolutely no doubt that this legislation has brought many benefits. Pensions help people maintain their standard of living in retirement, and savings provide important supplemental income for unforeseen expenses. Pensions are an economically efficient way to fund retirement, which means they are a prudent use of taxpayer money.

Others have expressed a few concerns about the lack of pension provision for the self-employed, and I have a question for the Minister. How and when should pension contribution rates increase above the 8% minimum? It is important that there is provision for the self-employed. There are 134,000 self-employed people in Northern Ireland. In Strangford, and perhaps in other constituencies as well, we have a tradition of many people being self-employed. I had a period of self-employment but continued to pay the pension contributions. That was probably when I increased the number of pension schemes I was in. Perhaps the Minister could indicate how we might encourage the self-employed to be involved. That is my question for the Minister, and I know I will get the response I wish for.

I want to conclude because I am conscious that others wish to speak. Automatic pension enrolment for workers makes sense and is a good deal. Pensions not only help the local economy but are a win-win situation for employers, employees and local business owners. The figures are astonishing: since 2012, more than 10.2 million workers have been automatically enrolled in pension schemes and that is on the increase.

The scheme is a success, and we thank the Government for their encouragement and promotion of it. I only suggest that it could be approached educationally at an earlier stage. I urge the Department for Work and Pensions to look at the issues others will raise on pension enrolment and to step in to solve them. None the less, I thank the Minister and Government for all they have done.

9.51 am

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and to be called to speak in today's debate, which has been so ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies). The debate raises an important issue and I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing it. It follows on from the excellent ten-minute rule Bill recently introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden).

When auto-enrolment was introduced, I recall being fearful of the impact it might have on my business at the time, and of the costs that it would pass on to me as an employer, but auto-enrolment has proved to be a huge success, reversing the decline in workplace pension saving and ensuring that millions more people are now saving for their future. I saw at first hand the benefits that the scheme has had on the lives and futures of my employees. Employees who would never have considered being part of a pension scheme were put in a position where it

[Peter Gibson]

became a simple and easy process. For the first time, they were ensuring that they did not fall into the trap of under-saving for retirement, encouraging self-reliance and responsibility.

There are still huge numbers of hard-working people who are not auto-enrolled in pension schemes, with many excluded on the basis of youth or purely because they are not working enough hours or earning enough. For those under the age of 22, the numbers are woefully low. Among those in part-time employment, although some will earn more than the £10,000 threshold, the numbers auto-enrolled are still significantly lower than among those who are in full-time employment.

The minimum age of 22 simply does not work for those who choose not to go to university. Why should someone who chooses to start working at 18 not pay into a pension from that age, in the same way as someone who is 22 does? They would have so much to gain from auto-enrolment being extended to them; we have already heard about the magic of compound interest.

The current system also disproportionately affects women and the poorest in our society, who are more likely to be in part-time work and have multiple part-time jobs, like many in my constituency of Darlington. Although Darlington has 1,820 employers, with 26,000 employees auto-enrolled, I am encouraged that the proposed extension advocated by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford would add almost 900,000 extra savers across the country. Those workers are often employed in industries, such as hospitality or retail, that have faced huge difficulties during the pandemic, but are in many cases the backbone of our workforce. It is only right that we do all we can to ensure that they do not miss out on future financial security; that is levelling up.

Extending auto-enrolment could add trillions to the nation's pension pot. It is a chance to ensure that people start to save for their future while they are young. It also allows us to ensure that the poorest in society have a more secure future and takes steps towards closing the gap between men's and women's pension savings.

In 2019, I stood on a manifesto to level up communities across the United Kingdom and the extension of auto-enrolment is a policy that has the potential to have a really positive impact on people's futures. It would be a commitment to level up for the long term.

As we contemplate how auto-enrolment can help us deliver on our levelling-up agenda, we must not forget the role of pension companies and the positive impact that these changes could have on their work. Auto-enrolment increases the resources available to them and provides a steady, long-term stream of capital for investment across the UK—investment that can be directed to the communities that are home to those who currently miss out on auto-enrolment, letting them see the benefits of their own savings.

I know that the extension of auto-enrolment would have huge benefits for many people in Darlington and across the country, so I hope that the Government will give this policy real consideration, as we continue to build back better from the pandemic and level up our country.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): For the benefit of Members, if you do wish to speak—notwithstanding that you have asked to speak—would you rise? Thank you.

9.55 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for getting us all up so early—9.30 am on a Wednesday—to talk about our favourite subject, which is clearly auto-enrolment.

I will start by being very rude and saying that we often see private Members' Bills introduced that are nothing more than political graffiti. However, the one recently introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on this issue is far from that, and we should give a great deal of consideration to how it fits with this debate. People might expect me to say that, because I am an old bean-counter. Before I came into this place I was a former finance director, and I remember with utter dread the systems and processes that we had to implement to deal with auto-enrolment.

Although most people tend to glaze over when we talk about pensions—present company excepted, obviously—this idea is really sound. That is because, let us face it, we are living in an ageing population all of the time, and in any person's view the need to save for our retirement is extremely important; and the crux of the matter is that the sooner someone does it and has the opportunity to do it—two important parts of what we are discussing today—the better for society. After all, many people will have in their pension savings the highest asset that they will ever hold.

The other reason that this debate is so important to me is because I am going to do something that not many MPs do in this place—admit how wrong I have been about things. Yes, I will now say that I made a mistake. That is because I remember the days when auto-enrolment first came in—my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford makes me feel very old, because 2005 feels like a very long time ago—and I remember that at the time I thought, "What a waste of time auto-enrolment is." I bemoaned how much it would cost us as a company, and the meaningful contributions that people would make were so small when auto-enrolment first started that it was a total nuisance to administer and I wondered whether it would really make much of a difference, precisely because people's contributions were so low. In addition, I expected that people would simply opt out—that there would be a knock on the door three months later and someone would ask, "Duncan, can you please take us out of this scheme?" But people did not, and that is because the Government got it right. They made those initial contributions so low that people got used to it.

So, on those two counts, I got it completely wrong. That is why I back what my hon. Friends the Members for Grantham and Stamford and for North West Durham are proposing, because with nearly 90% of people now participating in a workplace pension, old cynics like me have been proved totally wrong. The fact that we now have 10 million workers in an auto-enrolment scheme in this country is a testament to how extremely good auto-enrolment has been. It has created momentum—momentum for people to take responsibility and save for their retirement.

My constituency of North Norfolk is very beautiful, but we have a disproportionate number of lower earners. It is a coastal community; hospitality and retail are very important, and therefore form a chunk of lower earners. Why are we not making it easier for everybody to contribute, to allow younger people—that rump of my workforce—to have that chance earlier? All the statistics show that they will reap the benefits of getting started on that ladder earlier. It is a very simple proposal, but it has far-reaching consequences. If it opens up more people to take that responsibility, to be able to earn for their retirement, I think it is extremely worth considering and I am very happy to back it.

10.1 am

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for bringing this very important debate to Westminster Hall this morning. I am not declaring an interest but, like other hon. Members present, I was involved in the financial world in a previous life, having worked for 25 years in the financial services industry. I have also been a trustee of several charitable investment portfolios, and served as a member of the pensions and investment committee on Powys County Council during my time in local government.

I fully support the point made by my hon. Friends the Members for Grantham and Stamford and for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) that the issue of auto-enrolment is not only about benefiting employers and employees, but about the huge amount of capital that builds up in those funds and the constructive way that it can be invested for social and environmental good, and for the general improvement of the economy.

Much mention has been made of the statistics showing the remarkable transformation of the pensions industry since the introduction of auto-enrolment, so I will not go on at length about them. However, I would like to pull out one or two contrasting statistics. We have heard that nearly 90% of employees are now workplace pension members, compared with only 50% in 2012 before auto-enrolment was introduced. Auto-enrolment has resulted in a significant increase in pension membership, particularly of defined contribution schemes—another very important aspect. The statistics carry on; they are extremely impressive. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has alluded to that, so I will leave it there.

The introduction of auto-enrolment has been what I would consider to be a quiet revolution. It has helped to normalise pension saving in my constituency of Clwyd South and elsewhere in the UK, increasing the proportion of people who see pension saving as a good thing and who say they know where to go if they want more information.

That is another vital aspect of auto-enrolment: it is about not only the amount of money and the level of take-up, but a cultural change that has huge benefits for the country in the long term. A recent British social attitudes survey found that 79%—a majority—of individuals interviewed viewed automatic enrolment as a good thing for them, 77% agreed that saving into a workplace pension was normal for them, and 75% knew where to go to find out more about workplace pensions. That reinforces my point about the cultural change that is so vital in this process.

Another point that is vital to draw out in this debate is that the latest data suggests that auto-enrolment has reduced some of the regional disparities in workplace pension participation. Figures from 2020 show that rates of employee workplace pension participation are fairly consistent across the UK, with little geographic variation. Regional data prior to auto-enrolment is not available, but the continued roll-out of auto-enrolment over the last five years has been accompanied by increased rates of participation by private sector employees in regions other than London and the south-east, which is hugely important to many hon. Members who represent seats far away from the south-east of England.

Another important point emerged from the 2020 study by Karen Arulsamy and Liam Delaney, “The Impact of Automatic Enrolment on the Mental Health Gap in Pension Participation: Evidence from the UK”. It showed that, particularly for people who are not particularly experienced in financial matters, auto-enrolment has completely removed the mental health gap in pension participation.

Finally, the private Member’s Bill introduced my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) is absolutely vital, particularly for my constituency of Clwyd South, where auto-enrolment figures are good but could be higher. There are 1,040 employers involved in auto-enrolment and 3,000 job holders. That is, in a sense, connected to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), because my constituency has a real mix of different employment patterns. Like his constituency, tourism and hospitality are important parts of the employment make-up of Clwyd South. There are many young workers and people working part time who fit their jobs around their families and other considerations.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham will be speaking later, but I want to quote one thing that he said:

“three quarters of those aged 22-plus are auto-enrolled into pension schemes, but under the age of 22 it is only 20%...of people in work, not students. That is a big difference, and the difference that auto-enrolment has made since 2012. For part-time workers, while some will earn more than the £10,000 threshold, auto-enrolment is 57.8% compared with almost 90%”

—as has been established earlier—

“of workers in full-time jobs. If we assume a similar take-up, the Bill could see an extra 30% of the part-time workforce auto-enrolled”.

The other point he makes, which again goes back to a point I made earlier, is that an

“extra £2.77 trillion...would be invested in our pensions for the lower-paid and younger workers”.—[*Official Report*, 5 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 81.]

It benefits not only them and their families, but the general economy.

In conclusion, I am delighted that we are discussing this important issue. As I said, it is a quiet revolution that brings hope and comfort to many families, particularly among those who are not particularly experienced in financial matters, and adds greatly to the prosperity and health of the economy of the United Kingdom.

10.8 am

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I give credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for securing the debate and, indeed, to

[Rob Roberts]

the Minister; it is always a pleasure to see him responding to a debate. He must get tired of hearing from everyone, every time we have a pensions debate, “Auto-enrolment has been wonderful and the things the Government are doing are outstanding, but we could always do more.” We are always asking for more. That is the way of things, and I think he has come to appreciate that over time.

As everybody else has done, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) and his private Member’s Bill. When I read back through the Bill last night, I saw that it contained many of the things I wanted to cover, so I shall be very brief, which will please everybody no end. I will just mention three points that I hope the Minister can cover later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) mentioned excluded people. Someone earning £9,000 in each of two different jobs would not be enrolled despite having £18,000-worth of income, which would otherwise clearly qualify. Like those of my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), my constituency is very rural, and we have lots of people in those circumstances. Something as simple as taking away the £10,000 qualifying point would be a real benefit to those people.

On the under-22s, I was a financial and pensions adviser for a decade and a half, and one of the key things that we always said—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned it earlier—was, “Start as early as you can.” An extra five years will add in the region of 26% to 30% to the end value of a pension pot. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) used the golden words “compound interest”. Those extra years at the start make such a huge difference at the end.

That is particularly relevant in my own situation. My daughter is 17 years old. She has decided that university is not for her and has gone into full-time work, but she is not being auto-enrolled. Of course, she can opt to be enrolled when she gets to 18, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk mentioned, it is easier when it is done for us; it is harder to opt out than to opt in to something. I completely appreciate that.

My second point is on qualifying earnings. People may well be under the illusion that if they are earning £30,000 a year, they are contributing 8% of £30,000. Sadly, that is not the case. The lower earnings limit, which is £6,240, is taken off before that 8% is calculated, so someone earning £30,000 is only paying 8% of £23,760. Getting rid of the lower earnings limit and making pension contributions start from zero would add another 26% to the final value of someone’s pension pot by the time they come to retirement. Just those two changes—making auto-enrolment available to under-22s and making it count for all earnings—would add 29% and 26% to the final value of a pot. That is a huge amount and would make a huge difference.

My final point, which is very simple, is about complacency risk. We hear that auto-enrolment has been transformative—my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford used that word, and we have all heard the statistics—but has it? Eight per cent. is not enough. Even if it was 8% of all earnings, it would not

be enough. My cousin is a financial adviser over in America. I talked to him over many years about how I did my processes and worked out how much people should save, with the calculations and the risk levels and all the interesting bits that go into forming a conclusion. He said, “I don’t do any of that. I just tell people, ‘Just do 20% and you’ll be fine.’” He advises people of relatively high net worth, and 20% is a relative amount to different people, but 8% just will not do it.

We have this complacency: because the Government have mandated 8%, people think, “Well, that must be okay, then; that must be what I need to do to get a good standard of living in retirement.” Somebody earning £30,000 per year, leaving out the earnings that do not qualify, will be contributing £1,900 per year over 35 years. Assuming 4% growth, they will have amassed a pot of about £140,000 after 35 years. That does not sound a terrible amount, but when we adjust it for inflation, in today’s prices, that is a pot of about £86,000. That will not buy a lot in retirement.

This is where the two things that I mentioned earlier will come in. If we added 29% and 26% to that pot, while it would still not be a massive amount, or enough to get people to where they need to be, it would certainly be something. As was mentioned earlier—I spoke about personal responsibility—people need to go and see a financial adviser and take the guidance that is available from the Money and Pensions Service.

What we are doing is not enough. People must wake up and open their eyes; what we are doing is great, but we could absolutely be doing more. There are a couple of ways we could do more. Back when we had defined-benefit pensions, the employer would pay about £3 for every £1 that the employee paid. That was unaffordable, and it was the main reason that most defined-benefit pensions were closed down. Under the defined-contribution schemes that existed before auto-enrolment, employers paid about £2 for every £1 that employees paid. Now, that figure is 60p or 70p. Although I talk about personal responsibility, there is a lot more scope for employers to do more, as they used to.

Another potential option would be to roll the principle of auto-enrolment forward into other savings options. Why can we not have an auto-enrolment individual savings account? Why can we not do what my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford said about saving for a house deposit? Why can we not use the same principle in other arenas? Why can we not make pensions a bit more flexible, as they are in the United States, where the 401(k) product can be utilised in a lot more ways a lot sooner? That could provide the deposit for a house or be used at other crucial times in life. There are lots of things we could do.

I have offered a bit of a sandwich, with a nice opening and a nice ending, and bit of a demand in the middle. We are doing wonderful things and they have been successful—everybody says so. We can do more and we probably should, and I think the Minister knows that.

10.16 am

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for securing this debate. I have been trying to secure one for a couple of months, but he seems to have managed to pip me to the post.

I thank so many hon. Members for mentioning my ten-minute rule Bill to look at extending auto-enrolment. Everyone who has spoken has pointed to the success of auto-enrolment. It has been a cross-party success, as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) said. It is slightly sad that there are not more Scottish National party or Labour Back Benchers here to welcome that success and talk about the future, but this is something we can proceed with on the basis of those on all sides of the House coming to an agreement.

The main point, which has been made by many Members, is that an extra 10 million people are now looking to save. The reason they are saving is that for every 50p they put in, they get £1 in their pension pot, because they get the tax relief plus the employer's contribution. That is seen as a simple and straightforward thing. For every £4 an employee puts in, their employer puts in £3 and they get £1 in tax relief. That is a simple, straightforward way of explaining it to people. It is important for us to have this debate and to look at the success and the future of auto-enrolment.

Many hon. Members made the broader point that we want people saving for themselves, their families and their futures. This is a small “c” conservative principle that cuts across working-class communities across the country, including mine in North West Durham. It provides a really important stake in society when people save into a pension over time and see that money invested in UK companies, as well as in companies across the world—although my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington made the important point that if we are looking to expand auto-enrolment, we need to enable people to see the benefits of those savings in their communities.

I therefore hope that the Government will look at ways to ensure that that patient capital can be invested more in things such as social housing projects and transport infrastructure schemes. I do think it is time to expand. I could understand why, in the past, employers were concerned about auto-enrolment, but it is great to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, who ran his own business, that he has seen those concerns alleviated by the impact that it has had on his employees.

Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) may know, Luke 15:7 states that

“there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine...persons who need no repentance.”

I am glad to see my hon. Friend on board and helping to drive the agenda; as he mentioned, it is so important for those lower-paid part-time workers in his constituency and mine. I will come to that in a moment.

There are two groups that future changes could really affect. One, as my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford said, is that younger age group. It is unbelievable to me that someone of my age—any person in this room, in fact—will benefit from the employer contribution and tax relief, but someone aged 18, 19 or 20 will not. That seems demonstrably unfair, and it is something that we really need to get a grip on. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, compound interest created by saving early makes a real difference in retirement.

Reflecting on what my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) said, the statistics from before and after auto-enrolment kicks in are stark.

Before it kicks in, a fifth of people are enrolled; after it kicks in, 17 out of 20 are enrolled. That is a massive change. We need to bring those figures into line, particularly for people who do not go on to university but choose a different path. As my hon. Friend also mentioned, that is a very important factor in the regional disparity of where people pursue their careers. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) also made a very good point: how can it be right that those earning £50,000 or £80,000 per year get the tax relief and employer contribution, but others—particularly part-time workers—do not?

I mentioned some examples when I introduced my private Member's Bill in the House. Women are particularly disadvantaged. Part-time workers often juggle multiple jobs around childcare or other caring responsibilities; it seems to me totally unfair that someone doing two part-time jobs that are above the threshold just does not get the tax relief and employer contribution. If we could reduce the age of auto-enrolment to 18, we would be looking £25,000 in younger workers' pension pots. That is not going to be transformative in and of itself, but taken together, the changes will be transformative. Getting young people auto-enrolled early is crucial to allowing them to see their savings start to build early, and that is what we need to see.

In addition to what hon. Members have already said, I say to the Minister that we need to see an age reduction, we need the qualifying earnings amount to be reduced, and we need the threshold for earnings to be lowered too.

Guy Opperman: I thank my hon. Friend for his speech. I was ill when he introduced his ten-minute rule Bill, but I read his speech in *Hansard*. He will understand that Ministers are not able to respond to a ten-minute rule Bill in the normal course of events. Clearly, he is in the process of drafting his grave and weighty Bill, but am I led to believe that the intention is not to introduce the extension until the mid-2020s, which was the original intention of the December 2017 automatic enrolment review?

Mr Holden: Yes, it is. I think that it needs to be introduced in a phased way, exactly for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk and others have mentioned. We need to phase it in over time so that employers can be ready for the increased cost, but also so that we do not burden young employees very quickly with an enormous extra cost.

Phasing in the extension is exactly the right thing to do; that is how auto-enrolment has been such a success so far. If we had hit people by taking a large chunk of their income at one point, people would have withdrawn and auto-enrolment would not have been the success that it is. Instead, we are seeing take-up rates for full-time workers of nearly 90% now. The phased approach is so crucial. I would like to see it on that sort of timetable—phased in throughout the mid-2020s. That is where we need to be to ensure that as many people as possible take it up and can save for the long term.

We have come such a long way over the last few years. We saw the proportion of people saving for their pensions drop to around 45% before auto-enrolment was introduced. It had been between 55% and 45% for the previous 20 years or so. We have seen the proportion rise rapidly due to auto-enrolment; it is now well above 70%. If we

[Mr Holden]

can include part-time workers as well, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk alluded to, we could see the proportion reach 80% or 90%, which is exactly what we want. Some 6,000 employees in North West Durham are already auto-enrolled, with 1,500 employers. We need to see more people auto-enrolled to save for their retirement.

Overall, extending auto-enrolment is probably the strongest levelling-up measure that we could deliver. I want people across the country who work and play their part in our society to see the same response from the Government, with support to pay into their pensions, and support in their old age and retirement.

10.25 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Like everybody else, I congratulate the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) on securing the debate. There have been a number of Tory Back-Bench contributions; I was worried that I would end up agreeing with all of them, but I have managed to find a couple of aspects to disagree with—I am pleased about that.

I agree completely that auto-enrolment has been a success. The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford set out well its history and success. I agree, too, with the principle of creating larger pots for investment in infrastructure. That is an age-old argument, but we never seem to get there; I agree that that needs to change. I am slightly concerned about the talk about pension savings funding housing deposits. I know that people want access to the housing market. However, I worry that, depending on how deposits are funded, that will not take the heat out of the housing market, but will actually increase it, because more people will be chasing a smaller pot of houses. We need more affordable houses as much as new ways to get people deposits.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford made the interesting point that only 12% of job adverts advertise pension contributions. If we are talking about advice and people understanding the benefits of pension contributions, we need to look at that. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who would have been surprised to have been called so early, further set out the success of the scheme, and talked about his personal experience and, importantly, education—that is clearly important for everybody. It was brave of the Minister, in the current climate, to intervene on the hon. Member for Strangford to talk about cake—fair play.

We heard from the hon. Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson), and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). It was very good to hear the employer's and the director's points of view. Both Members admitted that they had concerns, but they were pleased to see how successful automatic enrolment is. It is good to have that buy-in.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) spoke about access to advice; I will come back to that, because I agree with him on that point. The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) made a good point about complacency. We need to make sure that people understand that they might need to increase their contributions and pay more. That is very important, and it links to the point about getting proper advice.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden). I, too, congratulate him on his efforts in bringing forward his private Member's Bill. He set out his stall really well on that day, as he did, briefly, today. His key point—that for every 50p somebody contributes, they get £1 in their pension pot—sums it up perfectly; it is a great illustration.

As we have heard, auto-enrolment has clearly been a good thing, and a success in getting way more people to save for their retirement. In fact, it has been so successful that we have to ask why it took so long to bring in such a scheme. The Association of British Insurers states that automatic enrolment has brought a further 10 million people into pension saving. As we have heard, 88% of eligible employees participated in their workplace pension in 2020, which is up from 55% in 2012. That is a fantastic step forward.

However, there are concerns that an estimated 12 million people are still under-saving for retirement, and that needs to be addressed. Given what we have heard today about the success of auto-enrolment, and given that the Government think it is important that people save for retirement and believe that auto-enrolment is a success, the Government should logically ensure that as many people as possible are eligible. That means implementing the recommendations of the 2017 review as soon as possible. During the passage of the Pension Schemes Bill, Labour and the SNP worked together to introduce amendments that would do that, so it was disappointing that the Government voted those down. The Minister did commit to implementing the recommendations of the 2017 review by the mid-2020s, but rejecting the amendments does not give confidence.

We know how unstable UK Governments have been in recent years, and now the Leader of the House is threatening us with another general election, so it seems to me—without being too flippant—that there is a risk, if action is not taken sooner rather than later to get legislation through the House, that matters could slip further. As I said, the hon. Member for North West Durham has his private Member's Bill, which we would support. I am still concerned, though, that we are looking at the mid-2020s. If we agree that this change is so good, we need to look at bringing it forward and getting things moving much quicker.

Rob Roberts: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about bringing forward measures, but if we make these changes, is it not really important to give businesses enough lead-in time to plan properly and budget for them, rather than springing a significant change on businesses?

Alan Brown: There is a point there, but we have heard from an employer and a finance director that their concerns were allayed once the scheme came in, so I think that there will be fewer concerns as we go forward. Speaking of giving employers notice, we need only think about national insurance contributions. That rise was introduced in a short space of time, so we should not be too concerned about how we phase this in. If we do not do it, more people will lose out, which defeats the purpose.

Everybody here agrees that we should lower the age threshold for auto-enrolment to below 22. I have said that I would rather have 16 than 18 as the threshold. I would be content with a two-stage process on that; we

could review the situation with regard to 18 to 21-year-olds, just to see how successful it was, and to check that they were not opting out, but in the long term we definitely need to move to 16-year-olds, who could be in full-time employment. We also need to look at removing the lower limit of the qualifying earnings band, so that contributions are payable from the first pound earned. As we have heard, its removal would benefit the low-income workers who otherwise would have little prospect of a decent private pension.

To repeat what other hon. Members have said, the issue is particularly acute for women, who are more likely to be lower paid, in part-time work and doing multiple jobs. We have a massive gender pensions gap. In a recent report, the Pensions Policy Institute found the following:

“Men have substantially more private pension wealth than women, with disparities increasing across age groups. For those aged 65-69, median pension wealth for men is just over £212,000 compared to just £35,000 for women... Divorced women’s pensions are much lower than divorced men’s.”

The Association of British Insurers states that the average pension pot for a woman aged 65 is one fifth of that of a 65-year-old man. Women receive £29,000 less in state pension than men over 20 years. The deficit is set to continue unless further action is taken. We also need to look at expanding the contribution rates beyond the 8% statutory minimum, to allow people to maximise their pot. That builds on what the hon. Member for Delyn was saying.

As I have said, further delays are unacceptable. I hope that the Minister will say that the UK Government will set a clear timetable for their plans for expanding automatic enrolment. Morally, they should do that, given that they have made other decisions that are affecting pensioners both in the here and now and in the long term. We have a cost-of-living crisis, and I note that Tory Back Benchers are now using it as a defence for keeping the Prime Minister in his place, even though the cost-of-living crisis happened on his watch. They are arguing that there is a cost-of-living crisis that warrants our attention, but they still voted through the removal of the triple lock in the November Budget, costing pensioners more than £500 this year alone and a cumulative £2,600 over the next five years. That cut comes despite the fact that UK pensions are already the least generous in north-west Europe in comparison with the average wage.

We have just had the report on the shocking state pension underpayments, and there are comments that the system for state pensions is not fit for purpose. We have seen 118,000 people underpaid as regards benefits. We still have the injustice faced by the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—and there are very low take-up rates for pension credit, which the UK Government acknowledge is an issue, but have not remedied.

The SNP continues to demand that the UK Government introduce a proper take-up strategy for pension credit, as the Scottish Government have done for devolved benefits. We continue to call on the UK Government to establish an independent savings and pension commission to ensure that pension policies are fit for purpose and reflect the demographic needs of different parts of the UK.

Another aspect of auto-enrolment that needs to be addressed relates to the self-employed. We have heard about the massive increase in employees in defined contribution schemes, but the trajectory for the self-employed has been the polar opposite—for them, the numbers have gone down: 48% of the self-employed contributed to a private pension in 1998, but the figure went down to only 16% in 2018.

Another key point is about professional advice. It makes no sense for people to save for retirement, or for support for when they are older, but to remain at risk when accessing their pension pots. That important matter was covered by the Work and Pensions Committee in its report “Protecting pension savers”, published last week. I support the calls for the Government to set a goal of ensuring that at least 60% of people use the Government’s Pension Wise guidance service or receive paid-for advice. That is a key consideration.

Pension Wise has proven to be a success. We need to make sure that more people access it. There should be a trial of automatic Pension Wise appointments, in order to encourage more people to access advice that will benefit them. The UK Government should initiate two trials: one in which people automatically get an appointment when they access their pension for the first time, and another in which they get an appointment at age 50, before they access their pensions—a mid-life MOT, as it has been called.

Auto-enrolment has been a good measure, but it needs further action to make it even better, so that it can benefit millions more people. Action to implement the 2017 recommendations should be a priority. I hope the Minister will agree, and will say that they will bring legislation forward at the soonest opportunity.

10.36 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank all colleagues for taking part in today’s debate. We have had a rounded discussion of this important issue, and it has been heartening to see so much engagement from Members across the House.

As I know colleagues appreciate, pensions are a very long-term policy area. The decisions we make today have profound effects over many years. Encouraging sustainable and sensible saving now makes for much better retirement in the future. It is therefore right that we actively explore ways to help those who could benefit from further opportunities to auto-enrol in pensions. We must work with businesses to understand their needs, and to build a system that is fair and sustainable for all. We should be ambitious and responsible at the same time, particularly in the years following the covid crisis.

Auto-enrolment has proven to be one of the most positive developments in recent memory for savers, and for securing people’s long-term prosperity. It has been transformative in encouraging millions of people to save earlier in their careers. That will dramatically improve outcomes later in life, as hon. Members have mentioned.

I remind the House that it was the Labour Government in 2008 who first introduced legislation on auto-enrolment—a contribution of which my party should be very proud. However, the measures have cross-party support, and I pay tribute to colleagues from across the

[Matt Rodda]

House who mentioned that. It is important that we work together, and that we remember the contribution made by those in the other place, who also recognised the policy's potential and helped develop it before it came into practice. More than a decade since its inception, it is natural that we look again at auto-enrolment.

In conversations with the pensions industry, I have heard experts call for us to consider lowering the qualifying earnings threshold and the minimum age requirement. The People's Pension, for example, endorsed those proposals. It argues that millions of new savers would be created, many of whom would be women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The Association of British Insurers found that employees would be able to save an additional £2.6 billion a year if the earnings trigger was scrapped.

There is justification, as well as a desire in the sector, for policy makers to look at all available options. That is especially true in the light of the Government's commitments in 2017 to reviewing the situation, and to getting workers to save early by considering removing the lower earnings limit and reducing the age threshold for automatic enrolment to 18 by the mid-2020s, as we have heard reiterated today. The deadline is approaching fast, so I ask the Minister to clarify what stage the Government have reached in their consideration.

I also ask the Minister to set out the work his Department has done to understand the wider implications of last year's decision to freeze the earnings trigger and only modestly increase the upper limit of the qualifying earnings band. Understanding those consequences is important for tackling inequality and helping more workers to get into the habit of saving, as has been mentioned. Studies have shown that only 37% of female workers and 28% of black and ethnic minority workers are eligible for the scheme. Finally, I reiterate the importance of this debate, and thank colleagues from across the House for taking part. I hope the Minister will respond to the points made.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. It is genuinely hard for me to disagree with anything that my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), who is an esteemed member of the Treasury Committee, put forward in his outstanding speech. I thank him for bringing this matter forward for debate. Contrary to popular opinion, I am always keen to debate all matters pension. I have done this job for about 1,680 days and continue to make the case for the change that we are driving forward.

I will address in more detail the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), my constituency neighbour, who is a vast improvement on his predecessor. He helpfully enlightened us with the fact that St Luke is the patron saint of pensions, which I did not know. I will return to his ten-minute rule Bill and private Member's Bill in due course.

I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). It is a bit like taking an SNP horse to water and trying to make it

drink; his speech started so well, with the statement that, by and large, he could not disagree with anything that had been said, but that sentiment disappeared in general criticism of the Government. He will know that the state pension is up by more than 5% in 2021-22. He will know that pension credit take-up is increasing. He will know that winter fuel payments and cold weather payments are well in excess of £2 billion. He will know that there are free eye tests worth £900 million and free bus passes of £1 billion. I could go on to address various other points he raised, but I want to focus primarily on the automatic enrolment issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford.

I am slightly concerned that the story of today's debate may be, "Minister admits that in 2018 he, too, was ambushed by a cake—a lemon drizzle cake—while on a ministerial trip to Newtownards, Northern Ireland". There are many points that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that I want to address. It was an honour and privilege to visit his local credit union. I would love to take him up on his kind offer and return to Northern Ireland. Because of covid, so much has happened as regards ministerial visits and progress on so many things. Our country has acquired approximately £400 billion on the nation's credit card, and there are difficult fiscal choices to make, which have clearly impacted the roll-out of many economic and fiscal policies. Certainly, in 2022, provided I continue to hold this job that I enjoy, I hope to make the case across Northern Ireland. I have not visited Derry/Londonderry; the credit union there is one of the most successful in the UK and it would be a great pleasure to visit it.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned consolidation and said that he had four pensions. It is right to celebrate and laud the fact that probably the second biggest project that the Department for Work and Pensions is rolling out is the pensions dashboard. Auto-enrolment is the first, and I will come to that in more detail. The pensions dashboard will be transformational: he will be able to see his four pensions on his mobile phone, laptop or iPad. Just as people have a savings app or banking app, we will be able to take the tens of thousands of pensions out there, access that information and understand what an individual has. Crucially, so many colleagues raised the issue of awareness, and the dashboard is the key to understanding that.

There are other things that we are doing, and I could talk in detail about our plans—which will come forward this October—for what are called simpler statements, which basically amend the traditional, very complex pension statements that very few people understand, save for independent financial advisers, which some colleagues present have worked as in the past. The man or woman in the street simply does not understand those statements in sufficient detail, so we are putting them into a two-page form that tells people what they have and gives them proper information; it will do what it says on the tin. We in the DWP and, to be fair, people across industry believe strongly that that is the right way forward, in order to enlighten members, so that they have a better understanding of what they have.

The dashboard will come forward in 2023 and simpler statements will come forward in October 2022. There is much that we could say on the issue of financial education. It is a credit to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that

he introduced financial education in secondary schools, but we need to do more to enhance awareness about all matters of finance—that does not need to be pensions: it is about all matters relating to money and the usage of money—in primary schools, and to encourage wider understanding of that among our children through their education. I would certainly support that.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the issue of the self-employed, as did other Members. I will make a couple of points on that issue. The first is that there are already plenty of self-employed people who can perfectly properly sign up to a private pension. I am an example. I was a self-employed jockey—I was not very good at all and did not make much money—and then I was a self-employed barrister and helped to run a charity before coming to this place. However, it is much more complicated for those people, because they do not have any of the benefits of automatic enrolment.

There is a way forward, and we are working on a trial with HMRC to explore the opportunities presented through Making Tax Digital. There is a clear solution for how to change the tax system, on which we are working with HMRC and the Money and Pensions Service. It will almost certainly be a drop-down box with an automatic deduction, which will allow people to do what they can presently do on their manual tax return, and it will make self-employed automatic enrolment much easier. It is a work in progress. Today is Australia Day; it is appropriate that we laud the fact that Australia has showed us the way on so much of automatic enrolment. Certainly, the Australians have addressed the question of how to enhance self-employed take-up of automatic enrolment in a variety of ways, and I am looking at that closely through the HMRC trial. I hope to update the House and parliamentary colleagues on that point in the very near future.

Several colleagues raised the point about 8% plus, which I will come to in a second. Let me first deal with the issue of the 2017 automatic enrolment review, which is also largely the subject matter of the work in progress that is my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham's ten-minute rule Bill. The simple truth is that when I acquired this job, back in the dim mists of time in June 2017, I was given two primary responsibilities by the late, lamented David Gauke, who was the Secretary of State. The first was, "Get us to 8%"—bear in mind that automatic enrolment was not even at 5% at that stage. It is a massive triumph for this country, the employers, the employees—who quite clearly have not opted out—and government on a cross-party basis that we have got to 8%. The world has not come to an end and drop-out rates are really low, so without a shadow of a doubt, that is a massive success story. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) is totally right that more needs to be done, and I am going to address that point in a second.

The second thing that happened, pretty much as I arrived in the DWP as Minister, was that I received a copy of the 2017 review in the autumn of that year. We took the decision that we would support it without a shadow of a doubt. It was an independent review; we did not have to support it, and Governments often do not support them. However, we then made the decision that the measures should be introduced on a phased basis.

Clearly, events have got in the way—the past four or five years have been somewhat complicated—but the practical truth is that the Government have an unquestioned commitment to bring forward the 2017 review measures: the lower earnings limit and the 22 to 18 threshold. The way in which we do that and the phasing of it is still a matter of ongoing debate within Government.

People above my pay grade have to make decisions on that—it is dependent on other pieces of legislation and other considerations. Clearly, a consultation would have to take place, but in broad terms the timetable would involve primary legislation to introduce the primary measures and enabling powers, secondary legislation and a consultation to follow, and timings thereafter. Certainly, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham was seeking confirmation that the measures would be introduced in a phased approach after the next election, in the mid-2020s, and I hope that is helpful for his understanding.

It is not for me to decide what is in Her Majesty the Queen's Speech, either this year or next, but clearly there are a variety of ways in which we can progress such legislation. First, there is a private Member's Bill. That is not impossible, but it is complicated for Government business for primary legislation on a large matter, particularly given the timings of this Session. I welcome my hon. Friend's ten-minute rule Bill, but it comes very late in this Session. Obviously, there will be future private Members' Bills.

Secondly, we are clearly looking to bid for a third or fourth Session pensions Bill that can take these matters forward as normal Government business. My intention is to bring forward the legislation, subject to all the usual provisos about being a Minister with larger collective responsibility.

Mr Holden: In addition to this debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford, and my ten-minute rule Bill, what more could we do to support the Minister in his bids to drive forward this very sensible agenda in Government?

Guy Opperman: The fact that there is cross-party support is relevant because, quite rightly—but sometimes wrongly—Oppositions oppose many pieces of legislation. Clearly, this legislation has the support of all political parties. I cannot speak for the one Member of the Green party, but I know that the Liberal Democrats and other smaller parties support the legislation. That is very relevant and needs to be shouted from the rooftops.

This matter has an impact, particularly on low earners, in every single constituency in the country. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham said in his eloquent speech, such measures would be a really good example of levelling up in low-earning communities. Clearly, people above my pay grade—whether the Chancellor, Prime Minister or others—will decide what goes into the Queen's Speech this coming May, and I wish them all good fortune with that. Some of the clarifications that my hon. Friend made will help, as will the way in which he is trying to bring legislation forward. Airing the matter in the House helps, confirming to all parties that such measures have cross-party support. So much pension policy is so long-term that the impact of pulling a lever is not felt until three to five years later, so it makes a massive difference to have cross-party support.

[Guy Opperman]

I will touch briefly on a couple of other points. With regard to longer-term plans to go higher than 8%, I totally agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn that 8% is not enough. Again, subject to the ability to travel in future, I hope to engage with American colleagues to look at their 401(k) and the way they deal with it. Subject to the ability to take those things forward, the next goal after the 2017 review is clearly a discussion and a debate on how much above 8% is enough.

I am wearing my Australia Day tie, which was given to me when I and my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) triumphantly crushed the Australians in the parliamentary cricket match a few years back. The Australians have got to 12% and are doing so much, particularly in utilising the defined contribution and automatic enrolment to do the things that my hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) mentioned—namely, safely investing those savings in local communities so that individual savers can say, “That is what is happening in my area.”

I can give examples. I have set up two banks, as colleagues will be aware: Atom bank, which I was a founder member of, and the Northumberland Community Bank. Another good example is the Cambridge and Counties Bank, which utilises the pension reserve to loan on asset-backed lending to assist with investment in the Cambridge local area. There are other examples—the Sparkassen in Germany do this all the time—of only lending to local communities in that way. Such examples will proliferate, which is a good thing, because this comes to awareness. Members are then aware of what their savings are invested in and are so much more engaged, and that can apply across the country.

I accept that we need to do more on awareness. The Money and Pensions Service is clearly doing great work, and I support totally what Pension Geeks is doing with Pension Awareness Day, and what Scottish Widows is doing with its pension awareness road trip. The reason I am a supporter of the statements season is that I do not think that pensions awareness or engagement is good enough, quite frankly. We have to have a product or process whereby people are engaged, much as we do in tax or educational results, so that they understand better what they have got at a time when they can really get engaged. Obviously there is a working group on statements season, and it is a matter of discussion with the industry, but we have to do more to create greater engagement.

In my last minute or so I want to try to address some of the final points. Clearly, consolidation is a matter that we are working on, and I can happily give colleagues more on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham

and Stamford raised two final points about the nature of savings and what we are saving for. The traditional product has clearly been a pension, but our parents and grandparents would all have had much greater awareness of rainy day savings. We should unquestionably laud and support all the companies that are already running a 1% savings club or working with credit unions and other organisations to ensure that our employers and constituents have the capacity for rainy day money. If that was a problem pre covid, it is a particular problem post covid. There is also a wider policy issue about how we enable products to be developed to ensure that people are saving for deposits, although that is about the wider culture of saving in the longer term.

To finish, I thank the 10 colleagues who came along this morning to make the case for pensions savings and the many who support this policy and are driving it forward. Certainly, we can find very little in my hon. Friend's speech to disagree with. I thank all colleagues for coming along and making the case and for supporting our reforms. I accept that there is more to be done, but this Government are utterly committed to ensuring that that happens.

10.58 am

Gareth Davies: I pay tribute to the Minister, who is one of the longest-serving Pensions Ministers we have had in this country. As somebody who came from the fund management industry to this place, he is respected not just in this House but in the industry, too. I also thank all hon. Friends and hon. Members for their contributions. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the importance of getting in early and financial literacy. We heard informed speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), giving the perspective from business. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) about the benefits of increasing the size of the pensions pot for social and environmental investment.

Of course, let me congratulate once again my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham on his excellent private Member's Bill. He is enjoying a tremendous amount of support today. I maintain that we should focus on 18 to 21-year-olds. If nothing else, we should take away from today the fact that our pensions system has a great deal of power in what it can bring to our communities. Let it be said that this should not be a hidden secret any more. The power of compounding and savings benefits everybody, and people should start as early as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of automatic pension enrolment.

Vehicle Ownership: Fatal Accidents and Rural Crime

11 am

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

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fatal accidents, rural crime and the adequacy of vehicle ownership restrictions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I pay tribute to the family of Andrew Rowlands, one of my constituents, who died in 2020. His parents, Karen and John, are here today. I have met them before, as well as their daughter, Becca. Andrew was killed in a car crash in June 2020. The car he was travelling in was bought not long before for £100. It had no valid MOT and was described by the judge at the time as a wreck. The driver of that vehicle had no driving licence—they had not even had a driving lesson—yet they had still been able to buy the vehicle. They were jailed in June 2021. Later that year, I met John in my constituency surgery.

My request of the Minister today is to look at one simple change to the law. If a person wants to buy a car, they should have to have a driving licence. That means a simple change to the V5 form. At the moment, filling in the date of birth and the details of the driving licence of the person purchasing the car is voluntary. All we want is for that to be made mandatory. That would prevent people without driving licences from being able to buy cars.

To buy a shotgun or rifle, the buyer must provide a licence and be over the age of 18. To buy an alcoholic drink, lottery scratchcard or lottery ticket, the buyer must provide ID. To scrap a car, a person must provide ID and have a UK bank account, yet to buy a car—even a totally unroadworthy one, such as the one driven on the day Andrew was killed—a buyer does not have to do those things. It is taken on trust, on the V5 form, that the buyer is a suitable person and able to own a vehicle.

In the modern day, it is totally unacceptable for somebody without a driving licence—without even having had a driving lesson—to own a car, and there are three reasons for that. The first, obviously, is the death of one of my constituents. We do not want to see more young people being killed because other people can buy totally unroadworthy vehicles and use them on a public highway.

Secondly, it has broader implications. Since I met John in my constituency office, I have been talking more broadly to Durham police and the rural community to find out what other impacts such a change could have. For example, Durham police are very concerned about so-called community vehicles. Basically, what happens is that I buy a car off anybody, but I do not provide my address or details, because I can sort of fill it in. There is no requirement to check a driving licence and no requirement to put down a date of birth—it is just an

option. Those vehicles are then used in county lines drug trafficking; they are used to move people around the country. They are often parked up somewhere slightly out of sight, and they are easy to use. There is a real crime angle there for towns and cities.

Thirdly, I have spoken to local farmers, and there is a real rural crime angle as well. Since I was elected, I have lost count of the number of farmers who have got in touch about people trespassing on their land. This is not trespassing in the form of a poacher with a couple of pheasants under their jacket, like something from the 1940s. This is people driving through farm gates, smashing up land, destroying crops, worrying livestock and allowing animals out on to the roads.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I applaud my hon. Friend for bringing forward this debate on this important issue and for highlighting the tragic case in his constituency. Does he agree that the rural crime he talks about is part of a bigger picture that people in rural communities face? It could be vehicle crime, property damage, fly-tipping, poaching, farm machinery theft or animal theft—they are all part of a bigger picture that our rural communities have to suffer. It is great that Cumbria police and Durham police are working hard to support communities, but these crimes have a major impact on the mental health of people in rural communities.

Mr Holden: They do have a big impact on people in rural communities, particularly on their mental health, because of the isolation element of living in a rural area. My hon. Friend makes a broader point about the use of such vehicles for other crimes. The police have told me in conversations that if people are involved in what some might consider low-level crimes, such as lamping or poaching, they are usually involved in other crimes as well. It is a major issue that they are able to move around almost at will by using vehicles that nobody can trace. That is exactly the issue that I am trying to point to.

Some of the farmers I recently met over in Satley in my constituency face these issues on a regular basis—so regular that they have set up their own local WhatsApp group. Fences have been driven through, causing thousands of pounds of damage for the farmers, but even if they spot the vehicle and get the number plate, it is impossible to trace the ownership because the vehicles have basically disappeared into the system.

In Stanhope and all the way up in rural Weardale, farmers have faced similar issues. It was at one of my first constituency surgeries after being elected, in Stanhope town hall, that this issue of rural crime and untraceable vehicles was brought to me. More recently, down in Muggleswick, during the pandemic, when people were meant to be staying at home, there were people driving such vehicles—totally untraceable—to do drug deals in rural areas. People phone the police to say, “We have the number plates”—people have done the right thing on their farms and rural homes and put up CCTV—but that is totally useless if the ownership of the vehicle cannot be traced.

This proposed change would mean the traceability of vehicle ownership, and it would therefore prevent people from being able to use such vehicles to commit rural crime. Thirdly, it would stop people without driving licences using such vehicles.

[Mr Holden]

We have seen the impact of changes to the scrappage scheme. We used to hear all the time about people nicking bits of railway and trains having to be stopped. We used to hear about people dying in substations when they were trying to nick expensive metals. We used to hear regularly about lead being stripped from church roofs. All of that ended with a simple change in the law that meant someone had to provide ID and bank account details if they were selling scrap metal—a really simple change. All I seek is a similar change for people when they are selling cars.

I am not asking the Minister today for an immediate yes or no to a piece of legislation; I am asking to meet her in order to talk in more detail and find a suitable legislative vehicle for addressing this issue. I cannot see why the Government would not want to push forward with this, because it would tackle rural crime and the criminal exploitation of young people in our towns and cities, and it has the ability to stop more tragic deaths, like that of Andrew, happening in the future. It is a sensible change that I cannot see the Opposition opposing. Will the Minister today commit to meeting me to talk about this further, to see what we can do to make this very sensible change, which will save lives?

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) for opening the debate and for his continued championing of rural issues. I also thank my neighbour in Cumbria, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). As the Member of Parliament for Copeland, in Cumbria, I truly live, breathe and understand the challenges of rurality, rural crime and, particularly, rural roads. I commend the work that has been done by Andrew's parents, John and Karen Rowlands, who are here today.

As the mother of four daughters aged 18, 19, 21 and 23, who are all on the road, I worry every time they go out on our rural roads, as every parent does. We recognise that in rural areas a driving licence is all too often a passport to adulthood. It is a necessity in order to be able to access college, training, apprenticeships, work and social life, but rural roads have disproportionately more collisions. It is a priority for the Department for Transport to reduce that as far as possible, and we continue to work towards that every day, across the Department.

Today's debate is primarily about vehicle ownership and fatal collisions, but my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham also raised a number of questions about rural crime, which I will pick up with colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and at the Home Office. His overwhelming request was for a meeting with me to discuss the issue in more detail, which I am very able and willing to have, in short order.

I start by expressing my sincere condolences to Andrew's family, to John and Karen and to his sister, Becca. I reassure right hon. and hon. Members that the Government take road safety and deaths occurring on the road incredibly seriously.

It is true that a driving licence is not needed to purchase a vehicle. To make it a requirement of a purchaser to show a valid driving licence would, in our view, be impracticable in many vehicle purchasing transactions. However, I say that with the caveat that I am very willing to meet my hon. Friend to discuss ways in which this could assist or may be possible. Examples of such transactions include fleets purchased by companies to be sold on or leased, companies that acquire vehicles for the use of employees and those for whom a licence is not required, as their vehicles are only driven on private land, not to mention the many private vehicle sales that occur every day, in which it would be difficult, if not near impossible, to verify the authenticity of a driving licence.

Instead, the responsibility lies with the buyer of a vehicle to ensure that they behave within the law and only drive it if they are legally able to do so, as well as ensuring that the vehicle is roadworthy and has a valid MOT certificate. It is of course unfortunate that some individuals choose not to obey these laws, endangering themselves and others on the road or in the vehicle. In some cases, that has very tragic consequences, as we have heard this morning.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I heard what the Minister said about the practical difficulties of authenticating a driver's licence at the point of sale. When she meets the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), I wonder whether she might consider another way of doing things. If it is too difficult to authenticate a driver's licence at the point of sale, perhaps a driving licence would have to be presented when a vehicle goes for an MOT, for example. That is another way of ensuring that whoever is using a vehicle and is responsible for it has, as the hon. Gentleman so eloquently said, the skills and the responsibilities to do so safely.

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Member makes a valid point. Although I am not the Minister with responsibility for roads—that is Baroness Vere of Norbiton—I will discuss exactly that point with her. I know that there have been significant improvements in the way that police and the Motor Insurers' Bureau are able to check, for example, on motorists' insurance, using technology, software and interoperable connectivity to improve safety and check the eligibility of people to be behind the wheel on UK roads. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

Any death or serious injury on our roads is, of course, unacceptable. My deepest condolences go to the victims of road collisions and their families, and I pay particular tribute to John and Karen for their work to raise awareness of the importance of young drivers in particular, and all they do to support our THINK! campaign, as well as generally improving awareness of the dangers of driving and the responsibility involved in being behind a wheel.

The Government take uninsured driving very seriously. Driving without insurance is, of course, a criminal offence. Since 2005, the police have had the power to seize vehicles driven by someone without insurance. By 2020, 2 million vehicles had been seized in Great Britain and the level of uninsured driving has dropped by 50% over the last 10 years.

Mr Holden: I appreciate that the Government are considering ways to try to tackle issues such as driving without insurance. However, should there not be a change to ensure that we know who owns a vehicle, which would make it even easier to prosecute people for crimes such as driving without insurance? If we do not know who owns a vehicle, it is very difficult to bring a prosecution against somebody for driving without insurance.

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That is all part of the conversation that he and I will have when we meet. Over the next week, I will look at arranging that meeting, which will happen certainly by the end of this month. I am very happy to involve officials in that meeting as well, so that we get the full breadth of the Department for Transport's understanding of all the issues pertaining to his request.

Under continuous insurance enforcement, or CIE, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency works with the MIB to identify those who are driving without insurance, enabling enforcement action to be taken.

I turn to driving on private land. I know that is a burden to so many farmers and landowners across Cumbria, and indeed in all rural areas. For some landowners, it is a real problem that they face all too often, so I will continue to engage with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to find solutions to it, and I understand that concerns have been raised about it today.

Vehicles that are driven illegally on private land may be seized, of course, by a police officer. However, any change in the law to cover driving offences occurring on private land would be significant and require legislation that had potentially wide-ranging impacts. We have a regime of licensing, which ensures that only people who have demonstrated a competence to drive a vehicle on the highway are permitted to do so.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham for his championing of these rural issues in my Department and all other Departments. Driving on private land is not subject to the same licensing regime. To change this would have consequences for many people who only drive on their own land, most notably the farming community.

Mr Holden: I am not proposing that we change the requirements for driving on private land. I am just proposing that, to own a vehicle, someone has to have a driving licence. That would mean that they could give the vehicle to another, perhaps younger, person to drive on private land or for stock car racing or something like that. I am not proposing that we require a driving licence for driving on private land.

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case. I know that more can be done; I absolutely acknowledge that. Our calls for evidence will be published before this summer, so now is a good time to discuss the issue, and we would welcome any evidence given to support that. We all recognise that more can be done.

We are delivering on our commitment to change the law on a number of matters at the moment, including causing death by dangerous driving or careless driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill introduces changes to increase the maximum term of imprisonment to life. The Department is introducing an increase to the minimum disqualification periods for those two offences in the Bill to reinforce the seriousness with which the Government view them. Instead of two years, they will be increased to five years.

We are working on a call for evidence on parts of the Road Traffic Act 1988. We expect to be in a position to publish that in the first half of this year. While details are still being worked up on the scope of that particular issue, I know that officials are paying close attention to the points raised in this debate. We would welcome thoughts on where issues could be tackled by the call for evidence, and that is why I think that that meeting will be particularly helpful at this time. The evidence is expected to include drink and drug driving offences and the offence of failing to stop and report. My hon. Friend has not referred to that in this debate, but I wanted to set that out, and when we meet, we can discuss validation ahead of purchasing a vehicle.

Rural roads account for nearly 66% of all fatalities, while carrying only 33% of the traffic, with casualties mostly being vulnerable road users, such as young drivers and motorcyclists. My Department is developing a new road safety strategic framework, which will outline our ambitions to improve road safety in the UK. We are considering how we can best incorporate rural road safety into it.

We have also just concluded a consultation on the potential for creating a road collision investigation branch. That independent safety body would work to better understand the root causes of road collisions, learning lessons and making recommendations for interventions and policy changes that could help reduce collisions and their severity and improve rural safety for all road users. We hope to be able to set out the next steps over the coming months. It is my aim that these developments make a real difference to road safety in the UK, including reducing road traffic collisions and the tragic deaths and injuries that they cause.

I thank John and Karen Rowlands for their presence today and for the courageous way in which they are trying to prevent collisions, serious injuries and fatalities, particularly among young road users. I also thank them for their work in supporting the Department's THINK! campaign.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham, who so eloquently champions rural issues. Today, he has drawn attention to rural crime and demonstrated the importance of identity in preventing further incidents. I welcome his interventions and the conversation we will have with officials shortly.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Health Inequalities: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate. This is in line with the 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 parliamentary estate. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and health inequalities.

It is a real pleasure to be here under your stewardship this afternoon, Mr Twigg. I thank all those who have come along—all on the Labour side of the House—to debate this important issue, which affects so many of our constituents. I thank the organisations that have provided me with information to help me articulate my points, including the Royal College of Physicians, the Inequalities in Health Alliance, the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Maternity Action, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the NHS Federation, the UK Vaping Industry Association, Kidney Research UK, the Health Foundation, the Terrence Higgins Trust, Global Blood Therapeutics, the Local Government Association, the Institute of Alcohol Studies, the Children's Alliance and, as ever, the House of Commons Library, which brings much of this together. I do not believe I have missed any organisation out. If I have, I apologise.

Each organisation made helpful and constructive comments about the matter we are debating today. The extent of health inequalities is remarkably wide—in fact, I felt I understood the extent of such inequalities, but the information from those organisations has widened my knowledge significantly. Each of the organisations had the decency to send me information, so I will read out comments from each of them, if I may.

Alongside its key ask for a cross-governmental strategy to reduce health inequalities, the Inequalities in Health Alliance also asks the Government to

“commence the socio-economic duty, section 1 of the Equality Act 2010”

and to

“adopt a ‘child health in all policies’ approach.”

The Health Foundation notes:

“Public health funding grants to councils have been reduced by £700 million in real terms from 2015/16 to 2019/20. In the Spending Review published in October 2021, the Government said it would maintain the public health grant ‘in real terms’ until 2024/25, but has yet to confirm the amount for 2022/23.”

We are only a couple of months away from the beginning of that financial year. The Terrence Higgins Trust asked me to ask whether the Minister can confirm when local authorities will have their public health grant allocations published. Other organisations also asked that question.

The Institute of Alcohol Studies said:

“People from the most deprived groups in England are 60% more likely to die or be admitted to hospital due to alcohol than those from the least deprived... We believe that for any levelling up agenda to be comprehensively successful, it must address alcohol harm as a top priority.”

The LGA said:

“Councils have seen a significant reduction to their public health budgets in the period between 2015/16 and 2019/20. The recent announcement of a real-terms protection of the public health grant is welcome, but is unlikely to address the impact of the past reductions to funding.”

Cancer Research said that its modelling estimates suggest that

“30,000 extra cases of cancer in the UK each year are attributable to socio-economic deprivation. The two biggest preventable causes of cancer—smoking and overweight and obesity—are more prevalent in deprived groups.”

Kidney Research said:

“Around 3 million people in the UK have kidney disease and every day, 20 people develop kidney failure.... There is also a gender bias associated with kidney disease—women are more likely to be diagnosed with kidney disease and are at higher risk of developing end stage renal failure than men.”

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On that point, I want to ask him about gender inequality in terms of health. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on osteoporosis and bone health, he will know that fracture liaison services are key to prompt and timely diagnosis of osteoporosis, but only 51% of NHS trusts in England have an FLS and only 41% of all NHS trusts have permanent and sustainable funding in place for their FLS. That means that every year an estimated 900,000 people miss out on the medication they need to prevent avoidable fractures. Does he agree that this health inequality, or postcode lottery, needs to end?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is completely right and she has been a real champion of osteoporosis services, pushing them in her own area and as chair of the APPG. One figure shows that half of women over the age of 50 suffer a broken bone due to osteoporosis. That is the kind of stark figure that we have to face. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

The NHS Confederation has made comments similar to those I have mentioned:

“The number of people waiting for planned NHS care in England has grown to record levels, with more than 5.6 million people currently on the waiting list and over 7 million ‘missing patients’ anticipated to come forward... Inequalities are now becoming evident in the backlog, with evidence suggesting that waiting lists have grown more rapidly in more deprived areas during the pandemic.”

Maternity Action says:

“Vulnerable migrant women face charges of £7,000 or more for... maternity care. Charges are levied on women with insecure immigration status, including destitute asylum seekers whose claim has been refused and who are not in receipt of Home Office support, women whose relationship has broken down and who were dependent on their partner for their immigration status, women on fiancée visas and women who have been unable to afford to renew their visas. This policy disproportionately impacts on minority ethnic women, who make up 85% of women using Maternity Action’s Maternity Care Access Advice Service, which advises women”

on such matters.

The British Heart Foundation said:

“The prevalence of heart failure, stroke, and mini stroke in adults with learning disabilities in England is higher than the general population, and circulatory diseases are one of the main causes of death in people with learning disabilities. For the most part, this can be attributed to differences in the social determinants of health.”

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health said:

“Child health outcomes in England are some of the worst in Europe... Our State of Child Health 2020 report reveals a widening gap between health outcomes across nearly 30 indicators. It shows that children living in more deprived areas have worse health outcomes than their peers living in less deprived areas... The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted and accelerated the devastating impact of health inequalities.”

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, given that the largest number of covid-related deaths have been experienced by ethnic minority communities, it is imperative that the Minister provides clarity on whether the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and the Health Promotion Taskforce will be given a remit outside the Department for Health and Social Care?

Peter Dowd: I am pleased that my hon. Friend asked that question, because it is one that has been asked many times, and I am sure the Minister will cover it—it is one of the questions I have as well.

The UK vaping industry said:

“It is absolutely critical that the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities continues the pragmatic approach of Public Health England in recognising the role of vaping in tackling inequalities. It is essential that the institutional knowledge of PHE is not lost in the establishment of the OHID”

It is important that that is factored into these debates.

The House of Commons Library referred to the debate on health inequalities versus disparities. Jabeer Butt of the Race Equalities Foundation has welcomed the institution of the OHID and the possibility of working alongside it, but he said:

“With the establishment of OHID, we can’t help but wonder why the language used by the Health and Social Care Secretary talks about ‘health disparities’, compared to Professor Chris Whitty, who describes ‘health inequalities in the Government announcement.”

This is not just about semantics. It is important that we recognise that it is about not just disparities but health inequalities as well.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on his speech. He touched on a really important point: that the Government talk about disparities when they should talk about inequalities. To truly tackle health inequalities, we need to look at social factors, such as housing, racism and air pollution, and socioeconomic factors. Does he agree that, to tackle all of those inequalities, the OHID will need to look in the round at all those issues and seek a cross-governmental role to deliver on the Department of Health and Social Care’s aims?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is spot on. That is a key point that we want to tease out today: cross-departmental working.

As with many other health issues, the devil is in the detail. Only by looking into the granularity of the issues can a real understanding of the levels of inequality and disparity be established. I do not have time for more significant references to the organisations concerned, but it really was important for me to get down to the detail of the information that they provided. I will give the documents to the Minister for her perusal in due course.

Before the pandemic, growth in life expectancy had stalled for the most deprived in England. Between 2014 and 2019, people in the least deprived areas saw their life expectancy grow significantly, but there were no significant changes for people in the most deprived areas. For women in the most deprived areas of England, life expectancy fell between 2010 and 2019—a stark fact. The pandemic unambiguously exposed and exacerbated inequalities that have existed in our society for far too long, as many hon. Members will have seen first hand in their constituencies. The pandemic has widened gaps that were already too big to begin with, and once again it is the most vulnerable who have borne the brunt.

We know from the Sir Michael Marmot’s “Build Back Fairer” report that mortality rates for covid in the first wave mirrored mortality rates for other causes. In order words, the causes of health inequalities more widely were similar to the underlying drivers of covid-19 deaths among certain groups. It has been estimated that working-age adults in England’s poorest areas were almost four times more likely to die from covid than those in the wealthiest areas—another stark figure. Now, with the backlog, analysis of waiting list data shows that people living in the most deprived areas are nearly twice as likely to wait more than a year for treatment compared to those living in the least deprived areas. That cannot be right.

Before the pandemic, through the pandemic and now as we emerge, we hope, from the worst of the omicron variants, it is clear that there is a deep-rooted inequality in our society that causes huge inequality in health. The gap in life expectancy is startling. People in my constituency live on average 12 years less than people in Southport—just at the other end of the borough. Those are stark differences in healthy life expectancy—how many years a person spends in good health. Before covid, it was estimated that people in the richest communities in England could expect to live in good health for up to two decades more than the poorest. In Bootle, according to Nomis at the Office for National Statistics, 42% of people who are economically inactive are long-term sick, compared to the national average of 24%.

However, statistics get us only so far. A recent paper from the Royal College of Physicians brings to life the reality of health inequalities. One hospital clinician saw a patient who was extremely malnourished and dehydrated. The patient had been regularly missing meals so she could feed her teenage son. When she first became unwell, she did not call the GP, because she was unable to afford to pay someone to look after her son, and was frightened that he would be taken into care if she had to go to hospital for a long time. She was eventually admitted to hospital with sepsis. There are other stories in the paper of people who missed hospital appointments because they could not afford public transport, people who do not have the kitchen facilities to cook food and

[Peter Dowd]

someone who was hospitalised because their asthma was aggravated by mould in their flat that the landlord refused to fix.

As we all know, 40 years ago, Sir Douglas Black, a former president of the Royal College of Physicians, was asked by the Department of Health and Social Security to lead an expert committee looking into health and inequality. That now famous Black report was unequivocal and said that while overall health had improved since the introduction of the welfare state, there were widespread health inequalities, the main cause of which were economic inequalities.

In his foreword to the report, the then Secretary of State said:

“the influences at work in explaining the relative health experience of different parts of our society are many and interrelated.”

That is as true today as it was then. It might seem that health inequality is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS but, as other hon. Members have said, health and social care services can only try to cure the ailments created by the environments people live in.

Research by the University of York linked austerity measures with the deaths of almost 60,000 more people than would be expected in the four years following their introduction. The money a person has will change the decisions they make about their health. It is the difference between having a healthy meal and having a meal at all, or between choosing to pay for the journey to the GP for an ongoing cough or choosing not to.

Housing affects health too. Last year, Shelter found that poor housing was harming the health of a fifth of renters. Our society benefits some people and deprives others, and those structural inequalities drive many of the health inequalities in black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups. We have to address that if we want to tackle this issue.

If we are to prevent ill health in the first place, we need to take action on issues such as how much money people have, poor housing, food quality, communities, place, employment, racism and discrimination, transport, and air pollution. That is why many organisations and coalitions, including the 200 members of the Inequalities in Health Alliance, which is convened by the Royal College of Physicians, have made calls for a cross-Government strategy to reduce health inequalities.

Tackling health inequality requires a considered and co-ordinated approach across myriad factors. Last year, the Government signalled that they recognise the need to look beyond the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS and to take action on the issues that cause ill health. When the Secretary of State announced the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities in October last year, we were promised a new cross-Government agenda that would look to track the wider determinants of health and reduce disparities. The Health Promotion Taskforce was established.

These are potentially encouraging signs, but I am concerned that we are yet to hear the detail of what the OHID will do to reduce health inequalities. Will the Health Promotion Taskforce have a remit to take action outside the Department of Health and Social Care? When will we see a strategy on reducing health inequalities,

so that we know what the Government’s ambition is in this area and we can track progress? Will the Government commit to developing a cross-Government strategy to reduce health inequalities?

Will the Minister set out how the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities will reduce health inequalities? Again, I push the question: will he confirm that the OHID and the Health Promotion Taskforce will be given a remit to act outside the DHSC? Will he tell us about the work of the Health Promotion Taskforce and how often it meets? What engagement has the OHID had with Government Departments to date, since it was formally established on 1 October 2021? Importantly, will the Minister set out how the OHID will work with integrated care systems and support them to address health inequalities in their areas? I hope he can answer some of those questions.

When the Labour Government first asked Professor Marmot to review health inequalities in 2008, Gordon Brown said:

“The health inequalities we are talking about are not only unjust, condemning millions of men, women and children to avoidable ill-health. They also limit the development and the prosperity of communities, whole nations and even continents.”

He was absolutely right.

This Government were elected on a platform of levelling up, but while covid-19 caused a decrease in life expectancies for most countries between 2019 and 2020, the UK’s life expectancy has fallen below where it was in 2010. The UK was one of only two countries where that happened, the other being the United States.

In 1980, the Government responded to the Black report by saying:

“you might be right about the solution, but it’s going to cost too much.”

After two years of living with the pandemic, which, of course, has hit the most deprived the hardest, it is clear that the real cost lies in not supporting those who need that support most. Only Government can create the conditions for better health by improving the factors that lead to ill health in the first place. I hope the Minister can set out what the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities can do to achieve the aim of reducing inequality, and can confirm that the Government intend to tackle the wider determinants of health, which drive so much of the health inequality that we see.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): A good number of Members want to speak today. I do not intend to impose a time limit, but it would be helpful if you could keep your speeches to around six minutes. That will ensure that everybody gets in. I intend to call the Front Benchers at no later than 3.40 pm.

2.51 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I will keep my mask on because I have a wound, unfortunately, which I need to keep covered. It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I remember that we served on the 2012 Health and Social Care Bill Committee together, so this is bringing back memories.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on his excellent speech, and particularly on his focus on the wider health determinants and the need for an intergovernmental strategy and co-ordination. He is absolutely right.

I sought to become an MP because of my work on health inequalities. I was at the University of Liverpool for 10 years. Prior to that, I was a jobbing public health consultant. My hon. Friend mentioned the Black report. We must not forget that Margaret Whitehead at Liverpool was the first person to identify the health divide between the north and south. I am grateful to her. I learned so much under her and my other colleagues at Liverpool.

In the time that you have made available to me, Mr Twigg, I want to make three points. First, health inequalities are not inevitable. We hear “Oh, it’s always been there; it’s never going to change”. They are not inevitable but a consequence of political choices. As my hon. Friend said, those choices relate to whether or not we want socioeconomic inequalities to continue. It is also about—and this is rarely talked about—inequalities in power. We must ensure that that is addressed and brought into the debate.

Secondly, the structural inequalities across our country have been exposed and exacerbated by covid, resulting in, as Professor Sir Michael Marmot has said,

“the high and unequal death toll from COVID-19”,

which was one of the highest in the world. Thirdly, tackling health inequalities involves every single Government Department, not just the Department of Health and Social Care.

The term “health inequalities” refers to the increasing mortality and morbidity that occurs with declining socioeconomic conditions. In my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency, the health inequality gap is more than 12 years. Those health inequalities are systematic and socially produced, and are a result of the differential distribution of income, wealth, knowledge, social status and connections. There is overwhelming evidence that those factors are the key determinants of health inequalities, influenced by written and unwritten rules and laws across our society, rather than biological and behavioural differences. I have always been disappointed by the focus always being on the individual: “It’s your fault if you get ill; it’s your fault if you get a disease. It’s your lifestyle choices.” It is not. There is overwhelming evidence on that.

There is no law of nature that decrees that the risk of a baby dying is 94% higher for children born into poor families than for those born into rich families, but that is the reality. We know that infant mortality, which had been declining for nearly a century, has started to rise again. As my hon. Friend has said, there are consequences to inequality and the austerity that has been imposed on so many families.

To my first point, given that health inequalities are socially produced, there is hope because that means that they are not fixed or inevitable—we can do something about them. If the Government are committed to levelling up, will the Minister comment on why the Gini coefficient has increased over the past few years? As my dear friend Frank Dobson famously said, nothing could be more unjust than someone knowing that they are going to die sooner because they are poor. Will the Minister comment on the socioeconomic factors that are driving health inequalities? Why they have they got worse over the past two years?

On my second point, Sir Michael Marmot was very clear in his analysis of the covid death rate that there have been four drivers of the high and unequal death

toll in the UK: the governance and political culture detrimentally affecting social cohesion and inclusivity; the widening inequalities in power, money and resources; the regressive austerity policies over the past decade; and the declining healthy life expectancy of the poorest, particularly women, which is among the worst of all comparable economies. Deprived communities have also been hit particularly hard in that regard.

On my third point, as important as our NHS is in treating and caring for us when we get ill, reducing inequalities must involve all Government Departments, as my hon. Friend has said. That was reflected in Sir Michael’s recommendations to address those inequalities. He said that we must build back fairer from the pandemic, with multi-sector action from all levels of Government, and increase investment in public health. Since 2015, there has been a 24% cut in public health budgets.

One thing we know about the NHS and its impact on inequalities relates to the privatisation and marketisation of health services. We know that that helps to reduce access to health services for those in lower socioeconomic groups. On top of that, there is the inequality in health outcomes. I fear that the 2021 Health and Care Bill will make a bad situation even worse, adding to the issues resulting from the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Not only do countries in which there is a narrow gap between rich and poor have high life expectancy; they also have better educational attainment, social mobility and trust, lower crime and a fairer society as a whole. I appreciate that I have gone over time and apologise for that.

2.58 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I will keep my remarks as brief as possible. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this important debate, at a time when the NHS is under enormous strain and facing a clear and present threat of relentless cuts and privatisation under this Conservative Government.

As well as leaving our beloved health service on its knees and struggling to cope after two years of a crippling pandemic, this Government have presided over a period of austerity that has seen health inequality become even more prevalent and extreme.

Last week, the other place started its Committee stage of the Health and Care Bill and began discussing proposed amendments about health inequality. Speaking at that Committee sitting, peers from across the House made clear that the Bill is a huge opportunity to eliminate health inequality and for the Government to demonstrate their commitment to tackling the “disease of disparity”, to quote the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who pledged to address the issue when he took office last year. However, in the months since, there has been little evidence that the Government are taking the bold steps required to address the crisis.

The Government cannot say that they are not aware of the issue, because research published in 2019 by the Department for Work and Pensions revealed that the highest reported rates of poor health in those under the age of 55 was overwhelmingly in the poorest percentiles, with the bottom 20% of the population having worse health outcomes by a staggering 1,100%.

[Navendu Mishra]

Three years and a pandemic later, the situation is even bleaker. In 2020, life expectancy in England fell more dramatically than at any other point since world war two, as a result of the covid pandemic. In the poorest areas, life expectancy declined nearly twice as much as it did in the wealthy ones, while ethnic minority people died from covid at much higher rates. Sadly, those with disabilities faced a significantly higher death rate.

In my constituency, the gap in mortality and reported serious illness is stark. In the most affluent areas such as Heaton Mersey, life expectancy for women is 84 years, while for men it is almost 83. However, just a short distance away in central Stockport, the average life expectancy for a man is a staggering 12 years shorter, while in Brinnington a woman's life will, on average, end a decade sooner. For life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and heart disease, it is a similar picture. On average, the limited life chances of my constituents are particularly acute. Research by the King's Fund reveals that the north-west experienced a far higher proportion of deaths from covid-19 than the south-west, to give just one example.

Significant investment in our NHS is needed to halt the rise in health inequality. That includes hospitals, which unsurprisingly play a significant role in health outcomes for many people. That investment could be put towards the facility's funding or its catchment area, or it could improve accessibility for the vulnerable. With the NHS already at breaking point following 12 years of Conservative Government austerity and a crippling pandemic, we cannot afford to be wasteful—a point I have made consistently since my maiden speech, when I criticised this Government's underfunding of Stockport NHS trust by £170 million in recent years.

Ultimately, I welcome any decision that improves public health outcomes and ensures the best quality healthcare for the people of Stockport. To build a healthier, happier and more equal society we must do more than simply increase NHS funding. I therefore urge the Minister to give a genuine commitment to truly universal healthcare that is fit for purpose for everyone, enabling the NHS to continue to be the envy of the world.

3.2 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on an excellent, well-researched speech and on securing this important debate.

Before turning to the exact subject of the debate, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for vaping, I want to reflect on the role of the predecessor body of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. Public Health England sought to be a practical institution, with evidence and pragmatism at the heart of its approach to public life. I want to pay particular attention to its work on tobacco harm reduction, which I have witnessed not only as a member of the APPG but personally. Since 2015, across seven evidence reviews, PHE reports on the role that e-cigarettes can play in a healthier society have captured the ethos of the organisation in its entirety.

The first report was a landmark publication for the vaping industry. It concluded—I hope that everyone in this House heeds this fact when reflecting on reducing inequalities born from smoking cigarettes—that vaping is “95% less harmful” than tobacco. In its report, PHE went on to look favourably on e-cigarettes, while others have sought only to fuel misinformation, risking lives by claiming vaping and smoking to be one and the same. They are not. It is because of that evidence-based endorsement of vaping that millions of smokers across England and—dare I say it?—across the world, who have exhausted all other routes trying to quit smoking, have a fighting chance with an incredibly successful product that is helping smokers to quit.

Smoking is perhaps one of the biggest contributors to inequality in our society, causing considerable damage to private and public health, and it has a high impact on physical and mental health. It is an expensive and addictive habit, particularly for those most disadvantaged in our society, where smoking prevalence is highest. Vaping is less expensive and is an effective way to stop smoking. It is therefore critical that the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities recognises the role of vaping, picks up the torch left by Public Health England and continues to be a stalwart champion of tobacco harm reduction.

This could not be more important as we continue to wait for the Department of Health and Social Care to publish, first, its review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016—that review is now eight months late—and secondly, its new tobacco control plan, which is also late and nowhere to be seen. The APPG for vaping's door is always open to the Minister, and I know that leading bodies such as the UK Vaping Industry Association would welcome the chance to work with Government to secure a future in which the health benefits of switching from smoking to vaping are fully realised. The UKVIA has industry-led solutions to many of the remaining concerns that prevent people from finally making the switch to vaping. Those solutions include the guidance it produced on introducing restrictions on packaging and branding. I support that paper, and can share it with the Minister if she wishes.

The UK is seen by many across the world as a world leader in tobacco harm reduction, with countries, smokers and vapers looking to the UK for guidance in this space. That reputation should not be compromised by the loss of institutional knowledge during the transfer of resource from Public Health England to OHID, and it should not come at the cost of a Government Department delaying publications once again. If the Government are serious about levelling up and wish to support endeavours to improve people's lives, they must ensure that OHID adopts the same evidence-based approach as its predecessor to finding solutions for life-debilitating problems.

I once again express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle for having secured this debate. I hope that in responding, the Minister can provide clarity about the timeline for responding to the TRPR review and for the publication of the new tobacco control plan. I also hope that she agrees that the OHID must remain independent, with its institutional knowledge protected.

3.7 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for having secured this important debate, and for his eloquent and detailed speech. Salford is currently the 18th most deprived local authority area out of 317 in England, yet it is a tale of two cities: more than 30% of the city's population reside in a highly deprived area, yet we are also home to some of the wealthiest suburbs in Greater Manchester. That disparity is shown starkly by our life expectancy. It has been improving over the past few decades, but there remains a gap between Salford and the rest of England of three years for males and two years for females.

Male residents living in the most affluent areas of Salford can expect to live more than 11 years longer than those in the most deprived areas, while females in the most affluent areas can expect to live seven years longer. I think we can all agree that that is morally wrong. Sadly, we have known for decades—from the Beveridge report to the Marmot report—that poor health, discrimination, housing, employment and income are inextricably linked, yet we have seen very little action in recent years. Of course, there was a burst of radical policy development in the late 1940s, with the creation of the welfare state and the NHS, for example, and we saw policy approaches in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but since then we have lacked a comprehensive health inequality strategy. What is worse is that austerity has resulted in the unravelling of many of the positive policies put in place and the undermining of the remaining ones.

The creation in October 2021 of the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and the announcement of a new cross-Government agenda to track the wider determinants of health and to reduce disparities were met with cautious optimism. However, since the creation of the OHID, there has been little information on what it will actually do or what it has done so far. Will the Minister clearly set out how the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities will reduce health inequalities? Indeed, what is the new cross-Government agenda? Can she confirm that the Health Promotion Taskforce will be given a remit to act outside of the Department of Health and Social Care, to address the true socioeconomic causes of poor health? Finally, can she set out how OHID will work with the new integrated care systems, and how it will support them to address health inequalities in their area?

As the Inequalities in Health Alliance states:

“If we are to prevent ill health in the first place, we need to take action on issues such as poor housing, food quality, communities and place, employment, racism and discrimination, transport and air pollution. All parts of government and public services need to adopt reducing health inequality as a priority.”

Of course, I fear that the Government will not do that. It would show that an active state that supports communities, industry and workers to increase living standards for all within a new, democratic economy is the only way to do this properly, and that goes against everything the Government believe in. None the less, I hope that the Minister will at least address some of the questions I have asked today.

3.10 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this particularly important debate.

The Minister will be aware of the Tudor Hart law: the areas with the best health are more likely to receive better health services. As my late mum—a lifelong nurse—would have said, “Much gets more.” There can be few greater examples of that than in south-west London, where an imminent planning application proposes to open a new hospital in healthy, wealthy Belmont, but at a cost: the downgrading, in the heart of a pandemic, of both Epsom and St Helier Hospitals. In the wild west of south London's NHS, it is almost as if coronavirus never happened. Under those reckless plans, St Helier will lose its A&E, intensive care, children's unit, maternity services, renal services and 62% of its beds to a wealthier area of considerably better health—so much for levelling up.

We have seen this plan on repeat. Funding is allocated and everyone pretends that three possible sites are being considered for development: Epsom, St Helier or Belmont. Evidence of widening health inequalities is presented by the bucketload, but a reason is always found to choose Belmont as the winning site. The reality is that, at the time of the latest decision, there were more than twice as many people with bad or very bad health within a mile of St Helier than within a mile of Belmont. The local population is significantly larger, with considerably more dependent children and elderly people. It is a plan that flies in the face of any supposed commitment to tackling health inequalities.

The programme points to its deprivation analysis—a document that considered deprivation by borough, rather than by proximity to each of the possible sites. Why does that matter? It matters because it disguises huge inequalities within boroughs, such as the 10-year difference in life expectancy between parts of Merton.

The true analysis of deprivation could not be clearer. Some 42 of the 51 most deprived areas in the catchment are nearest St Helier. Given that, hon. Members can surely see how ridiculous it is that the Belmont site received a higher score for supposedly tackling deprivation. Is it any wonder that health inequalities keep widening? While the programme considered old age as a decisive factor in the location of acute services, the depressing reality is that old age in Mitcham looks very different from old age in Belmont.

Health inequalities in south London are stark, and not just by geography. Black, Asian and minority ethnic residents are more likely to have underlying conditions such as diabetes, lupus and kidney failure and are at a higher risk of developing heart disease and hypertension. Black women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than white women, and are more likely to require neonatal or specialist care baby units. Such facts are of paramount importance for this hospital reconfiguration, as 64 of the 66 areas across the catchment with the highest proportion of BAME residents are nearest St Helier. Just one is nearest Belmont. Under those plans, many women will see maternity services moved further away. The programme's solution is to encourage more women to have a home birth, which is obviously dependent on the risk to mum and baby and is currently chosen by just 3% of women in the catchment area.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

The reality is that my constituents will not travel to Belmont. It is quicker from every corner of Mitcham and Morden to reach St George's Hospital or Croydon. That is a completely terrifying prospect, because St George's is already coping with too many women having children there, its A&E is in the bottom quartile for space standards, and the Care Quality Commission has demanded that fewer patients attend the site.

Where does this leave us? The planning application for the Belmont site is imminent, and the cost of the proposals is soaring—the latest estimate is almost £600 million. Improving St Helier would not only keep services where they are needed most, but save £161 million. I ask the Minister to take the unequivocal evidence that I have presented and, if she genuinely wants to close health inequalities under her watch, insist that these proposals are reconsidered. Stop wasting taxpayer's money and leave these vital services at St Helier's current site.

3.15 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on his excellent speech and on securing this important debate. As we know, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities was officially launched in October as part of a wider Government restructuring of public health bodies in England. Back in September, the Health Secretary announced his vision for what the OHID would prioritise. He listed three goals: preventing poor mental and physical health; addressing health inequalities and improving access to health services; and working with partners within and outside of Government to respond to wider health determinates.

It is welcome that the Government have set out to alleviate health inequality. However, in order to truly tackle the disparities in health outcomes, the Government must change course and more closely consider the health outcomes for illnesses associated with stigma, misunderstanding or insufficient public awareness. I am speaking specifically about those living with HIV in this country. Despite accounting for less than 2% of the British population, people of black African heritage accounted for 13% of new HIV diagnoses among heterosexuals in 2020, and 64% of these diagnoses were of women. People of black African heritage are also significantly impacted by late HIV diagnosis, which is particularly frustrating, considering that those who are diagnosed late are much more likely to die from the disease.

I am increasingly concerned by the state of HIV testing in this country, given that the proportion of people who are eligible for a test but are not offered one more than doubled in 2020. That is completely unacceptable, and it is a systemic problem that falls under the remit of the OHID. I want to use this debate to urge the OHID to monitor the provision of commissioned services for people who are disproportionately likely to be diagnosed with HIV, and to consider how they could be improved. In particular, I want it to look closely at the availability of testing, both at home and in A&E departments, especially in areas of high HIV prevalence, and to consider the extent to which that might be acting as a barrier to achieving its aim of ending HIV transmission by 2030.

If the Government truly want the OHID to tackle health inequalities, then its work needs to have a laser-like focus on improving health outcomes for those living with stigmatised illnesses, such as HIV. It goes without saying that the Government cannot fulfil their pledge to end HIV transmission by 2030 without taking the measures that I have outlined today.

3.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for setting the scene. He is a man known for setting the scene well, and we appreciate his contribution—I think every one of us will have been heartened by what he has said today. I wish to make a contribution as my party's health spokesperson. I am pleased to be here to discuss the evident disparities and inequalities in our health system, both on the mainland and back home in Northern Ireland. I know the Minister is not responsible for health in Northern Ireland, but I will give examples that will hopefully spur those who speak in this debate.

We must ensure that everyone has access to efficient healthcare. I will speak about three groups of people: those with mental health issues, those who are homeless and those with addictions. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities officially launched in October 2021, as part of a restructuring of health bodies in England and throughout the UK. I am pleased that the OHID will co-ordinate local and central Government to initiate improvements in public health. The purpose of the OHID is clear. If it delivers on that purpose, everyone present will be more than pleased because many of the issues would be addressed.

I thank the Government for listening and learning from the lessons of the pandemic, and that information has now been taken ultimately to improve our health service. The Minister has said that our Government have three priorities to work on. The first priority is preventing poor mental and physical health. One in four people in the UK—25% of the population—and 19% of adults in Northern Ireland suffer from poor mental health, so that should be prioritised. The second priority is addressing health inequalities. Health is devolved, but this must be a priority for the Department across the whole of the United Kingdom. The third priority is working with partners within and outside Government to respond to the wider health determinants. These partners also have a responsibility for public health outside England.

I will talk about addiction issues and why it is so important that we address them within this campaign and policy, which the Minister will reply to shortly. In Northern Ireland, and in my constituency in particular, alcohol and drug-related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities monitored in Northern Ireland, with rates in the most deprived areas five times those of the least deprived areas for drug-related mortality, and four times those for alcohol-related mortality. I suspect that other hon. Members will also state those mortality figures for people with drug or alcohol addiction issues. The inequality seems to be, unfortunately, in the areas where people have a poor quality of surroundings and less money, and therefore they are the ones we need to focus on because of the high risk of mortality that is prominent.

The King's Fund has ascertained that health inequalities are avoidable and depend on people's access to care; the quality and experience of care; behavioural risks to health, such as smoking and drinking; and wider determinants of health, such as housing circumstances and social factors and decisions. All these things combine to put pressure on people. Crisis, an organisation that campaigns to end homelessness, has contacted me in relation to tackling the disease of disparity. That is quite a term: the disease of disparity. Yes, it is a disease and it needs to be addressed. People who are homeless face some of the poorest health outcomes in society.

Some of the statistics are as follows. People experiencing homelessness are three times more likely to be diagnosed with a severe respiratory health issue. I did not know that until I got that information from Crisis, but it is a fact. The average age of death among homeless people is 46 for men and 42 for women, as the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) referred to. In this day and age that is totally unacceptable. We must address that issue. At the same time, I read in the papers—I do not know whether it is true—that people are living longer. Will someone who is homeless live longer? They will not, and therefore that must be addressed. I hope the Minister can respond to that.

Finally, a recent study found that people facing homelessness in major cities, such as Belfast or London, have levels of frailty like that of a 90-year-old. Again, that is another combination of issues. The barriers blocking greater equality for our health service are just astonishing, and these have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. It is about time that we started prioritising, and that starts with everyone being given the same allowances to access our truly admirable NHS.

Lastly, it is time for the OHID to monitor the provision of commissioned services for those who are socially disadvantaged and cannot access sustainable healthcare. I urge the Minister to commit to producing guidance and support on what actually works in the provision of health and social care services. I believe our duty in this House is to speak up for those who need speaking up for. Today, I am doing just that.

3.24 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this important debate. When the Government launched the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, renamed from the Office for Health Promotion, the Secretary of State said that it was not just a name change but

“a statement of intent—a driving mission to ‘level up’ health and ensure everyone has the chance to live happy and healthy lives.”

That is a mission that I sincerely hope all his Cabinet colleagues will commit to truly delivering on. The issue goes to the heart of the inequalities in communities such as mine. Sadly, it is an issue that has only got worse over the last decade. In the Government's most recent national deprivation data, Barnsley ranked in the bottom 15% of the country for levels of income. Of the 318 local authority areas in the entire country, Barnsley ranked as the 19th worst for health deprivation and disability.

The Secretary of State has said that the top two priorities for the new office are preventing poor mental and physical health and improving access to health services, as has been discussed in today's debate. As things stand, Barnsley is well above the national average for diagnoses of depression, arterial disease, learning disabilities, high blood pressure, heart failure, epilepsy, diabetes, dementia, obesity and heart disease. Barnsley East residents are almost twice as likely as residents anywhere else in the country to suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, much as a result of the thousands of men who worked down the pit. Around 8,000 miners have sadly lost their lives over the last two years.

I have raised the issue of covid death certificates with the Government on several occasions. I directly ask the Minister, again, whether she can give us an update on what the Government are doing to change guidance—it is a very simple ask—to ensure that industrial diseases are recorded on death certificates if someone, sadly, dies of covid. That is important to make sure that families receive the compensation to which they are entitled.

We cannot look at health inequalities in isolation, because income and health inequality are fundamentally linked. The ONS reports that the difference in life expectancy between the least and most deprived areas in England is 9.4 years for men and 7.6 years for women. The difference in the number of years lived in good health between the most and least deprived areas can be as much as 20. While areas such as Kensington and Westminster thrive, northern working-class towns such as Barnsley continue to be left behind.

There can be no justification for the levels of inequality that we face. Whether someone lives in Westminster or Barnsley, they deserve to live well. We have a long way to go if we are to tackle these health inequalities. They are not only an enormous challenge that the Government need to address today; they mean reversing more than a decade of decline.

3.27 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate and making an excellent opening speech. I also endorse what has been said by hon. Members on all sides—predominantly those from urban areas, because poverty is a major driver of health inequalities and discrepancies. I hope that my colleagues will understand if I now focus on some rural discrepancies, which are also significant and in some ways overlap with those on which hon. Members have focused so far.

The first area I will look at is social care. Social care is, obviously a huge issue and under massive pressure everywhere in the United Kingdom. There is an extra problem in rural communities like Cumbria. In my constituency, the average house price is 11 times the average household income; there are twice as many second homes in my patch as there are council houses. At this moment, 150 people who should be in social care are stranded in hospital beds, and one of the reasons for that is that the Government underfund social care. Not a penny of the national insurance rise that is coming will go into the pockets of hard-working care workers, so it is hard to retain and recruit them from a relatively small working-age workforce.

[Tim Farron]

That has led to a number of issues. Just the other day, I was speaking to a person who needs a rota of six carers in order to function, but that person has not been able to find more than three for the last six to nine months. That is caused by a number of things, including silly visa rules, which the Government need to look at again, and the massive discrepancy between house prices and income—the availability of anywhere affordable to live for folks in the area.

Secondly, there is the issue of mental health—particularly young people’s mental health. Similar issues are present there when it comes to recruiting and retaining staff. There are wonderful staff—too few of them. When I did a survey of families in my constituency last year, we discovered that more than 50% of young people who presented with mental health conditions that needed attention waited more than three months, and 28% waited more than six months. Some 52% said their experience of that care was poor as a consequence.

If a 15-year-old broke their leg on a football field on a Sunday afternoon, they would be seen immediately, but if something invisible breaks within one of our young people, they wait six months or more. That is intolerable anywhere, but it is fuelled by the fact that we are in a rural area that is underfunded for mental health provision.

When it comes to GPs, a few years ago the Government got rid of the minimum practice income guarantee, which subsidised small surgeries. Small surgeries in rural areas are not small because they are bad, but because they cover the size of a small country but a relatively small population. Coniston, which mourns its doctor, Dr Simon Fisher, who sadly passed away just a few weeks ago, has a roll of just 900 patients, not because its practice is poor quality but because it covers a vast area. The Government took away that money.

The sticking-plaster money, called atypical practice funding, that went to some surgeries just to keep them going will fold when the clinical commissioning groups go and the new integrated care boards come in, in just a few months’ time. I ask the Minister to look carefully at that, as otherwise we may lose dozens, if not hundreds, of rural GP surgeries around the country.

On cancer provision, the National Radiotherapy Advisory Group states that it is bad practice for any patient needing radiotherapy to have to travel for more than 45 minutes for treatment. I can tell the Minister that not a single person in my constituency lives within 45 minutes of radiotherapy, and many of them must make four-hour round trips, day after day, in order to get treatment at an excellent but distant centre in Preston. If the Minister is committed to tackling discrepancies, she will finally do what Government after Government, including the one of which I was part, have failed to do—deliver the satellite radiotherapy unit at Kendal that we have long been campaigning for. That will shorten those journeys and save lives.

My final point is about accident and emergency. The nearest accident and emergency centre to most of my constituency is at Lancaster. There is a lot wrong with the hospital at Lancaster. It is an old site, at the wrong end of the one-way system, and could do with renewing. Talk of hospital improvement money going into it is welcome, but what is not welcome is the Minister’s Government’s continued insistence on looking at the

option to close the Royal Lancaster Infirmary, merge it with the hospital at Preston and have a new hospital somewhere in the middle. If the answer is to make A&E for south Cumbria another 10 or 15 miles further away, that is the wrong answer. I ask the Minister to talk to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and others to take that option off the table, so that people from my communities do not have to travel dangerous distances to get the treatment they deserve.

I endorse what my colleagues from more urban areas said earlier in the debate, but I want the Minister to focus on the fact that many people in rural communities think they are overlooked by this Government, that their votes are taken for granted, and that as a result we get the situation that I have just outlined.

3.32 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this debate and on the passionate way that he opened it.

Health inequalities are one of the defining issues of our time and are innately linked not only to how long we live, but to how well we live. Every person across this great country deserves to thrive and live a long, fulfilling and healthy life. That principle informed the creation of our national health service and it continues to drive the work that Opposition Members do.

As colleagues have done, I reinforce to the Minister the perilous position that we find ourselves in with regard to health inequalities. The pandemic has exacerbated the health inequalities that were already widening prior to the first lockdown. Indeed, in February 2020 the King’s Fund reported:

“Males living in the least deprived areas can, at birth, expect to live 9.4 years longer than males in the most deprived areas.”

For females, as we have heard, this gap is 7.4 years. That is not good enough.

Worse, the gap is increasing. Life expectancy has had a steady ascent for 100 years. That ascent began to plateau in 2011. Can the Minister advise what she thinks happened in 2010 that led to that abrupt stalling of life expectancy? It is very real. [Interruption.]

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 25 minutes for Divisions in the House.

3.35 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4 pm

On resuming—

Andrew Gwynne: Before I was interrupted by the Division bell, I was about to say that I have seen at first hand the injustice of health inequality. Denton, the main town in my constituency, where I grew up and have lived, is not a very large town. It has a population of 38,000 people spread over three council wards, and its area is 2.5 miles by 1.5 miles. I grew up in Denton West, which is one of the more prosperous wards in my constituency and in the borough of Tameside.

My best friend at secondary school lived in Denton South, which, conversely, is one of the poorest. We both went to the same school. We were two kids growing up

in the same community, at the same school, doing the same things, hanging around together. Yet according to the average life expectancies, he will live 10 years less than I will. That cannot be acceptable, it is not acceptable, and it is one of the reasons I joined the Labour party and became politically active. Tackling those inequalities, not just in a small community such as Denton but across the country, is absolutely what we should be about, in order to improve outcomes for all.

The last decade has been a disaster in terms of inequality, and I say to the Minister that that is the direct consequence of political choices that her party has made. It is a consequence of a decline in real-terms local authority spending, a consequence of a reduction in per-person education spending—a consequence of 12 years of Conservative government. The fact is that it is impossible to corral health inequality into one box. As we have heard in this debate, it is closely tied to social determinants: where people grow up, their environment, their education and their disposable income all contribute to health inequalities. If we are to tackle the crisis, the Government must recognise that they cannot make policy decisions in a vacuum.

That leads me to the issue of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. I note that one of OHID's key priorities is to

“develop strong partnerships across government, communities, industry and employers, to act on the wider factors that contribute to people's health, such as work, housing and education”.

That is music to my ears. It is clearly a positive and welcome aspiration, but three months on from OHID's launch, we have yet to see any clear indication that cross-Department work has actually been prioritised by the Government. This point has been made by the Inequalities in Health Alliance, an organisation with more than 200 members, including the Royal College of Physicians. The IHA has asked the Government to underpin and strengthen OHID's work with an explicit cross-Government strategy to reduce health inequalities, involving all Departments, and led by and accountable to the Prime Minister. So far, the Government have been resistant to committing to that.

I would be grateful if the Minister, in her response, could advise us what assessment she has made of the request from the IHA and whether her Department will commit to developing a specific cross-Government strategy. In addition, can she set out how OHID will assess its own effectiveness, and what influence it will have on other Departments? Will she also outline what engagement OHID has had with other Departments since it was established back in October? We need to know that OHID is not just more warm words with very little in the way of positive action. The Government cannot point to OHID with one hand and then, with the other, undermine the work that it purports to do.

For example, last October, the very month in which OHID was formed, the Chancellor of the Exchequer ended the £20-a-week uplift to universal credit. That plunged 300,000 children into poverty pretty much overnight. That political decision obviously has a negative public health impact for people across the country, yet apparently that was not something the Chancellor either considered or seemed particularly concerned about at the time. Can the Minister advise us how OHID will prevent further such disastrous policies from being implemented? If she cannot, I simply do not see how it

will solve the crisis of health inequality in this country. I would be grateful, too, if she could outline what role OHID will play with regard to the new integrated care systems. Some clarity on that would be very much appreciated, particularly in advance of the Health and Care Bill's anticipated return to the Commons in the next few weeks.

Finally, I want to touch on the subject of levelling up and its relationship to health inequalities. It has become somewhat of a go-to phrase for the Government. It should perhaps be a cause of concern to the Minister that, more than two years into this Administration, the levelling-up White Paper still has not been published. On that note, I want to press her on what exactly the Government's priorities are.

In 2020, Professor Sir Michael Marmot published “Build Back Fairer” in Greater Manchester, which called for several policy interventions from the Government. Professor Marmot proposed investment in jobs, housing, education and services, and made particular reference to tackling the social conditions that cause inequalities at local and community level. We saw local authority public health funding cut by 24% per capita in real terms between 2015-16 and 2020-21. That is the equivalent of a reduction of £1 billion, which cannot be right. We need to restore public health funding to local authorities, so that local teams are able to provide vital services that communities need to stay healthy.

In conclusion, we went into the pandemic with health inequalities already growing, which left Britain's poorest areas, as well as those in black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, acutely vulnerable to covid-19. That is totally unacceptable. We are now in 2022; we should not be living in a society with such extreme levels of health inequality. It is not right, and it needs fixing. The Government must do more and can do more, and they must do better.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): The debate will finish no later than 4.25 pm. I know that the Minister is aware of the need to allow two or three minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) to wind up.

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on bringing forward this extremely important debate. It has been really interesting and, with many people contributing, it has been quite rounded. The hon. Gentleman spoke passionately and knowledgeably about the issue, as did other Members. We have probably done the issue a disservice by having only an hour and a half to debate it. I look forward to further debates.

It is time to shift the centre of gravity of the health system from treating disease to building good health. To do that, we have to focus on the people and places who face the worst health outcomes. That is why on 1 October 2021, we launched the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. The mission of OHID is to improve the health of our country so that everyone can expect to live longer in good health, and to break the link between people's background and their prospects for a healthy life.

[Maggie Throup]

OHID is doing that by working with the rest of Government, the healthcare system, local government and industry, to bring together expert advice, analysis and evidence in policy development and implementation. As a number of hon. Members mentioned, covid has shone a light on the poor underlying health of certain groups in the population, the depth of health disparities and the implications for our health, economy and society.

Health disparities across the UK are stark. As the hon. Member for Bootle highlighted, in the borough of Sefton, where his constituency is located, the life expectancy deprivation gap is 11.8 years for women and 12.5 years for men. Health disparities can be driven by a range of factors, including education, income, employment and early years experiences. Therefore, OHID aims to systematically tackle the top preventable risk factors for poor health by looking actively at the evidence on health disparities and the ways in which we can go further to address them.

The new Health Promotion Taskforce, which was set up by the Prime Minister, will drive and support the whole of Government to go further in improving health and reducing disparities, because many of the factors most critical to good physical and mental health are the responsibility of partners beyond the health service. This new Cabinet Committee, now chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, brings Departments together around the objective of reducing ill health and health disparities. It also provides a new opportunity to work together actively on the most important health issues and agree new ways to address them collectively. I hope that helps reassure colleagues that the new taskforce is at the top of Government, and is determined to bring all Departments together to tackle this agenda.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I referred to the contact that I have had with Crisis on homelessness. Will the contact that the Minister has referred to include those groups? They have the facts. She will have heard what I said about the disparities between those who, like us, live in a well-off area, and those who do not and have not got a home. Homelessness is deadly.

Maggie Throup: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that tackling homelessness is a high priority for this Government.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the Government will shortly publish a landmark levelling-up White Paper that will set out bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunities in all parts of the UK, and to reduce the disparities between different parts of the UK. Poor health is stopping people accessing quality education and jobs with good career prospects, limiting their career progress, and undermining local prosperity and the general wellbeing of communities across the UK. Of course, it would be wrong of me to pre-announce the contents of that important White Paper.

Tackling health disparities promotes economic prosperity by increasing productivity and reducing strain on public services, including the economic cost of preventable ill health to the NHS and the welfare system. To address those issues, we are investing in tackling the key contributors, such as obesity and smoking. We are also investing £500 million to transform Start4Life and family health services.

Debbie Abrahams: I refer back to my point about not victim blaming, but in relation to the NHS resource allocation formula, can I ask the Minister whether the Government will be reinstating the health inequalities weighting that the previous Administration scrapped?

Maggie Throup: If I may, I will write to the hon. Lady on that so I can make sure that my facts are completely clear, rather than giving her an answer that may not be quite accurate.

In recognition of the strong relationship between work and health, the joint work and health unit was established in 2015. It has invested in a programme of trials and tests to identify effective models of health and employment support, and it is now using that learning to develop and/or roll out services to support disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to enter and stay in employment. The 2021 spending review confirmed that the public health grant will be maintained in real terms for the spending review period, so local councils can continue to invest in prevention and essential public health services. The distribution of that grant is heavily weighted towards the areas that face the greatest population health challenges, with per capita funding almost 2.5 times greater for the most deprived authorities than for the least deprived. The allocation at local authority level will be announced shortly.

The role that local authorities play in improving public health is far broader than simply the important services and interventions funded through the public health grant. That grant is part of a wider package of targeted investment in improving the public's health over the spending review period, including £300 million to tackle obesity; £170 million to improve the "best start in life" offer available to families, including breastfeeding advice and parent-infant mental health support; and an additional £560 million to support improvements in the quality and capacity of drug and alcohol treatment, which was announced as part of the drugs strategy. In addition, we have made over £12 billion available to local councils since the start of the pandemic to address the costs and impacts of covid-19. Of this money, £6 billion was non-ringfenced, because we recognise that local authorities are best placed to decide how to manage the major covid-19 pressures in their local areas.

Stephanie Peacock: I made a point in my speech about an issue that affects my area, regarding covid death certificates and industrial disease. Would the Minister either respond to it now or write to me about it?

Maggie Throup: I was going to answer the hon. Lady's point shortly, but I will answer it now. I will write to her on the important issue she raised about industrial disease. We need to ensure we have everything in place to enable families to access the different forms of support available to them.

I will come back to OHID for a moment. OHID has regional teams, which will have a vital role in working with integrated care systems at regional level. OHID will produce important data and information resources, which will be vital to ICS work in improving population health. Through ICSs, we will improve local working on population health and reduce health disparities.

One of the key objectives of these reforms is to give integrated care boards the responsibility and the ability to tackle health inequalities, as made clear in NHS England guidance. This will also reinforce the role of local authorities as champions of health in local communities and empower the NHS to improve poor health.

I will answer a few of the questions that have been asked. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) raised e-cigarettes. I commend her for the work that she does through the all-party parliamentary group for vaping, and I reassure her that OHID will continue to monitor and publish evidence and reviews on e-cigarettes. Our tobacco control plan will be published later this year, outlining our smokefree 2030 plans.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) highlighted disparities affecting rural communities. He raised a number of issues specific to his constituency, and I am sure that the relevant Health Minister will be happy to meet him to discuss them in more detail.

The hon. Members for Bootle and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) asked why we use the terms “disparities” and “inequalities”. I reassure them that the terms are used interchangeably, and it is important to understand that a term itself does not impact on our understanding of a problem or our response to it.

I thank the hon. Member for Bootle again for securing a debate on such an important issue. The pandemic has highlighted the impact of health disparities on people’s life outcomes and the pressures on the wider health and care system. The establishment of OHID, the creation of the new Health Promotion Taskforce Cabinet Committee and targeted investment in public health demonstrate that the Government are fully committed to tackling health disparities. I genuinely believe that by working together across Government, and with local authorities and the NHS, we can make a huge difference in improving health, life expectancy and life outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable in our society.

4.18 pm

Peter Dowd: I appreciate the fact that so many colleagues have come here to discuss this matter today, because it really goes to the heart of the needs of our communities.

We need a seismic shift—a paradigm shift—to tackle health inequalities and inequalities more generally. If we can guarantee £1.3 trillion to support a few institutions because of the banking crisis and £400 billion in relation to the pandemic, surely we can afford in the longer term to tackle health inequalities that affect the lives of millions of our constituents—many of whose lives are, to quote Thomas Hobbes’s “Leviathan”, “nasty, brutish, and short”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and health inequalities.

DWP Risk Review Team

4.21 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Before I call Kate Osamor to move the motion, I inform Members that this debate will conclude no later than 4.55 pm.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Department for Work and Pensions’ Risk Review Team.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. Today, I will talk about the Department for Work and Pensions risk review team, which was set up in May 2020. The DWP states that the team’s role is to “review and take action on cases identified”

by the integrated risk and intelligence service as being “a high fraud risk.”

I was first alerted to the team’s existence in October 2021, when my constituency office began to receive contact from what would become a total of 29 constituents who had had their universal credit payments suspended indefinitely under almost identical circumstances. Those constituents are all Bulgarian nationals and tend to have either settled status or pre-settled status. Time and again, my office was told that the cases were under the management of the risk review team, with little to no further explanation of the reason, apart from some claims of suspicion of fraud. Constituents told me that their claims were suspended for months on end—as long as 11 months, in the worst case. Although that particular constituent’s claim has now been restored, they have received no compensation for the hardship caused.

The DWP provides no timeframe for the completion of the reviews, nor a right of appeal. A significant number of those constituents are single mothers who work part time. This situation has left them in a completely crippling financial position and pushed many into serious destitution—relying on food banks, facing eviction from their homes and racking up serious amounts of debt. One constituent, whom I will call Maria, is a constituent of mine only after she lost her home in Liverpool as a result of having her benefits suspended, and subsequently moved to Edmonton.

From the cases my office has been handling, a number of constituents have since had their universal credit payments restored and backdated, as there was no evidence of any wrongdoing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I have constituents coming regularly into my office—you probably do as well, Mr Twigg—asking for help on this matter, although they may not be Bulgarian. Those constituents say that the DWP has asked them for information. I always ask, “Well, have you got that information?” to which they reply, “We are not quite sure.” Does the hon. Lady think that when an application is refused, whatever the reasons may be, the Department should make officers and staff available to help that person to get the right information and respond? The people she mentioned had their benefits restored, but they would not have had to wait had it been done right the first time around.

Kate Osamor: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point, which I will come to later. I back everything that he has said, because the claimants need much more support. For many claimants, English is their second language, so the more support the Department can give them, the better.

We have seen few claims disallowed for reasons of constituents failing a habitual residency test, and none that we have seen have had their claims closed for fraud. All that raises a series of questions for the Minister. How many fraudulent claims have been discovered by the risk review team? What justification is being used for the original investigation and suspension of claims? Has the Department undertaken an equality impact assessment to ensure that the process is not resulting in direct or indirect discrimination? I ask those questions because, sadly, there did not appear to be much information publicly available about the risk review team, and the Department appears reluctant to enlighten me further. I wrote to the Minister about these issues on 26 November 2021, and I received a response only yesterday evening. I am very grateful for that response, despite having to chase the Department nearly four times.

I have also asked a series of written questions. In response to one of them, the Minister for welfare delivery stated that as of 24 December last year, 149,000 cases—approximately 3.74% of universal credit claims—had been suspended under the risk review process. We have found out that 3% of claimants in those cases had their benefits reinstated. However, using the argument that to do so would mean incurring disproportionate costs, the Department has so far declined to confirm what has happened to the other 97% of cases.

Let me ask the Minister some more questions. How many claims have been deemed to be fraudulent and subsequently closed? How many claims remain suspended? How many people who we have not yet heard about are suffering in silence, not just in Edmonton but across the country? This issue is especially concerning because the cases I have seen predominantly concern claimants for whom English is a second language. Many face real difficulties accessing services, and that can create barriers to communicating with the Department directly and to accessing outside advice and assistance.

Some appear to have had their claims referred to the risk review team after being unable to answer security questions over the phone. I am unsure how much assistance they are given in the process if there are language barriers. In response to written questions, the Department has stated that there is a “high risk of fraud” in these cases, and that all claims are “suspended pending contact” with the claimant and them providing the requested information. It has also insinuated that the cases are related to organised crime, and yet in our experience the majority of those who are impacted appear to be vulnerable single mums who have done nothing wrong.

I can speak only for my constituency, but the brunt of the policy appears to have fallen overwhelmingly on Bulgarian nationals. Charities working in the local area, such as Citizens Advice Enfield and the Edmonton Community Partnership, concur with that assessment. From the many organisations I have spoken to that have similar cases, I have heard of Romanian and Polish nationals being affected, but no British citizens or those of other nationalities. Tellingly, those affected are all EU citizens.

Thus far, the Department has said that it does not keep demographic data on nationality, making it impossible to produce conclusive proof, but I understand that the Department does hold data on claimants’ nationality at the point of national insurance number registration. While we remain in the dark about how this opaque team conducts its business, and with the cases that I know about being so overwhelmingly concentrated among Bulgarian nationals and other EU nationals, it is impossible not to suspect that potentially discriminatory practices are being carried out.

Considering the issues that I have raised, I have a series of recommendations for the Minister. First, I urge the Department to change its “guilty until proven innocent” approach. The Department clearly does not have the resources to process the cases in a timely manner. I understand that there are roughly 165 full-time equivalent staff on the team. It seems likely that thousands of people are left languishing for many months, effectively under no recourse to public funds conditions, even if they are entitled to claim benefits and have committed no wrongdoing. Claims should be suspended only if evidence of fraud is found, with the review and an initial decision made prior to that course of action.

Secondly, the team must provide proper assistance to those whose cases are being investigated. It must appreciate the barriers that may exist to providing evidence. The whole process has appeared opaque and complex to my caseworkers and me, let alone someone for whom English is not their first language.

The DWP must also appreciate the barriers to providing documents—learning lessons, for example, from the Windrush scandal—as there may be deeper reasons why claimants are unable to provide certain pieces of evidence. *The Independent* reported on a Bulgarian national who was subject to the risk review process and was asked to provide every page of their old passport. However, that was impossible, as the Bulgarian embassy in London reportedly takes expired passports when citizens apply for a new one. That should be urgently be looked into, and an equalities impact assessment should be carried out.

Thirdly, the DWP should provide adequate compensation to those who have had their claims wrongly suspended. I know of constituents who have had their lives turned completely upside down, in some cases losing homes and acquiring significant debt, not to mention the stress and anxiety caused by the months of waiting.

Backdating payments does not make up for the impact of the process. Of all the cases my office has dealt with, only one constituent has received any compensation. They were granted a consolatory special payment of £200 because of delays in a mandatory reconsideration decision and the outcome of the risk review action. That sum is nowhere near enough to make amends for the seven months in which they waited for more than £10,000, which they were entitled to receive during that time. We need a proper compensation scheme for those who have been seriously affected by the way that the risk review team has conducted its business.

Lastly, and crucially, the DWP must be more transparent. More than 140,000 claimants have been affected by the risk review team. There must be greater awareness of the way in which it operates. Currently, it appears to be operating with impunity. Guidance should be published on how the team works in identifying and investigating cases. The DWP should also make public how many

cases remain suspended, and what percentage of those have been closed after the Department came to the decision that it believed the claim was indeed fraudulent.

Transparency and scrutiny are essential for good governance. Any new policy that may cause negative consequences must be identified and then, ideally, addressed quickly. The hardship being caused to my constituents, which I have spoken about today, may not be an intentional effect of this policy but, for one reason or another, they are getting trapped in this net. It is imperative that we understand why. I urge the Minister to take on board the stories that I have relayed today and to urgently review the operations of the risk review team, with the seriousness that the situation deserves, before many more lives are torn apart.

4.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I have had an opportunity to work with you in the House, but also on various hills—with mixed results, but it is always a pleasure to be in your company.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) on securing this important debate. My Department faces a huge responsibility, day in and day out, to pay benefits to millions of households, ensuring they have the help and support they need and wherever possible helping them into sustainable employment. We do everything we can to make sure that happens in a timely way. That was proven when covid-19 hit. We paid out to over 3 million more households at a time of global crisis. Universal credit in particular is a very resilient system, because it has been stress-tested in such an environment. Our latest public statistics show that around 90% of new universal credit claims are paid in full and on time.

Alongside that, we have another responsibility: to ensure that we are using taxpayer money properly and that funding is going to those who need it. Unfortunately, there are those who think it is acceptable to commit fraud against the welfare system. Those people cost the taxpayer—in fact, stole from them—an estimated £6.3 billion last year. That is £6.3 billion of taxpayer's money—an absolutely staggering sum. I can just imagine what any Member in this House would want to do with that money to help not only their constituents but thousands of others. It is money that could be going to fund other vital Government services. Those who fraudulently claim that money clearly have no right to it.

I believe it is right that my Department makes every effort to find and crack down on fraud, and to ensure that we have the fullest range of tools at our disposal to achieve that. Those committing fraud are clever, committed and constantly thinking of new ways to get around the systems that we have in place, and to turn new technological advances to their advantage. The job of the DWP is not just to keep up with that, but to try and get ahead of it. It is our job to keep innovating and finding new ways to identify fraud where it happens and to put a stop to it. It is our job to keep fraudsters guessing at how we might find them, so that they do not find new ways to evade us. The risk review team is one of those innovations, established as a direct response to new threats. Its role is to provide an operational response

to threats that have been identified. It does this by suspending suspect cases, where specific intelligence provides evidence of fraud.

I would like to stress that we are talking about a relatively small number of claims. Of the 3.7 million claims made to universal credit since May 2020, less than 4%, approximately 149,000, have been suspended under the risk review process. Those are not run-of-the-mill cases, but ones where, based on our analysis, we believe there is a high level of risk. It is because of that level of risk that claims have been legitimately suspended. It is an approach that provides much needed capability to disrupt and respond to new and emerging threats at pace.

To give an example of one of the challenges that the DWP has faced, in May 2020 the cyber-resilience centre, working as part of the integrated risk and intelligence service—we are pretty good at coming up with snappy titles for teams—prevented an attack by organised criminals. That led to the suspension of thousands of universal credit claims and prevented £1.9 billion in benefits from being paid to people trying to scam the system in 2020 and 2021. That is just one example; those attacks continued and more cases had to be suspended to safeguard public funds.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) on securing this debate. I agree with the points that the Minister is making about the importance of tackling fraud, particularly as universal credit has the highest level of fraud of any DWP benefit in history. Does he agree that it is not acceptable to take somebody's benefits away for 11 months, as in one of the cases that my hon. Friend mentioned, with no support available? That potentially completely ruins someone's life.

David Rutley: I understand the point that the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee makes, but the key thing is that claimants need to prove eligibility. We want to help them to prove eligibility for a benefit. The challenge, and the reason these cases take time, is often that claimants are not able or willing to provide that evidence. I will come on to that later.

Jim Shannon: I think the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) hinted at this, and I did in my intervention: there are occasions when people do not understand the process, and need a wee bit of help. I think the hon. Lady asked about that. Is there an opportunity to make extra officials available to pursue those necessary evidential bases when claimants may themselves not understand what has been asked for?

David Rutley: The hon. Member makes a good point. We stand ready to help and assist. One of the points made by the hon. Member for Edmonton was that, in some of the cases that she highlighted, there are challenges around the ability to speak English. Of course, interpreters are made available. In the Chamber today, we have three of the most well-recognised campaigners in the House, along with others who have not spoken yet. Hon. Members should bring cases about which they have concerns to my attention directly, with the usual information that they think is appropriate and that needs to be processed. If there are any outstanding concerns, I will take a personal interest in them and move cases forward. The issue is that often—I will talk about the statistics in due

[David Rutley]

course—the information is not provided, and of course we cannot provide benefits without that evidence, because of all of the fraudulent cases we have spoken about. I will carry on with my speech, which I hope will answer more questions. We will take a close look at each and every one of those 29 cases if that information can be provided—I give hon. Members that undertaking.

First, I need to emphasise that the overwhelming majority of claims for universal credit are legitimate. We know that most people are not trying to defraud the Department. The hon. Member for Edmonton raised—I would not say “a couple”—a lot of pertinent issues via parliamentary questions. That was one of the reasons why we were delayed in providing full answers to all her questions: we wanted to make sure that they matched up with the parliamentary questions. In the letter that I sent her, I apologised for that. As I say, it was mainly because we wanted to ensure that we had all the right information in response to all the questions. I hope that underlines the approach that we want to take, which is all based on due process.

However, I take this opportunity to stress, as I already have, that we are trying to get the balance right between getting money to those who need it and tackling those who are actively seeking to commit fraud. I will follow up on those individual cases in due course once the information is provided. Benefit claims should be verified and paid as quickly as possible, which is why we always make it clear to claimants exactly what information they need to provide. We do that via the claimant's universal credit journal, and the messages also let the claimant know exactly how they can contact the Department and speak to the staff members responsible for their case. That is an important dimension; in our casework, we can do better at highlighting that to constituents. I also take the feedback that maybe we can do a better job at communicating that to MPs and their offices—a point well made.

Where there is a problem in providing information, we always encourage the individual to get in touch, so that we can discuss and resolve the matter as quickly as possible. As the hon. Member for Edmonton would expect, when we suspend a claim, we do not do it lightly. Suspension is always a last resort, for the reasons that the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), has highlighted. Suspension is based on an initial assessment that a person would not be entitled to the benefit that they have claimed—an assessment that is based on intelligence and not on the specific characteristics of claimants, such as nationality. I know that that was a concern of the hon. Member for Edmonton, but I can confirm that a person's nationality is not a factor in determining whether a claim is referred to the risk review team.

In fact, because nationality is not a factor in that assessment process, an equality impact assessment is not needed. However, as part of the initial universal credit claim process—not the risk element, but the claims process itself—we do request information regarding a person's nationality. That is necessary to assess the eligibility and entitlement of a claimant at the start of their claim, but it is not used as part of the risk review process.

We take good care to ensure that we understand a person's personal circumstances, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted, and any potential vulnerability before we suspend. That means that we can engage with individuals in the right way. We have processes in place such that any contact from a claimant will be dealt with by a dedicated team. That type of one-to-one conversation with a member of staff allows the claimant to discuss the claim in detail and means that the member of staff can provide the necessary support to help to ensure that individuals can give us the documentation we need.

Once the risk review team has its information and the decision has been made that there is an entitlement to benefit, we will of course lift the suspension immediately and pay any arrears due. However, we receive no contact from the majority of suspected fraud cases—approximately 65% of those that we suspend. That is a remarkable figure: 65% of people do not get in touch with us after a suspension notice.

If a claim is suspended, we are unable to make alternative payments. However, claimants are still able to get help from work coaches to find them work. We have a record more than 1.2 million job vacancies and our work coaches are supporting thousands of people into work. There is also continued support for the most vulnerable children, regardless of a parent's universal credit suspension. Children in receipt of free school meals will continue to receive that support. There is also the free childcare provision for three and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds, where eligible. An individual may also be entitled to claim child benefit, assuming they meet the qualification conditions.

More broadly, local authorities have responsibility for local welfare provision. Recognising that some households will require additional help this winter, we have provided £500 million to provide support with essential household costs such as heating and food bills. That is delivered through the household support fund in England. Other help may be available via healthy start payments and the holiday activities fund. Staff in local jobcentres will be able to help to direct those in need. I should also make it clear that, while in law there is no right of appeal against the decision to suspend payment of a benefit, a claimant does have the right to appeal any outcome decision where the Department has determined that there is no entitlement.

Hon. Members will appreciate that I cannot say too much about how the risk review team works in this area of activity. As I said, it is a constant challenge to stay ahead of fraudsters and we cannot provide any clues to those looking to evade our systems. However, while a focus on disruption is a primary tactic of the team, their activity does not stop at that point. The risk review team will also gather intelligence that can be used as the basis for a formal criminal investigation, should it be warranted. It is worth noting that although the number of suspicious claims processed by the risk review team is significant, it is believed that the numbers of people responsible for those claims are actually relatively small. Our focus is on pursuing those behind the attacks in intelligence-led investigations, which is the most effective use of our resources.

Last month I went on a raid with fraud colleagues as part of a joint crackdown on fraud with West Midlands police. The raid was part of Operation Goliath, a joint

national operation with police nationwide that aims to combat fraud. Numerous arrests were made and we believe that we stopped an organised crime gang alleged to be stealing from the benefits purse. Thousands of false claims, based on thousands of hijacked identities, had netted the gang approximately £4 million already—a huge amount of money, and a figure that would have likely been far higher had we not been able to intervene at the pace that we did and had the approach taken by the risk review team not been in place.

As I have said, fraudsters are constantly thinking of new ways to attack us and to evade and circumvent our systems and safeguards. Some of the frauds are so engrained and deep-set that, remarkably, even after the arrest of major criminals, we are still being contacted by individuals pursuing claims linked to those investigations. It is extraordinary.

We are continuing to build and grow our capabilities, including investing to save. At the end of last year, we had announced a total investment of £613 million, which is a huge amount of money, over the next three years, to support the Department in this challenge and enable us to drive down fraud and recover debt. The money also enables further recruitment into our counter-fraud, compliance and debt so that we can continue to respond quickly and effectively to threats. It includes the funding of around 2,000 trained specialists to stop and identify scammers. I wish that we did not have to recruit those people, but we have a challenge, which is why we have to take those steps.

I hope that hon. Members agree that we must have a co-ordinated response to the attacks on the benefits system, and take action on as many fronts as possible to drive criminals out of it. These criminals will not let up and neither will we, on which note I commend the work of the risk review team, which is clearly playing a major part in helping to stop fraud getting a foothold.

At the same time, I reiterate the point that I made earlier: I know that it can be difficult, and that there are challenges for the people involved, but we always want to work with genuine claimants. In getting the balance right, I again extend the offer to hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Edmonton, who has been a doughty champion for her constituents, that if they write to us on those cases we will take them up and follow them through. I hope that she will do so, and that I have given her some satisfaction on the questions that she asked. Clearly, we will follow up on the outstanding parliamentary questions that she highlighted in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Women's Football

4.52 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind Members that they are expected to wear a face covering when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission, and that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the estate. Please also give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the experience of women playing football in England.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank all Members in attendance. I can see that there is some incredible expertise on the subject in the Chamber, and I look forward to hearing others' contributions. I am glad to have secured the debate, which has come at an important time for women's football, not least because of the situation that Coventry United women players faced just before Christmas. The players and staff found out two days before Christmas that the club was in financial trouble and their contracts were to be terminated, only to be saved at the eleventh hour on 4 January by a new buyer for the club.

Women's football has seen incredible growth in the last few years. That is down to increased opportunity and, importantly, visibility. The Football Association, under the leadership of Baroness Sue Campbell and Kelly Simmons, has done a great job in getting young girls and women playing football, as shown in the FA's latest "Gameplan for Growth" report, published in 2020. Between 2017 and 2020, the FA doubled participation in grassroots football among women and girls, and doubled fans attending international and women's super league matches. I thoroughly enjoyed, in spite of the cold, going to see the Lionesses as they played at the Stadium of Light last year in the World cup qualifiers. It is great to see them going around the country and playing to different audiences. The Lionesses will always be very welcome in Sunderland and I hope they return soon. That highlights the importance of visibility in the growth of the sport.

The BBC, for example, has done a great job in helping build the sport's profile. It will provide live network TV and radio coverage of the women's Euros, which take place in England this summer. It was the first to cover a whole Lionesses campaign, when it showed every game of their 2015 World cup run, and attracted 28 million people to watch the 2019 World cup campaign. Those are truly incredible numbers, showing the value of the BBC as a public service broadcaster, which I am sure the Minister recognises, while also showing that, when women's football and women's sport is on TV, it brings in viewers.

Do not let those stuck in the dark ages say that people are not interested in women's sport. A report released by academics at Durham University last week exposed the levels of misogyny still present among male football supporters, with some respondents remarking how women should not participate in sport at all, or at least stick to

[Julie Elliott]

perceived feminine sports, such as athletics, and that the media reporting of women's sport is PC nonsense or positive discrimination.

Let me say on the record that they are wrong, and the numbers back that up. Visibility matters, and seeing women play sport on TV makes a difference. The importance of visibility cannot be overstated. Work by the Women's Sport Trust shows that it is having an effect. Sky Sport's new deal has already brought in almost 8 million new viewers in the early stages of the new women's super league season. Around nine in 10 of those viewers had not watched women's super league in the previous four seasons. The commitment that organisations, such as the BBC and now Sky, have shown to women's football and women's sport in general has given young girls across the country the opportunity to see good sporting role models. It is truly invaluable to see people who look like them do amazing things. It does wonders for the confidence of those just starting out on their playing journeys, no matter how far they decide to go.

I would like to ask the Minister where the Government are up to in considering adding the women's equivalent of the men's sports to the listed events regime. I understand that the Government are open to consultation on that. The Minister for Media wrote to me in November, saying that it takes time, but could the Minister today give me a more definitive timescale for when the consultation is likely to conclude? The case for equality is overwhelming. With the visibility of women's sport and women's football rocketing, there is even more reason to get the future of the sport right.

The situation at Coventry United women's football club was so concerning, which it is why it is important to debate the issue. Coventry plays in the second tier of women's football, turning professional only last summer, becoming the fourth fully professional team in the women's championship. Many of the Coventry women had left good careers to achieve their dream of playing professional football. Many of them had supported the team for many years. Yet, on 23 December, two days before Christmas, the women were told that training was cancelled, and the players, who had not been paid in four weeks, were invited to a Zoom meeting at 10 am, in which they were told that their contracts were being terminated. That is a dreadful way to inform someone of that news.

One of the Coventry players, Anna Wilcox, told Radio Plus Coventry:

"It was just a feeling of emptiness, thinking that now I've lost the club that I played for for a long, long time...It hit a lot of players and a lot of staff so hard. I really don't think we will be the last, unless something changes."

There are many issues that emerge here. The first is governance. Women's football has a range of different governance structures. Some teams are connected to men's teams, such as in my own city of Sunderland, with some of those being rich premier league teams such as Manchester City and Arsenal. Other teams are independent of any men's teams and operate on their own, such as Coventry United. Then there are fan-owned teams such as Lewes, who are doing extraordinary things under the leadership of Maggie Murphy. The range of governance structures means that there is an array of different financial arrangements, but the situation

that arose at Coventry is one that could happen to any team at the will of their owner, especially as it is reported that Coventry were given FA money earlier than was planned, to help them through what they knew to be a difficult period. It is unclear where that money went.

The difference in the nature of ownership means that it is incredibly unhelpful to compare the situation in the women's game with that in the men's game. Therefore, I agree with the recommendation in the fan-led review led by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is present, that the women's game needs its own review to look into the issues and challenges that the game faces.

The second issue I wish to highlight is the working conditions of women players. The average wage in the men's championship is around £35,000 a week. The average wage of the Coventry women's team when they went into liquidation in December was just £16,000 a year, which equates to £308 a week. Although there are a multitude of reasons why the pay is different—not least the 50-year ban on women playing the sport—it is obvious that women's experience of playing football is totally different from that of men. Although I am not saying that the women's game is at the same stage as the men's game, it is clear that the women's game does not receive the respect it deserves. In women's football, contracts are often shorter and the pay is low. Therefore, it is extremely hard for players and staff alike to plan for their future.

One of the most prominent examples of the working conditions of women footballers and their experience of playing is that of Birmingham City Women. When they were in ninth place in the top tier of the football pyramid in 2021, they came together to send a formal letter to their own club to bring to light their working conditions, because their previous request to meet the board about the issue was denied. This team are connected to a men's team, but at the point of sending the letter, only three players were understood to be under contract for the following season. In reaction to the reports, the spokesperson for the club said:

"Both men and women's first teams are yet to secure survival in their respective leagues. This makes it hard to start contract negotiations."

I am afraid that I disagree with the spokesperson. Not being under contract also makes it hard for women to plan their futures.

The issue of maternity rights for players impacts on their lives hugely. In research conducted by Dr Alex Culvin last year, players were quoted as saying they

"need longer contracts so we feel more secure. I shouldn't have to think I need to sign a four-year contract because I want to have a baby, so I know they'll pay me."

However, I understand that a new player contract has been agreed between the FA and the Professional Footballers Association that includes maternity cover and long-term sickness cover. I understand that this is a standardised contract that would cover players playing in both the women's super league and the championship. If that is accurate and is to be implemented, it will be a massive step forward for the status of women footballers and, more importantly, for the terms and conditions and employment rights that they experience. I pay tribute to all those who have worked so hard in the game to get to this point.

That does not mean that we stop here, though. Although it is great news, there is still work to do. At the moment, only women who have played in the top tier of women's football—the women's super league—are eligible for PFA support. This needs to change, and the PFA needs to widen its remit to support all professional women players. Although the PFA runs workshops for male players on post-career options and life worries, it should offer the same services to women players. That is one of a package of issues in the women's game that need to be looked at.

The investment put into the game by organisations such as Barclays has done so much to further the opportunities that are available, but we undoubtedly need a new formula that provides ample funding for the women's game at the grassroots level and beyond, because the existing funding can only go so far. That is why it is so important that the Government listen to the fan-led review and bring forward an equivalent review into the women's game.

I know that the Minister has said that we should expect a reply to the fan-led review in the spring, but a whole season—spring—is not a deadline and the women's game is in need of review now.

While I talk about women's football, it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the incredible work done by Khalida Popal in bringing the Afghan girls team over to the United Kingdom. This debate is focused on the experience of women playing football in England and I am extremely proud that these Afghan girls are now able to come and experience exactly that. There are tremendous opportunities in this country for young girls to advance in the sport and I am so happy that these Afghan girls were able to come here and continue to play the game they love, in safety and with support. Khalida's work has been inspirational and I am sure that all Members here today will join me in thanking her.

In conclusion, I return to the fan-led review. The Government have said, in an answer to a written parliamentary question that I submitted earlier this year, that they

"welcome the Independent Fan Led Review of Football Governance and...endorsed in principle the primary recommendation of the review, that football requires a strong, independent regulator to secure the future of our national game."

Can the Minister endorse in principle recommendation 45 of the report, which is that a wholesale review of women's football should be conducted? Also, can he provide a more specific timeframe for when the Government will publish their full response to the fan-led review?

I look forward to hearing what other Members have to say in this debate and to hearing the Minister's answers to the questions put by myself and others.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): This debate will finish no later than 5.55 pm. If hon. and right hon. Members can all keep their speeches to around five minutes, everyone should get in before we call the Front Benchers.

5.7 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this important debate on women's football. I hope that she will not

consider this patronising, but I have to say that I thought her speech was one of the best speeches that I have heard in this Chamber. It was truly excellent. She is right to say that there has been enormous progress in women's football but there is so much more to be done and I am sure that many of those who wish to speak today will do so on a very similar theme. I am also sure that the Minister will heed the points that are made, because I know that he is as passionate about women's sport as I am and as many of us in this Chamber are.

Before I get into the nitty-gritty of my speech, I will just note that there are now many more colleagues across the House who are interested in women's sport and women's football than before. When I was first elected in 2010, I often felt like quite a lone voice in talking about women's football. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and I are on the parliamentary football team, as is the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). Just by participating ourselves, we get to talk and think about women's football much more than ever before. It feels like there has been a shift in attitude, not just outside this House but inside it, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) referred in her contribution to people who inspire others. May I commend the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on that very basis? Back in 2014, I had occasion to invite her to come and speak at my association dinner and I also then asked her if she would like to come round and visit some of the football teams in my area, and of course she said she would. On that occasion, she visited Comber women's football club. As I say, that was back in 2014. Today, seven years after her visit, they still remember it. So I commend her. She is looking for role models. I tell you what: she is herself a role model.

Tracey Crouch: I do not often blush, but the hon. Gentleman is making me do so. It is very kind of him to say that. It is legendary that I ended up in his constituency because I did not understand what he was asking me. I just said, "Yes," and then the email came through saying, "Thank you for accepting the invitation to come to my constituency."

I do not want to hog the Chamber, Mr Twigg, as I have had enough airtime on football recently, but there are a few points I want to make that will build on what the hon. Member for Sunderland Central said. First, we should celebrate the remarkable growth in women and girls participating in football at grassroots level. In the five years since the FA published "Gameplan for Growth," participation has doubled. That is fantastic and we should congratulate those involved, but we must ensure that no one is resting on any laurels. To be fair, the hon. Member for Wirral South and I met the FA last week and I do not believe they are.

There are still too many vulnerabilities in the system for anyone to take their foot off the gas. For example, there are real difficulties getting girls to transition from playing football in PE to playing it for a club outside school. That is a challenge that has existed for a long time. It requires joined-up thinking with the Department for Education and partners. It is not insurmountable but it is difficult and there is no easy answer, otherwise it would have been done by now.

[Tracey Crouch]

Secondly, we should celebrate the incredible journey and success of the professional game. Its earliest origins date back to the 1890s. It saw record-breaking crowds during the first world war and was banned from the 1920s until 1971, before coming under the auspices of the FA in the early 1990s. With the emergence of the women's super league in 2011 and the subsequent establishment of the women's championship, we can now boast the leading league in women's football, attracting players from across the world. However, the points the hon. Member for Sunderland Central made about contracts at Coventry—and I will throw Charlton into the mix as well—are valid. I hope they have been noted by Ministers and others outside this place, because we need to take the welfare and working conditions of professional female footballers very seriously.

Furthermore, during the fan-led review we heard evidence that women's football continues to face many interconnected challenges. There were lengthy debates about the difficult questions of whether women's football teams should be affiliated to men's teams or be entirely independent. There were concerns about the long-standing disparity in the financing of women's teams versus men's teams.

There were also concerns about the overall infrastructure of the professional game and whether the gap between the top and the next level down is too big. That led us to recommend an independent review into the women's game. While I respect that the Minister and his officials are still going through other recommendations in the report, I repeat the call that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central made: can the Minister tell the House today whether he accepts the recommendation about a completely separate review into the women's game?

Turning to broadcasting, we can celebrate greater visibility of the women's game than ever before, as the hon. Member for Sunderland Central said. We have seen a 257% increase in domestic games broadcasts since 2016. Broadcasters have come a long way since the current Mayor of Manchester, then the Member for Leigh, and I ganged up on the BBC and persuaded it to show England in the 2011 women's World cup quarter-final on BBC2. I am sure that at the time the BBC just thought, "We'll show it to shush these pesky MPs," but it was pleasantly surprised that it was well watched and well received. The director of sport at the BBC, Barbara Slater, deserves a lot of credit for persisting with an agenda to ensure that women's sport is shown on domestic TV.

People should also thank Sky Sports for its continued commitment to women's football. The current deal is definitely a landmark and an exceptionally welcome addition to its wider sports agenda. However, it would be game changing if the women's football World cup and the women's Euros were added to the A list of listed events. That would provide parity and equality with the men's games. These events are themselves pre-eminent international events that command a large TV audience. Given that we are expecting FIFA to tender the rights to the 2023 World cup shortly, if these events are not listed there is a likelihood that at some point in the future they could end up behind a paywall, which would be a shame for all the budding girl footballers out there, who want to see their heroines in action. If the Minister

could give an update on where the Government are at with the consultation on listed events, that would be extremely helpful.

There is more I could say, but I will not. However, I will briefly mention that the all-party parliamentary group on women's football is still waiting for a response from the Minister to a letter sent before Christmas regarding the disparity in legislation that protects players from pitch invaders. I could also build on points made by the hon. Lady on the prevalence of misogyny towards women who play sport, but time is short, so I will end by thanking all those who are helping to grow the game and supporting women's and girl's football through broadcasting and sponsorship, and of course by wishing the Lionesses every success in their forthcoming Euros campaign.

5.15 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this important debate on the experiences of women in football. It is a real honour to follow the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I start by declaring an interest as a proud new member of the cross-party parliamentary women's football team.

Many of us in the team are not experienced footballers and, as someone who has played hockey for 30 years, I still spend most of my time trying to put my feet in the way rather than getting them out the way. The team brings together female MPs, peers, staff and journalists from across the parliamentary family and political spectrum. We are an excellent example of the power of sport, and specifically football, in bringing people together and bridging any differences we may have.

I have a background as a lecturer in sport and physical activity and as a group exercise instructor. Alongside my own adventures on the hockey pitch, I have worked with many female clients and students over the past 20 years to create and facilitate positive experiences of sport and physical activity for women, to enhance physical and mental health and wellbeing, to provide positive social interactions and to develop friendships and support networks for busy women who far too often put themselves at the bottom of their list of priorities and responsibilities.

However, I know that this positive experience is sadly not shared by many women across the country, who face a number of barriers to getting into sport, a lack of support once there or, worse still, totally unacceptable discrimination, sexism and abuse. I am keen to use my role in Parliament to be an advocate for all women who face such challenges, which is why I was keen to take part in the debate. I recently met Sport England to discuss women in sport, and just this week I spoke to Sam Keighley, strategic director of the Yorkshire Sport Foundation, who gave me a comprehensive overview of the issues faced by women when playing, spectating, refereeing and coaching football. Sadly, there are too many to mention, but I will share some of the highlights, or should I say lowlights, with hon. Members.

On playing, there is a lack of access to facilities for women's teams. Poor pitches are often used for boys' or men's games prior to the female game taking place and they are left in a terrible state. Female footballers feel that sometimes they are treated as second-class citizens. Female football is always second to male football in

funding, access to training, pitches and media coverage. Girls' and women's teams often get given second-hand equipment after the boys' have finished with it.

There are fewer opportunities, with fewer teams, and there are fewer opportunities to progress. Often teams have to travel further distances, which is difficult for those girls without parental support or access to transport. There is still far too much, "Girls don't play football," with people not talking to girls about what they actually want to do. There is little use of female role models in football, and any prizes or match tickets given out tend to relate to the men's teams, with no effort to link to the local women's teams.

With regards to coaching, coaching courses are male dominated, and there are still only a handful of female coaches and managers. Sadly, research shows that few junior boys' teams would welcome a female coach. There is abuse of coaches from parents and spectators during competitive matches, and there is a lack of opportunities for female coaches to develop. In terms of female referees, they sadly experience significant abuse. They experience sexist attitudes at clubs, such as, "Why have we got you refereeing?", "Are you even qualified?", and, "What do you know about football?"—some of the cleaner versions of comments made. The situation is improving, but it is a real issue and will continue to put females off officiating.

In terms of spectating, female spectators feel uncomfortable and are on constant edge when watching games with a female referee, waiting for the abuse to start once someone disagrees with a decision. Opinions and comments of female fans are often dismissed, to then be repeated by someone—a man—a minute later. This has happened to me on numerous occasions. There are even reports of a female physio in the professional game getting wolf-whistled every time she comes on to the pitch.

To conclude, I am sure we can all agree that football, and sport generally, play a crucial part in bringing people together, keeping us fit and healthy, both physically and mentally, and providing fun and entertainment for millions and sports clubs that are often at the heart of our communities. As has been said, women's football is growing at an incredible speed, with the women's World cup, the women's super league and the women's FA cup, and that should be celebrated. While there has been progress over the last 30 years, it is too slow. Before we can secure football as a sport that girls can play and get involved with as easily and comfortably as boys can, and before the women's game is treated with the same level of respect, funding and resources as the men's game, there is work to be done. We must get the grassroots and lower league stages firmly established. We must have a fully informed strategy to stamp out the abuse and sexism that are all too common.

I could talk about the broader issues around the importance of physical education in the curriculum and about many other subjects associated with women and girls in sport and physical activity, but I will conclude by saying what a pleasure it has been to take part in today's debate with some well-respected colleagues.

5.21 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Once again, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for

Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for her excellent and detailed speech and for securing this important debate. I also thank all those who continue to make women's and girls' football the fastest growing sport in the United Kingdom. Over the past decade, we have seen more and more clubs take on a women's squad on a full-time basis, and grassroots football has made huge progress in ensuring that more women's teams are able to thrive.

I grew up playing football, and as a teenager I absolutely loved the game. Many of my fellow female MPs are keen followers of the game, as we have heard today, and I am sure they will agree that it offers so much more than purely health-related benefits. Football taught me about communication, teamwork and competition. Had I not been given the opportunity to train at an academy, I doubt I would have had equal access to football and its many benefits. I am so grateful to have this opportunity to speak today on behalf of all the women and girls who simply do not have the same access to our national game as their male counterparts.

Progress in increasing participation has been made largely by the unsung heroes of the sport: the volunteer coaches, referees, administrators and community groups, without whose efforts women would not even have access to the game. Too many girls who love playing football constantly find themselves facing unnecessary barriers. For example, girls often cannot access teams because there are so few teams playing in organised leagues that it is not possible to get a proper fixture list together. That is why it is really important that we are here today looking at how we can best support new and existing women's clubs so that women can have equal access to playing football, and that goes for all programmes, both amateur and professional.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central outlined, the professional women's team in my own city of Coventry, Coventry United Ladies FC, was recently narrowly saved from liquidation. The club experienced significant financial pressures as a result of the pandemic, meaning it was forced to enter voluntary liquidation days before Christmas. Players and staff faced losing their job at the worst possible time. The club would have gone bankrupt, were it not for the 280 private donations from community members and an eleventh-hour takeover by a local midlands-based energy company that helped provide the necessary funds to keep the club afloat.

Even though the team has now survived this ordeal, the episode serves to highlight the systemic challenges still facing women's football. The players were left in a precarious position after they were told that their contracts had been terminated. In a sport where women already have to contend with short contracts and low pay, these players also had to deal with the near collapse of their team with no safety net.

The barriers that women in professional football face are not only financial but cultural. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central about Durham University's recently published report examining UK men's football fans' attitudes to women's football. This study was, sadly but unsurprisingly, the first of its kind. Ridiculously, 68% of those polled thought women should not participate in sport at all, or if they did, that they would be better suited to more feminine pursuits than football. This attitude is appalling and is reflected in how unequally women's football clubs are treated in this country.

[Taiwo Owatemi]

The change in tone and in the perception of women's football needs to be set from the top. If the Government truly want to create equality between men and women in football, they must do more to support women's football clubs. As a proud sponsor of Coundon Court Ladies FC in my constituency, a former amateur player and a lover of the game, I urge the Government, mayors and local governments to do everything they can to support women's football.

5.26 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this important debate. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am the author of "Don Revie: The Biography", about the Leeds manager. I mention that because I want to mention him today. Don Revie was a victim of cancel culture. He resigned from a job he did not like, and the FA banned him for 10 years. I have asked the FA to apologise, but it has not. What is extremely important, and why it is so pertinent to mention him in the debate, is that women were the victims of cancel culture 100 years ago.

During world war one, women's football was incredibly popular. Like in the men's game, many teams grew from the factory workforce, with factories setting up their own teams. Games attracted thousands of spectators, with one Boxing day match watched by more than 53,000 people. Celebrity players came to exist, such as Lily Parr. Women's football was thriving, with female players given offers to play all around the world. On 5 December 1921, that ended. The Football Association passed a resolution banning women from playing in its stadiums. Bolstered by sexist and selective medical opinions on the unsuitability of women for the sport, the FA delivered a death blow to women's football. In all likelihood, the reasoning behind the ban was due not to the health concerns of female players but more to the popularity of women's football, which was drawing spectators away from the men's game.

Although that was not an outright ban on women playing football, it took away the big stadiums and the media attention. Women could no longer play in front of big crowds, and without media coverage and the ticket sales from larger stadiums, most clubs were forced to disband. It was not until 1971 that the FA lifted the ban on women's football, and it was not until 1993 that the FA brought all women's football under its direct control. Let me put that in context. When England won the World cup in 1966 and, it is said, modern football began, with football fever sweeping the country, women were still banned from playing football by the Football Association.

The season before women's football was banned in 1921, there were only two professional men's leagues in England. Since then, men's football has grown to the point where it attracts the eye-watering salaries for the top footballers and can support four professional divisions. Women's football was not given the same opportunity. The women's game was cut off at the knees by the FA in 1921, just as it had become popular and mainstream.

I believe it is the duty of the Football Association to correct that. Given that a deliberate intervention by the Football Association caused the demise of women's football in 1921, the FA ought to deliberately intervene to build up that sport and make up for the last 100 years. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) will smile when I say this, but I have to mention Don Revie again. When I have written to the FA in the past to ask for apologies on behalf of the Revie family, it has dismissed that out of hand. That is an absolute disgrace. And I have no doubt that the FA will do the same if we try to do the same for women's football.

Without the FA's intervention by banning women's football, who knows where it would be now? The FA has a debt to repay. Investing in women's football clubs and academies, increasing media coverage of matches and encouraging spectators is not "positive discrimination"; it is something that is needed in the game now. It is necessary and should be brought about.

John Williams from the University of Leicester has said:

"The increase in media coverage of women's sport...was openly supported by some men. But it also clearly represents, for others, a visible threat".

That perception that the popularity of women's football could be a threat to the men's game is not new. It was the reason why women's football was originally banned, 100 years ago. There are those who criticise women's football as being less in some way—less skilful, less popular or less commercially viable. However, that is not intrinsic to the sport. In fact, women's football in the UK was once more popular than the men's. It was the actions of the FA that changed that.

Unfortunately, we have long heard male football fans—I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) on bringing this issue up—criticising and belittling the women's game. In fact, an academic study by Durham University reported that openly misogynistic views of women in sport were far too common among male football fans, irrespective of age. Lead author Dr Stacey Pope said of the study:

"Our research showed that attitudes towards women in sport are, to some extent, changing, with more progressive attitudes. However, the findings are also reflective of a patriarchal society in which misogyny is rife. There were numerous examples of men from across all generations exhibiting highly sexist and misogynistic attitudes."

Participants described media coverage of women's sports as "positive discrimination" or "PC nonsense". That needs to change.

The number of women and girls playing football in England hit 3.4 million in 2020. The desire to play and the desire of fans to see more women's football are evident. We saw that in the 2015 World cup: the Lionesses' games were extremely popular. When women's football is given the coverage that it deserves, people will watch. We simply need to give them the choice by showing more games on mainstream channels. That will only bring more young girls into the sport and strengthen the game's future—something that we would all welcome.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will start calling the Front Benchers at 5.38 pm.

5.32 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I will be brief, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for obtaining this debate. She is an incredible champion for women's sport in general and football in particular; and, Mr Twigg, nobody could be more perfect to chair the debate than your good self, a supporter of women's sport, including women's football, and the finest football team on the planet—that is the women and the men, I should say.

This issue obviously has a long history. I was going to begin by saying that often we talk up women's football and the position that it has got to because growth has been significant in recent years, but that often people do not talk about the cause of the demise of women's football previously. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) has just done me a favour there. There is a tendency not to talk about the fact that women's playing football professionally in this country was banned for 50 years. Many of the problems that we are trying to tackle today, and which have been covered already in this debate, stem from that ban. We have to accept the truth of that. It is not good enough to cheerlead for women from the sidelines; we have to accept the consequences of the ban, which affect every single part of the women's game today, whether it is the professional game or the grassroots game.

In relation to the professional game, people who love women's football and want to see it succeed are often told, "We can't pay the players more, because of market forces being what they are. People want to watch the men's game on the telly, and unless more people watch the women's game, the pay for women is going to be lower." Well, we have just heard that actually there is a root cause as to why more people watch the men's game than the women's game. That is why we need extra effort, to restore the women's game to the place where it should be.

The situation is the same for the grassroots game. I do not just play for the women's parliamentary football team; I occasionally manage to make it to Wirral Valkyries FC, in the Wirral, and you would not believe, Mr Twigg, how hard it is to get a pitch for a women's grassroots team. That is because we really have only enough pitches for half the people who want to play football in this country. We are going to double the number of people playing football at grassroots level, so we need some more space for them to play in. That inequality causes tension the whole time. Map the level of abuse that we all receive from a patriarchal society—as rightly said by my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn; I would not get away with such naked feminism!—and we can see we have a problem.

Rather than going over all that, I would simply ask colleagues one question. There are two professional football players in this country who play for the same team and who are brother and sister. Lauren James, who is 20 and has incredible talent, will probably never be a millionaire; her brother, Reece James, who is 22 and plays for Chelsea—the same team—almost certainly will. That is a level of wage inequality that we would consider absolutely unjust and intolerable in any other sphere of British life. How long are we, in this room, going to look the other way while women in this country face that kind of unjust pay gap? Women who play

football professionally do so with a determination that is almost irrational, given the lack of fortune that might reward their talent. It is as simple and as stark as that.

Very briefly, I pay tribute to the fantastic Sue Campbell at the Football Association, who is an incredible woman, as well as Kelly Simmons, the director of the women's professional game. They do not get enough credit and we should all thank them. I also thank Suzy Wrack at *The Guardian*, who has covered women's football absolutely brilliantly, and younger journalists such as Katie Wyatt and Caoimhe O'Neill, who write for *The Athletic* and are just brilliant. They are changing the fortunes of women's football.

I will finish with three very direct questions to the Minister—I could talk about this subject for about seven hours uninterrupted, but I will not. First, the Government could do a really helpful job that would not cost them any money, which is to benchmark the interventions that they are already making. Could they check that all the money they already spend on the grassroots game of football is being spent equally on men and women? That would make a big difference.

Secondly, could they ask the FA to look at the FA cup prize money? Nearly 2 million quid for the men's FA cup prize money does not really make a difference to the winners, but the women only get about £25,000 in prize money. There is absolutely no objective justification for that incredible disparity in prize money. It is our flagship competition. Could the Government ask the FA to look at that?

We have heard my final question from everybody; the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has done an absolutely brilliant job for football in this country, recommended it in her review. We need a women's review—please may we have one? Let us crack on and deal with these issues.

5.38 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second day in a row, Mr Twigg. It is good to see you here. It is a pleasure to respond for the Opposition in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing it and on her excellent opening speech, as well as all hon. Members who have spoken.

It was especially good to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) speak about the power of sport to bring people together and her experience as a new member of the parliamentary football team, noting the issues around girls' participation. It was eye-opening to hear about the experience of women fans and the anticipation of abuse or sexism relating to female officials, which is an angle that I had not really thought of before. It was very interesting.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who spoke about how women's football taught her about communication and teamwork, which has stood her in good stead for her role in the Opposition Whips Office. I join her in thanking the unsung heroes who keep women's football going—the volunteers. Importantly, she outlined the ordeal of Coventry United, which I will return to briefly.

[Jeff Smith]

As always in any debate on sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) gave us a lesson. The history of women's football is a fascinating background to the issues in women's football today.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), my predecessor, for everything she did when she held this role before me. I agree with almost everything she said, although I am not sure about her team being the finest team on the planet—they are trailing in second place in the premier league at the moment. I agree with just about everything she said, including on the extra effort that we need to put in to support women's football in this country.

In many ways, these are good times for women's football in England. The successes of the Lionesses in recent years—notably, taking third place in the 2015 World cup and then again making the semi-finals in 2019—have helped to boost the game's profile, and growth in interest, spectators and participation have followed. The Women's Super League has attracted record crowds, and we had 40,000 people watching the FA cup final at Wembley in December. Driven by the FA's efforts, the participation of women and girls in grassroots football doubled between 2017 and 2020.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) referred to the increasing interest in Parliament on this issue. I would put that down partly to the general increase in interest in women's football, but also to her work as an absolutely fantastic champion not just of women's football, but of football in this country. I thank her for her work on the review and for her wider work on football.

As the country looks forward to hosting the Women's Euros this summer, enthusiasm for the women's game will grow, attracting more fans and inspiring budding footballers. I would agree that coverage on the BBC and on Sky has raised the profile of the game, with more and more people watching women's football on TV, driving participation. I would echo the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central to the Minister about listed events, and I hope that he will respond.

In general, the future looks bright for women's football, but as we have heard today, there are challenges. To build a future that is fair and works for players, staff and fans at all levels, some issues need to be addressed. That is a job for the FA and for leaders in football, but also for the Government.

Today's debate was partly brought about as a response to the recent situation at Coventry United women's team. The team narrowly avoided disaster thanks to a last-minute buyer, and I am pleased that Coventry's players are going to be able to continue to earn a living playing the sport they love, but it should not have come to that. This was a full-time, fully professional championship club, but to the shock—complete shock—of the players and staff, they found themselves hours away from ceasing to exist.

Coventry is not the only example of the precarious nature of the existence of some women's clubs. Just as the Women's Super League was due to start in 2017, Notts County folded. In 2019, Yeovil Town dropped two divisions from the WSL as a result of financial

problems. Leyton Orient cast aside its women's teams last year, forcing the creation of London Seaward to ensure that the players could continue to play. Fylde women's team was disbanded in 2020, only for the decision to be reversed some time later, and Holwell Sports Women FC in the fourth tier of the football pyramid announced that it would have to fold just at the beginning of this month. So there are challenges, and it is not just problematic governance and job insecurity that need to be fixed. There is great growth in participation, as we have heard, but there needs to be more work on encouraging people to participate and on breaking down the barriers.

In the professional game, when things go wrong women's players are only eligible for support from the Professional Footballers Association if they have played in the top league of women's football, leaving most women players with nowhere to turn. As we have heard, levels of pay across women's football are generally low, with players often needing to work on other jobs alongside football to make ends meet. Many players, as we have heard, have poor access not just to pitches, but to the medical and fitness facilities needed to play safely. Employment contracts are often poor, short term and ill-suited to the specific needs of women. Generally there has been poor maternity support for women who wish to have children, although we have had encouraging news from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central about the potential change to that—so, fingers crossed.

Our women footballers deserve better. There is, of course, the issue of the abuse and harassment faced by women in the sport. Women in Football reports that almost a third of their members have experienced gender-based social media abuse, and that is one aspect of what many players have to endure. So there is progress, but more needs to be done.

We have had the excellent fan-led review of football governance, led by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford, which the Government are still dragging their heels on responding to in full or implementing. That review called for a separate dedicated review of the women's game, and that is really the key ask I have of the Minister today. We have had a number of asks, but I think the encompassing action for the Minister—I note that you want me to finish, Mr Twigg, so I will be brief—would be on that key ask. Given the complexities of women's sport and the crises that have cropped up, a full review of the future of women's football is urgently needed. The Government have said they would respond in full to the review in spring, but why the delay? Will the Minister clarify whether there is any truth in the rumour that the Treasury are the block on progress? The issues raised in the debate mean that a separate women's review is needed, so why not get on with it? The Government have accepted in principle the fan-led review's recommendation for an independent regulator. I repeat the request of other Members that the Minister should now endorse its call for a review of women's football. That is what we need. Let us get on with it.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I call the Minister, but I remind him that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) will want a couple of minutes at the end to wind up.

5.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, for the second time this week. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for securing this debate, and everyone who has participated so eloquently and knowledgeably. I wish a happy birthday to my opposite number, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith).

The debate is particularly timely, given that we are counting down to 6 July, when England will kick off their first match in the women's Euros against Austria at Old Trafford. As many hon. Members mentioned, women's football has made significant progress recently. I was fortunate to be at Wembley last December for the Vitality women's FA cup final between Chelsea and Arsenal. It was a brilliant match, and it marked the 50th anniversary of the first women's FA cup final—interestingly, it was only the 50th, for the reasons the hon. Member for Sunderland Central outlined. It achieved, my notes say, a record crowd of 40,000 people, but that is corrected by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who mentioned there being a 53,000-person crowd in the past, so we still have a way to go. In addition, a record audience of 28.1 million viewers watched the BBC coverage of the 2019 FIFA women's world cup on television and online. I praise the work done by the BBC and many of the public service broadcasters in their broadcasting.

We have seen other kinds of progress. There have been bespoke women's sports deals, such as the Barclays' sponsorship of the FA women's super league, which the hon. Member for Sunderland Central mentioned. We need that sponsorship; it is really important that this money flows into the game. England's men and women senior players are now being paid the same match fee for representing their country, but there is still huge progress to be made in equality of players' pay, as many hon. Members pointed out. I praise teams such as Lewes for the progress and leadership they have shown.

Despite the positive signs and progress, we cannot be complacent. Since becoming the Minister for sport, I have made it a personal priority to champion women's sport, including women's football, at every opportunity. That is why last year I established a working group to explore the challenges and opportunities in women's sport. The group included Women in Football and the FA, and it discusses challenges, opportunities and how best to overcome obstacles. The work of that group has already shaped thinking in the Department considerably.

I think I can make a few people happy today by announcing that I have written to sports' governing bodies and broadcasters outlining that the Secretary of State and I are minded to add the women's World cup and the women's Euros to the listed events regime. We will have a short re-consultation, which will end on 16 February. This is a huge opportunity for women's football; it can bring those tournaments to an even larger audience. We are working on several other areas, including the refresh of sport.

Many hon. Members mentioned misogyny and the hatred spread online. I am looking closely at how the online harms Bill might tackle the persistent and utterly unacceptable misogyny that continues to blight women's sport.

As many hon. Members have mentioned, there has been considerable growth of the sport at grassroots level. The FA published its "Gameplan for Growth" and highlighted that women's and girls' participation has doubled over the last few years. There are 12,000 registered teams, and there are 2.4 million women and 1 million girls under the age of 16 playing football.

Many hon. Members mentioned the importance of access to facilities, and I completely agree with them on that. That is precisely why we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds in pitches and multi-sport pitches, and why I am working with the Department for Education on how we can make further progress on schools' access to sports.

Despite the momentum in recent years, women's sport, including football, has been heavily impacted by the pandemic; there is the slow return of spectators, a lack of media coverage in some cases, and a loss of sponsorship deals—deals that women's sport has historically found it difficult to attract. As several hon. Members mentioned, we saw that most recently in the near liquidation of Coventry United ladies football club.

I turn to the fan-led review. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch)—like the hon. Member for Sunderland Central, and indeed everybody here—is a passionate advocate of women's and girls' football. The review, which published its final recommendations in November, not only considered the issues affecting the men's game in this country, but examined the complex future of women's football, which has a growing number of participants and fans. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford set out, fans and advocates of women's and girls' football gave evidence to the review, and starkly set out the fact that the women's game is at a crucial point. Many who gave evidence spoke passionately about the need for women's football to be properly financed; that should include a consideration of sponsorship and many other areas.

As many hon. Members have acknowledged, the review concluded:

"Women's football should be treated with parity and given its own dedicated review."

I am afraid that I cannot promise to give the Government's response today, but I can tell hon. Members that we are working on it every day; many people are working on it. I will ensure that I give a full response in the spring. There is no dragging of feet here. I thank the many people who have done work on this, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. It is because that work was so comprehensive that we want to do it justice and give it a comprehensive response. My hon. Friend mentioned the letter that she and others wrote to me. I will reply to her letter regarding the designation of women's football matches under the Football (Offences) (Designation of Football Matches) Order 2004.

It is worth pointing out that football banning orders are a Home Office policy, although we at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport do work very closely with the Home Office on that. I can confirm, however, that the football banning order legislation covers both women's and men's designated matches where there is a high risk of disorder. However, there may well need to be consideration of whether the scope of the order

[Nigel Huddleston]

needs to be widened. I will happily raise that with my Home Office colleagues. Members mentioned several other requests.

Tracey Crouch: The Minister will be aware that the Home Office has tabled an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is in the House of Lords, to extend the scope of football banning orders in order to tackle online racist abuse. Is this not an opportunity to ensure that football-related matters are covered?

Nigel Huddleston: I will happily raise that with the Home Office, though I cannot make promises about legislation on behalf of another Department.

I hope I leave hon. Members in no doubt that I am personally committed to continuing to help women's sport, including football, to come out of the pandemic stronger than ever. I will continue to work with the sector, and with all stakeholders across the House, to make that happen.

5.53 pm

Julie Elliott: I thank all colleagues for their contributions. There is general consensus on the broad issues that women's football faces. I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), for his contribution and the Minister for his response. I am pleased about what he said about listed events. I am disappointed that he has not gone further on the fan-led review, and that he has not committed in principle to starting the women's review, which was recommendation 45 of that review. We do not need to wait for the entire Government response to the incredibly thorough fan-led review before agreeing to that in principle. I ask him to look at that again, and to see whether the Government can respond sooner. They need only say, "Yes, in principle we agree." That does not merit our waiting for the response to the whole review. I thank everyone for attending; it has been a very worthwhile debate.

5.55 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 26 January 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Special Health Authority for Independent Maternity Investigations

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I wish to inform the House of the Government's plans to establish a special health authority under secondary legislation to continue the maternity investigation programme, which is currently a function of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch.

Plans to establish the Health Services Safety Investigations Body as a non-departmental public body are contained in the Health and Care Bill 2021. The Health Services Safety Investigations Body will take forward the work of the current Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch's national programme once fully operational—expected to be 1 April 2023. The scope of the Health Services Safety Investigations Body's investigations in the Bill does not include the current Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch's maternity investigations programme. This is because conducting investigations under “safe space” is a key element of the new Health Services Safety Investigations Body. The maternity investigation programme investigations do not follow “safe space” principles.

The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch became responsible for conducting independent investigations relating to intrapartum stillbirth, early neonatal death, or severe brain injury diagnosed in the first seven days of life and also maternal deaths—approximately 1,000 every year—on 1 April 2018. In 2020-21, the maternity investigation programme completed 1,024 reports and made more than 1,500 safety recommendations to individual NHS trusts addressing a wide array of issues.

The Government consider that independent, standardised, family-centred investigations should continue beyond April 2023 once the new Health Services Safety Investigations Body is established. The new special health authority will:

- provide independent, standardised, and family-focused investigations of maternity cases that provide families with answers to their questions about why their loved ones died or were seriously injured;

- provide learning to the health system at local, regional and national level via reports for the purpose of improving clinical and safety practices in trusts to prevent similar incidents and deaths occurring;

- analyse the incoming data from investigations to identify key trends and provide system-wide learning in these areas including identifying where improvements are being made or there is lack of improvement;

- be a system expert in standards for maternity investigations and support trusts to improve local investigations; and

- collaborate with system partners to escalate safety concerns and share intelligence.

The special health authority will be established for up to five years from 2022-23 to enable maximum learning to be achieved and to equip NHS trusts with the expertise, resources, and capacity to take on maternity safety incident investigations in the future.

Learning from these investigations is key for meeting the Government's commitment to “make the NHS the best place in the world to give birth through personalised, high-quality support”; and our national maternity safety ambition to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after birth by 2025.

[HCWS560]

PRIME MINISTER

United Kingdom-European Union Parliamentary Partnership Assembly: UK Delegation Appointments

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Article 11 of the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement states: “The European Parliament and the Parliament of the United Kingdom may establish a Parliamentary Partnership Assembly”—“as a forum to exchange views on the partnership.” In December, the House of Commons and House of Lords endorsed the establishment of the assembly. Both Houses agreed that the procedures currently applying to the nomination, support and funding of delegations to other treaty-based parliamentary assemblies will apply.

This statement sets out the United Kingdom delegation to the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. The Government also take this opportunity to congratulate Roberta Metsola on her election as the new President of the European Parliament.

The UK delegation is:

Full representatives

Stuart Anderson MP; Lord Bach; Simon Baynes MP; Hilary Benn MP (**Vice Chair**); Andrew Bowie MP; Baroness Crawley; Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP; Lord Gilbert of Panteg; Lord Godson; Sir Robert Goodwill MP; Lord Hannan of Kingsclere; Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town; Sir Oliver Heald MP (**Leader and Co-Chair**); Sir Mark Hendrick MP; Rupa Huq MP; Darren Jones MP; The Earl of Kinnoull (**Vice Chair**); Lord Kirkhope of Harrogate; Andrea Leadsom MP; Lord Liddle; Sir Tony Lloyd MP; Baroness Ludford; Baroness Mobarik; David Morris MP; David Mundell MP; Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne; Neil Parish MP; Lord Ricketts; Chris Skidmore MP; Karin Smyth MP; Lord Teverson; Kelly Tolhurst MP; Valerie Vaz MP; Philippa Whitford MP and Mike Wood MP.

Substitutes

Baroness Bull; James Daly MP; Marsha De Cordova MP; Dame Angela Eagle MP; Baroness Foster of Oton; Kate Griffiths MP; Luke Hall MP; Sally-Ann Hart MP; Robin Millar MP; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Alyn Smith MP and Baroness Suttie.

[HCWS560]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Help To Claim

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): The Department for Work and Pensions has announced today, on gov.uk, the outcome of the future support offer grant competition. The link to the announcement can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-boost-to-citizens-advice-to-deliver-help-to-claim-universal-credit-support>

Citizens Advice, in partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland, were successful and will deliver independent support from April 2022 following a further £21.3 million investment. The provision will continue to cover England, Scotland and Wales for 12 months, and ensures that free confidential and impartial support is available to help people make a new universal credit claim and manage their claim, up to receiving their first correct payment.

The future support offer name, used during the competition to indicate that DWP was looking for future provision, will revert to Help to Claim. The decision to retain the name reflects the fact that Help to Claim is a recognisable brand, both to people who will be using the support and to the staff who will be providing that support.

Since April 2019, Help to Claim has supported over half a million people, with nine in 10 people rating their overall experience as good or very good and would recommend it to friends and family.

From April 2022, the support will be provided through telephony and digital channels. For those individuals who are unable to access support via these channels, they will be able to go to their local jobcentre, where jobcentre staff will identify the right support to meet their needs. This support is already in place and available to those individuals who choose to seek support from the Department directly in making a claim to universal credit.

The Department is committed to providing the best possible support for all our claimants, including the most vulnerable in society, in both making and maintaining their claim.

[HCWS561]

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