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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 31 January 2022

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 708**

FOURTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-22

House of Commons

Monday 31 January 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

New Writ

Ordered,

That Mr Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Birmingham, Erdington, in the room of John Eugene Joseph Dromey, deceased.—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Education Settings: Safe Learning

1. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that pupils can learn safely in education settings. [905326]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): Mr Speaker, I am answering this question on behalf of the Secretary of State, who, as you know, is isolating having tested positive for covid over the weekend.

May I offer my condolences to the family and friends on the day of the funeral of the late Member for Birmingham, Erdington?

Our top priority remains to protect face-to-face education. To reduce transmission of covid-19, regular testing continues across education and childcare, with over 109.5 million tests completed. A further £8 million will support the in-school vaccination programme. To improve ventilation, we have delivered over 353,000 carbon dioxide monitors and purchased up to 9,000 air cleaning devices.

Bob Blackman: I express my sincere condolences to the Mother of the House and the entire family on the sad loss of the Member for Birmingham, Erdington.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in thanking and congratulating the headteachers and staff at all our schools—those in Harrow in particular—for keeping schools open as often as possible so that children can learn, as they should, in the classroom. Will he, however, join me in expressing the view that forcing young children to wear a face covering for seven hours a day is unfair, particularly for those who are hard of hearing?

Mr Walker: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the immense contribution of teachers, leaders and all who work in our schools. We have consistently seen 99.9% of education settings open to support face-to-face education. The Secretary of State always said that, while masks in classrooms were brought in for a period as we tried to study the impact of omicron, they should not be in place for a day longer than necessary. We no longer recommend them, and no child should be denied the opportunity to study for refusing to wear a mask.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Safety includes warmth. What will the Minister say to schools such as the one that contacted me this morning to say that, due to its £30,000 energy bill, it will not be able to manage its budget this year? It is very worried about what it can spend on fruit, books, salaries and all the other things that a small primary school needs. What urgent action will he take?

Mr Walker: We recognise some of the pressures facing schools and, indeed, all parts of the economy as a result of rising energy costs. That is part of the reason why we have provided a £4 billion increase for schools in the next financial year, which is allowing them to deliver on all the pressures that they are currently facing.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The Centre for Social Justice report published yesterday showed that more than 100,000 "ghost children" are still not returning to school for the most part, almost 800 schools are missing entirely a class-worth of pupils, and more than 13,000 children in year 11—a critical exam year—are severely absent from school. Will the Department get the proper data to find out where those children are and what is happening to them? Will it do as the CSJ has recommended and use the forecast underspend from the national tutoring programme to appoint 2,000 attendance officers to work with families to get those children back into school and learning again?

Mr Walker: I share my right hon. Friend's passion for ensuring that children are in school. I have discussed with the Children's Commissioner the designation of "ghost children", which we both feel is somewhat unhelpful. These are flesh and blood children who deserve to be in school and have the chance to benefit from face-to-face education. I assure him that addressing attendance and ensuring that they all have the opportunity to be safely in school is a top priority.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I, too, want children to be taught in safe spaces. That brings me yet again to the plight of Russell Scott Primary School in Denton, where, as the Minister knows, a botched £2.7 million refurbishment by Carillion has left the school with wrecked footings; a leaking roof; defective fire safety measures; inadequate drainage that floods the school with raw sewage; and playing fields that still resemble the Somme. It needs £5 million for that to be put right, or a new build. Baroness Barran wrote to me last week and basically said, "Tough—there's no money." That is not acceptable, is it? This is not levelling up. Let us get the purse strings opened and rebuild Russell Scott.

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman is clearly a champion for that school—he has made the case for it many times before. I would be surprised if that was the content of my noble Friend's letter, because a programme is due to open shortly, as he will know. Of course, we cannot pre-empt the programme, but I know that he has made a strong case for his school.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Ofsted's inquiry last year into the Everyone's Invited campaign, which exposed sexual harassment and other safeguarding concerns in schools, focused on the importance of mandatory sex and relationship education, as did Ministers. As a result of the actions of this Government, such education is mandatory for all school-age children. Will the Minister look to Ofsted to do further work on how schools are implementing relationship and sex education, because I am sure Members across the House are concerned about that?

Mr Walker: I know from discussions with Her Majesty's chief inspector that this is a priority for Ofsted, and we continue to work together on it. We are also supporting teachers to build their confidence in teaching this newly required subject, which my right hon. Friend has campaigned for strenuously.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): With much more school work being carried out online and with digital literacy among pupils rising extremely quickly, what protections are the Government putting in place to ensure that online platforms are a safe learning environment for young people?

Mr Walker: This is an important area of work within both the computing curriculum and the advice on keeping children safe in education. We certainly want to ensure that children are safe whether they are learning in the classroom or online.

Low-quality University Courses

2. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the provision of low-quality university courses. [905327]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): I believe that every student has the right to a high-quality education. The Government are committed to tackling low-quality courses and ensuring that students and the taxpayer see a return on their investment. We have worked with the Office for Students to tackle low-quality higher education courses and it will now, for the first time, impose stringent minimum standards for drop-out rates and progression to graduate jobs.

Danny Kruger: Wiltshire has no university, as my right hon. Friend knows, but we have something better in the form of Wiltshire College, which provides a fantastic range of courses for young people and adults, including at the great agricultural campus at Lackham. Will she join me in congratulating Wiltshire College on its retention of students and the progression that they achieve? It does that by working with employers to design courses that work for the local economy. Does she encourage universities to learn from the college sector how it does that?

Michelle Donelan: I agree completely with my hon. Friend's assessment of Wiltshire College. Like so many further education colleges, it works closely with local businesses to ensure that residents get the skills that local employers need. That is why the Government are investing in further education. We are providing investment to transform the Lackham campus into an agritech hub, with £1.2 million of capital funding for Wiltshire College, as well as £4 million for the delivery of T-levels to ensure that learners continue to have high-class learning facilities.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Parents and families are rightly proud of a child or family member who secures a place at our world-class universities, yet last week many will have seen the Minister belittle their courses and hard work. Her new proposal to fine universities if they do not meet universal thresholds

risks punishing universities with more disadvantaged, black and ethnic minority or mature students, who are more likely to take different routes through to higher education. Why is she putting barriers in the way of universities seeking to widen access to higher education?

Michelle Donelan: It is a shame that the hon. Member did not pay attention to the announcement we made. Is he actually saying that we should expect the dumbing down of some courses, because those who are disadvantaged do not deserve high quality? Is that really what the Opposition stand for? Let us not forget that many universities are excelling at supporting disadvantaged students to complete courses and go on to get graduate jobs—look at Sheffield Hallam, Nottingham Trent and Kingston. I believe that every student deserves a high-quality education, and so should the Opposition.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is not just the quality of courses that the Department and my right hon. Friend are working on; it is also the experience of students. Will she give an update on what steps she is taking to ensure that universities stop using non-disclosure agreements to silence the victims of sexual abuse?

Michelle Donelan: Last week, I launched a pledge, working with the likes of Universities UK and Can't Buy My Silence. It is very important that universities stop using non-disclosure agreements in respect of sexual assault, sexual abuse and harassment. They are morally inept and have no place on our campuses. I encourage every vice-chancellor to sign the pledge.

Student and Graduate Finance: Cost of Living

3. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) student and (b) graduate finance in the context of the cost of living. [905328]

21. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) student and (b) graduate finance in the context of the cost of living. [905347]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): We have frozen maximum tuition fees for the fifth year in succession, saving a typical full-time student finishing a course in the 2022-23 academic year over £3,000 in fee loans for the three-year degree. Maximum grants and loans have increased by 3.1% for the current academic year, with a further 2.3% increase announced for the next academic year.

Marion Fellows: As a result of their extremely high tuition fees—the highest in the world—English students leave university with three or four times the amount of debt that Scots do. Freezing the loan repayment threshold—along with the national insurance hike and the high, rising costs of food—significantly affects young graduates. Why are the Government failing to support students and graduates during this cost of living crisis?

Michelle Donelan: As I said, this will be the fifth year in succession that maximum fees have been frozen, saving a full-time student finishing a course over £3,000. With median non-graduate salaries at £25,000, it is right that we work to make the system sustainable and fair for the taxpayer, including those who do not choose to attend university, especially when only a quarter of those currently starting a course will actually fully repay their loan.

Patricia Gibson: Despite what the Minister said, the fact is that the Government have broken yet another promise that the student loan repayment threshold would be frozen. That means that, when student loan repayments are taken into consideration, together with the national insurance tax hike, graduates earning just over £27,000 a year will pay a marginal tax rate of an eye-watering 42.25%. Will the Minister explain to the House why she thinks that is fair?

Michelle Donelan: It is important that we strike a fair deal for students, graduates and the taxpayer. Only a quarter of those who take out a loan now will fully repay it, and as the hon. Member knows, the terms of these loans are very different from commercial loans. For instance, if someone loses their job or their salary reduces, their payments will change immediately.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Universities have a duty to provide students with value for money and they have undoubtedly been receiving a poorer education through remote learning. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, now that plan B measures have ended, every university should welcome back students to lecture halls, or provide refunds?

Michelle Donelan: I do agree. Online learning can be a great way to supplement and enhance learning, but let me be clear: it should not be used as a cost-cutting exercise and it should not be used to avoid utilising face-to-face provision. As the Secretary of State has outlined, we expect universities to be up-front and transparent about what students can expect, and I am personally calling vice-chancellors where we are concerned that this is not happening.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the ministerial team realise that student finance is in a terrible mess, with many students struggling to pay money back and many students refused a mortgage because of their student debt. This is a serious situation. The Government have got to get a handle on it and do something about what is going on, particularly in relation to the weak and enfeebled Office for Students.

Michelle Donelan: Contrary to the hon. Member's assertion, mortgages do not take into account student loans and we should put that on record. We are committed to a sustainable higher education funding model that supports high-quality provision, meets our skills gaps and maintains the world-class reputation of our higher education institutions, which is exactly why we will respond to the Augar review in full in due course.

Supporting Young People into High-quality Jobs

4. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support young people into high quality jobs. [905329]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): We are increasing spending on skills by £3.8 billion over this Parliament—that includes growing apprenticeship funding to £2.7 billion by 2024-25—and our skills revolution will ensure that young people have the skills that they need to access high-quality jobs through skills bootcamps, T-levels, traineeships and apprenticeships.

Robbie Moore: The Government's apprenticeship scheme has done a fantastic job in giving young people from across Keighley and Ilkley a route to high-skilled work. I saw that at first hand when I visited Byworth Boilers and met Suzanne Rutherford, Jago Harry and Curtis Daly, all of whom made that progression through the apprenticeship scheme. What plans does my right hon. Friend's Department have to ensure that success stories such as the Byworth Boilers apprenticeship scheme are repeated all across the country?

Michelle Donelan: As so many companies, such as Byworth Boilers, are recognising the benefits of growing their own, there have been 130,000 apprenticeship starts in the first quarter of this academic year, up 43% on the same period last year and 3.5% higher than before the pandemic. Apprenticeships can be transformative, and I am sure that Suzanne Rutherford, Jago Harry and Curtis Daly will find that for themselves.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Apprenticeships are the best way to support young people into high-quality jobs, but Government data shows the total number of apprenticeships fell by almost a quarter from 2001 to 2019, even before the pandemic. The levy has been described by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development as having failed by every measure and that it shuts out small businesses and young people. Is the Minister really satisfied with this failure? Can she explain why no reforms to apprenticeships are proposed in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill?

Michelle Donelan: Our high-quality apprenticeships do not just satisfy us; they satisfy the thousands of people undertaking them. There have been 130,000 apprenticeship starts in the first quarter of this academic year, which is up by 43% on the same period last year.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I am really proud of the many outstanding schools in my constituency, but it is important to remember that a degree is not the only route to a successful career. Does the Minister agree that apprenticeships are just as vital as university degrees, and will she arrange for the right Minister to meet me ahead of Apprenticeship Week, starting 7 February, to discuss what more can be done to promote apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: Both I and the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who is the Skills Minister, will be delighted to meet our hon. Friend. I absolutely agree with him on the importance of apprenticeships, and that is why we have just launched our new skills campaign, Get the Jump.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Does the Minister realise that many of the routes into quality jobs are in those very universities that she has been disparaging through her tax on so-called low-value courses? Does she agree that we need a much better metric than salary outcomes? Just because someone is not very well paid does not mean that they are no value.

Michelle Donelan: It is a shame the Opposition did not read our announcement the other week. In fact, we have not based it on salaries; we have based it on graduate outcomes, so there is a range of jobs that people can progress into.

Freedom of Speech: University Campuses

5. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect freedom of speech on university campuses. [905330]

15. **Mark Logan** (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect freedom of speech on university campuses. [905341]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): Freedom of speech is a fundamental principle of higher education and this Government will not allow the continued self-censorship of individuals facing negative repercussions for lawfully expressed views, which is why our Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill will strengthen existing freedom of speech duties.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The University of Buckingham in my constituency has twice topped the charts for the university with the least restrictions on free speech, and under the outstanding leadership of its vice-chancellor, Professor James Tooley, proposals have been drawn up calling for new laws to ensure that academics can sue an institution or use the complaints scheme if it fails to protect them from targeted campaigns of harassment related to their academic freedom. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister work with the University of Buckingham to make that new protection a reality?

Michelle Donelan: I welcome the University of Buckingham continuing to champion free speech. Our Bill contains exactly those sorts of measure to further strengthen protection for individuals who are being harassed for expressing their lawful views, and I am sure my hon. Friend will support it when it returns to this House.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Will the Minister agree to visit my constituency to see the efforts of some of our schools, including Eden Boys School, which is a feeder school into the University of Bolton, to make sure we get the balance right between freedom of speech and respect for religious values?

Michelle Donelan: Of course I will be delighted to visit Bolton North East. Maintaining free speech in our universities and political impartiality in our schools while also respecting religious values is imperative, as tomorrow's generation shape their views.

Lifelong Learning and Skills Development

6. **Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote lifelong learning and skills development. [905331]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): One absolute priority is to ensure that everyone can obtain the skills that they need at whatever time in life is right for them. That is why last week we launched our Skills for Life campaign, which will promote skills offers among adults, including our level 3 offer of apprenticeships and skills bootcamps.

Jane Stevenson: It was an enormous pleasure to welcome the employment Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), to Wolverhampton last week, when we met jobseekers of many ages who were taking part in a "car maintenance for electric vehicles" course delivered by City of Wolverhampton College as part of the Department for Work and Pensions' sector-based work academy programme or SWAP scheme. How can the Minister help providers like that college offer more courses of that kind, which are so valuable in helping people into work?

Alex Burghart: I commend the work that City of Wolverhampton College is doing on electric vehicle maintenance. When we see excellent providers working with employers, we also see the best outcomes for students, which is why we are investing an additional £3.8 billion in further education and skills over the current Parliament.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The truly outstanding Northern College in Barnsley is the only adult residential college in the north of England. Can the Minister assure us that it will continue to receive its residential uplift funding in future years?

Alex Burghart: I should be delighted to look into that issue for the hon. Gentleman.

Technical Qualifications: Strengthening their Value

7. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the value of technical qualifications. [905332]

14. **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of students studying for (a) BTECs and (b) T-levels in the 2021-22 academic year. [905340]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): We are reforming technical education to support progression and meet employer needs. Our initial figures show that nearly 5,500 new students started T-levels in September last year, more than four times the number who started in 2020. We do not routinely publish take-up data on individual qualifications such as Pearson BTECs, but we will publish in June the number of students who were studying for applied general qualifications at the end of 2021.

Simon Baynes: Will the Minister join me in congratulating my constituent Adele Hughes, who is working as an apprentice with Raytheon Technologies, on being awarded a bronze medal at the recent WorldSkills UK Competition, and does he agree that Adele's remarkable achievement demonstrates the value of technical qualifications and apprenticeships?

Alex Burghart: I am delighted to extend the Department's congratulations to Adele. What we are seeing through our apprenticeships programme at the moment is the study and achievement of world-class skills in England. That is why I hope my hon. Friend, and all other hon. Members, will join me next week in celebrating National Apprenticeships Week.

Ms Buck: More than a quarter of a million students are studying BTECs, but the Government are rushing ahead with a set of changes about which parents and schools and colleges are very concerned, especially as BTECs are taken up disproportionately by the most disadvantaged families in the most disadvantaged communities. One of the issues that have been raised with me is the limited number of opportunities and qualifications that will be available under T-levels, in comparison with BTECs. Can the Minister explain how a levelling-up agenda is being advanced by a reduction in the range of opportunities available to such students?

Alex Burghart: It was a central finding of the Sainsbury review, led by a Labour peer, that the vocational qualifications system should be simplified. What we are doing is creating world-class gold-standard qualifications that will give students meaningful work placements that will enable them to acquire qualifications designed by employers to give them the skills that the economy needs.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Apprenticeships and technical qualifications are extremely important to my constituents. Following the success of my jobs fair last year, I am organising an apprenticeships fair on 11 February this year. Will the Minister agree to open the fair, or to come along at some point during the day and support those young people in my constituency who are looking for an alternative route into work?

Alex Burghart: I will see my hon. Friend there.

Covid-19: Transmission in Schools

9. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help prevent covid-19 transmission in schools. [905334]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the Government continue to support a number of proportionate measures to reduce the spread of covid-19, testing regularly across settings, delivering 353,000 carbon dioxide monitors and up to 9,000 air cleaning units to ensure adequate ventilation, and committing a further £8 million to support the in-school vaccination programme. All that helps to protect face-to-face education.

Bill Esterson: The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies advised the Government to improve ventilation in schools in May 2020. It warned the Government to prepare for winter in July 2020. More than 10 million days of in-person teaching were lost last term. More than 400,000 children were out of school with covid last week. A quarter of schools faced teacher absences of 15% or more. Air cleaning devices are more than 18 months late, and are being offered to fewer than one in 30 classrooms. Why did Ministers ignore the advice about the importance of ventilation in schools for so long?

Mr Walker: The Government have consistently guided that ventilation is an important part of the measures against covid. We have had a world-leading programme of rolling out CO_2 monitors so that we can identify the classrooms that need extra support in this respect. Roughly 3% of classrooms came back as needing the extra support and the Secretary of State confirmed last week that every school that meets the criteria and that has applied for that will get it, paid for by the Department for Education. This is a successful response to ensure that schools have the support that they need.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Vaccination is key to protecting our children's learning in the classroom, yet 46% of 12 to 15-year-olds have still not had their first dose. One in eight children were off school earlier this month, causing more avoidable disruption to their education. Ministers missed their own target to offer every child a vaccine by October half term, so can the Minister tell the House what his vaccination target is now, and when he expects to meet it?

Mr Walker: As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, vaccines have never been compulsory for children. We want children to have vaccines, but they are optional and something that requires consent. We are continuing to support the vaccine programme, and the Secretary of State announced last week that we have accepted £8 million from NHS England to accelerate that in the schools pillar. The community pillar continues to be available to children in this age group.

Future Funding

10. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on future funding for education. [905335]

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): At the spending review, the Government set out spending plans for the Department for Education worth more than £86 billion for 2024-25. This is an £18.4 billion cash increase over the Parliament, showing that this Government are serious about skills, schools and families across the country.

Christine Jardine: I associate myself with the remarks made by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) about the late Member for Birmingham, Erdington.

We now know that £2.7 billion was spent on personal protective equipment that cannot be used, and that £4.3 billion of the money that was stolen during covid through the furlough scheme and other schemes is being written off by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Does the Minister share my concern about the difference that that cash could have made in meeting the target of more than £15 billion that the Government's own tsar reckoned was needed to catch up on the days that our children have lost in school? Will she call for a review of this?

Michelle Donelan: This Government are investing £4 billion extra on schools next year and £5 billion for recovery. This Government prioritise the skills of the future and the catch-up of children in schools.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the Minister, mindful of what she has just said, investigate how much local authorities are spending on so-called anti-racist education, which is based on deceit, spreads dismay and causes division? She will know that this is happening in Brighton and elsewhere. Will she therefore meet Don't Divide Us—parents and teachers who are highlighting these matters—with a view to issuing guidance and if necessary taking legislative steps to prevent this kind of indoctrination?

Michelle Donelan: I know that the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), will be only too happy to meet my right hon. Friend. It is important that I remind the House that schools are subject to political impartiality, and guidance on this will be updated shortly.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Taxpayer-subsidised childcare is increasingly being taken over by large for-profit companies quartered overseas, according to new research by University College London and the Nuffield Foundation. These companies have growing debts and charge high fees to parents while having among the lowest levels of staff qualifications and pay. They are reinvesting little in childcare provision. Does the Minister believe that repaying corporate debt represents value for money for taxpayers while families across the country struggle to access childcare that they can afford?

Michelle Donelan: We are investing additional funding for the entitlements worth £160 million in 2022-23. I know that the Minister for Children and Families, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), will be only too happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss this in detail.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Full membership of Horizon Europe continues to be treated as a negotiating pawn by this Government, but it is a very important source of higher education funding. When the Government talk of funding safety nets, they fail to recognise the importance of the rich collaborations that result from Horizon. When will this Government stop faffing about and make a concrete decision on the UK's full participation in Horizon Europe?

Michelle Donelan: We recognise that the ongoing delays by the EU have led to uncertainty for researchers, businesses and innovators. We have made it very clear that, in the event the UK is unable to associate with Horizon Europe, the funding that has been put aside will go to the UK Government's research and development programmes, including those that would form partnerships internationally.

Forced Marriage and Child Marriage: Information in Schools

11. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide information in schools for at-risk children on forced marriage and child marriage. [905336]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): The "Keeping children safe in education" statutory guidance provides a strong safeguarding framework for schools. It sets out the role that all school staff have to play in safeguarding children, including information for staff on what forced marriage actually is, as well as signposting to further help from the Government's forced marriage unit.

Mrs Latham: My private Member's Bill, the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill, has its Third Reading on 25 February. We are approaching a crucial time for young people at risk of child marriage. Many child marriages happen when children are taken abroad, generally in the summer holidays and often to someone they have never met. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can raise awareness of this issue in schools so that children know they can speak out if their parents or other relatives intend to take them abroad to be married in the school holidays and so that teachers know how to report children they consider to be at risk?

Will Quince: "Keeping children safe in education" is clear that all school and college staff should offer early help to children at risk of forced marriage or who are missing from education. It also signposts to detailed information developed by the forced marriage unit that outlines how schools and colleges should handle any concerns relating to forced marriage. My hon. Friend has campaigned long and hard on this issue, and of course I would be very happy to meet her.

The Reading Framework

12. **Nick Gibb** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the effect of his Department's July 2021 policy paper, "The Reading Framework", on the quality of the teaching of reading in primary schools. [905337]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his immense work on "The Reading Framework". The resulting framework is a vital and evidence-based tool to enable schools to teach reading effectively. It shows that phonics is just one part of becoming a fluent reader. Teachers should also focus on speaking and reading stories to foster a love of reading. English hubs tell us that the framework has been well received, and they are delivering a series of well-attended webinars to support schools to implement its recommendations.

Nick Gibb: I am sure my hon. Friend will have seen the recent report by two education academics challenging the Government's focus on phonics, despite all the evidence of its success in teaching children to read. Does he agree on the importance of continuing to make the case for phonics and the importance of the Government's clear focus on the curriculum, and on how it is taught, in helping us to complete our mission to transform the life chances of every child in this country?

Mr Walker: To coin a phrase, I agree with Nick. The evidence for phonics is very secure, and robust studies led by the Education Endowment Foundation show that phonics is extremely effective in teaching students to decode words. Schools do not teach phonics in isolation, and it is just one element of becoming a more fluent reader. Teachers must also focus on other elements of developing a passion for reading. My right hon. Friend is right that the evidence is very clear and that we should continue to follow it.

Children with SEND: Access to Specialist Support

13. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of access to specialist support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [905339]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): We are conducting a review of the special educational needs and disability system. We intend to publish proposals for improvements to the system through a Green Paper for full public consultation in the first three months of this year.

Vicky Foxcroft: The National Autistic Society ran a survey of parents and carers last summer, and it found that a quarter of parents waited more than three years to receive support for their child. Urgent reforms are needed for the 160,000 autistic pupils in schools in England to address the issues that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Can the Minister confirm that the upcoming SEND review will include robust proposals to tackle the crisis that disabled children and their families are facing?

Will Quince: I recognise some of the challenges the hon. Lady faces, and I give her that commitment. We prioritise children and young people with SEND and their families in our £4.9 billion education recovery plan, and those with the most complex needs continue to receive high needs funding, which increases to £9.1 billion in the next financial year. We have allocated £42 million this financial year to fund projects that support children and young people with SEND, including £600,000 to the Autism Education Trust.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): As lockdown has been scaled down, I have been visiting primary and secondary schools to talk about mental health. What steps have been taken to improve mental health access facilities, including counsellors in all schools?

Will Quince: Backed by £9.5 million, we are offering about a third of schools and colleges in England a grant this year to train a senior mental health lead in their setting. Our £15 million wellbeing for education recovery and return programmes are in addition to the £79 million boost to children and young people's mental health announced in March 2021 for mental health support teams in schools and colleges. My hon. Friend's point is well made.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Last week, I met a fantastic local ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—support group, who detailed to me the many delays that children are facing in receiving diagnoses and then education, health and care plans, support and treatment. What steps are the Government taking to support pupils with ADHD and suspected ADHD so that they can learn effectively and have a fulfilling educational experience?

Will Quince: The SEND review is all about ensuring that pupils get the right support, in the right place, at the right time and ultimately have better outcomes, and I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the issue further.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): The Minister will be aware that four out of five dyslexic children leave school with their dyslexia unidentified, so will he ensure that, consistent with the answer just given by the Minister for School Standards, the upcoming schools White Paper includes action on the universal screening and teacher training that our dyslexic pupils need and deserve?

Will Quince: My right hon. Friend is a strong advocate on these issues. The SEND review and the schools White Paper will, naturally, have to go hand in glove. The School Standards Minister and I would be happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this further.

School Staff Absences

16. **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government support to help tackle staff absences in schools. [905342]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): The Department has extended the covid workforce fund to at least the February half-term, so that schools with high absence and financial pressures can continue to access these additional funds. Other measures include asking former teachers to come forward if they are available to temporarily fill absences in schools during the spring term.

Rebecca Long Bailey: On 20 January, more than 415,000 pupils were off school and 15% of teachers were absent, but only 9,000 air purifiers have been promised, for approximately 300,000 classrooms. The Minister lauds the Government response, yet Germany has promised to subsidise 80% of the cost of air cleaning equipment in all schools to ensure that education is not disrupted. Why is he failing to ensure that our pupils have similar levels of protection?

Mr Walker: Very simply, because we are taking an evidence-based approach. We have listened to schools and we sent them the carbon dioxide monitors so that they can monitor where classrooms need the extra support. About 3% of classrooms needed that extra support and they are the ones where the devices are being provided entirely funded by the Department.

Apprenticeships: Early Years Workforce

17. **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What plans he has to develop apprenticeship routes for the early years workforce. [905343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): My Department has engaged with early years employers to help them design three high-quality apprenticeships—early years educator; practitioner and lead practitioner. Since 2018-19, there have been more than 26,000 starts on early years apprenticeships. Students can also study a T-level, a new gold-standard technical qualification in education and childcare, which provides a route into either work or further study.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his commitment to making sure that every baby gets the best start to life. Does he agree that by creating more of a mixed-skill workforce we will be able to provide the continuity of care that every family wants when they have a new baby?

Alex Burghart: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's considerable expertise and work in this area, and I agree with her on this, which is why we are investing £153 million in training early years staff to support learning and development, and £300 million to transform Start4Life and help family services. That £300 million is going to include funding for trials for an innovative workforce, and I look forward to talking to her about that.

School Buildings: West Dorset

18. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): If he will take steps to ensure a high standard for school buildings in West Dorset. [905344]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): Ensuring that schools are well maintained and support effective education is a Government priority. We have allocated £11.3 billion since 2015 to improve school buildings, and Dorset Council received £2.9 million this financial year in school condition allocations. We are delivering rebuilding projects in West Dorset, and our school rebuilding programme will transform 500 schools over the next decade.

Chris Loder: Twenty-five years ago, I attended the Gryphon School in Sherborne and was schooled in temporary classrooms. I returned to the school only a few months ago, to find the same temporary classrooms, in a terrible state, being used for students today. I am making limited progress with my hon. Friend's Department, so might he offer further support so that we can get the situation sorted out?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is right to speak up for his old school. I am concerned to hear of the issues there. I understand that he met my noble Friend the Minister for the School System and senior officials. We have been engaging with the Sherborne Area Schools' Trust on this matter and it has received £585,000 this financial year to improve its school buildings, but I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend again.

Early Years Healthy Development Review Report

19. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations of the Government's Early Years Healthy Development Review Report, published in March 2021. [905345]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): The Government are investing £300,000 million to transform "start for life" and family help services in half the council areas across England. That money will fund a network of family hubs, parent-infant mental health support, breastfeeding services and parenting programmes, and will allow local areas to publish their "start for life" offer.

Andrew Lewer: I thank the Minister for that support, but Camrose early years centre in Northampton South faces an emergency cut that will end its 8 am to 6 pm nursery service by 1 April this year. Will he meet me to discuss alternative solutions?

Will Quince: Like other maintained nursery schools, Camrose supports some of our most disadvantaged children. We have confirmed the continuation of its supplementary funding throughout the spending review period and will increase the supplementary hourly funding rate by 3.5%. I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Topical Questions

T1. [905352] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): As was explained to the House earlier, the Secretary of State is currently isolating, but on behalf of him, myself and the Department, I thank the staff and young people and their families across education and childcare for their perseverance and dedication. Face coverings are no longer recommended in schools, colleges or universities. Regular testing, vaccinations and enhanced ventilation continue to help to reduce transmission and thereby protect face-to-face education, which is our No. 1 priority.

The Government will spend another £8 million to support the crucial in-school vaccination programme. After the delivery of more than 353,000 carbon dioxide monitors, we are following the evidence and delivering up to 9,000 air-cleaning devices to fulfil all eligible applications where there is less natural ventilation. Because this Government have got the big calls right, 99% of children are back in school and learning face to face.

Rachel Hopkins: The most deprived schools have seen the largest cuts over the past decade, with a 14% real-terms fall in per-pupil spending between 2009-10 and 2019-20, compared with a drop of only 9% for the least deprived schools. That is not levelling up. Is the Minister content that her Government are funnelling money away from the schools and communities that need it the most?

Michelle Donelan: As the hon. Member knows, this Government are determined to level up, which is exactly why we have introduced a real-terms 5% increase in school funding and have the highest ever level of pupil premium.

T3. [905354] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The Secretary of State is sadly unable to be with us today, but will one of his Ministers commit him to meet me to discuss the universal accreditation scheme proposed in my recently published "Poverty Trapped" paper? It would mean that universities and colleges could give credit for knowledge and skills gained not just in formal education but in work or informal settings, to make it easier, cheaper and faster to switch careers and to level up opportunities so that everyone has a better chance to succeed.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his report. I very much share his sentiments about the importance of recognising prior learning. Currently, further education providers can use their own discretion when they assess learners' experience, but we are examining how we can encourage the greater use of knowledge in respect of prior learning. I shall pass on my hon. Friend's invitation to the Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Today, I send my love to the family of Jack Dromey, who will be deeply missed by us all. Through you, Mr Speaker, I also send to the Secretary of State my best wishes for a swift recovery.

According to the most recent figures, the number of children who are out of school because of covid has risen by 34%. In the light of that, do Ministers not regret all the time and energy they have wasted on defending the Prime Minister rather than prioritising our children's learning?

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): The hon. Lady may wish to play party politics, but we are focused on making sure that children can safely learn in schools.

Bridget Phillipson: If only that were true. It is a year this week since the Prime Minister appointed Sir Kevan Collins

"to oversee a comprehensive programme of catch-up",

only for Sir Kevan later to resign in protest because, in his words, the Government's plans risked

"failing hundreds of thousands of pupils."

We can all see covid's impact on children's learning and wellbeing. Labour's "Children's Recovery Plan" meets the scale of the challenge we face, so when will the Minister finally put children first and match Labour's ambition for their future?

Mr Walker: I am delighted that this Government are investing £5 billion in education recovery, and that we have a Prime Minister who two years ago delivered on a key manifesto promise to take this country out of theusb EU.

T4. [905355] **Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): The main issue in schools across Hampshire at the moment is SEND provision. There is a major increase in need as more students obtain their education, health and care plans, but a significant shortfall in personnel, even though the funding is in place. Will the Minister meet me and Steve Jones of Perins School, which is in my constituency—the dreaded Zoom is absolutely fine—so that we can talk about recruitment not only of teachers, but of student-facing support staff?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): Let me take this opportunity to thank all those who work in mainstream and specialist SEND settings for everything that they do. Schools have the freedom to recruit support staff to match their circumstances, and last year they recruited 6,000 more. Of course, I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): *Times Higher Education* has reported that several UK universities are providing Afghan Chevening scholars with considerable financial assistance, from food vouchers to laptops. Although that is to be commended, it is shocking that the financial contribution of the UK is not covering what these students need. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to increase the financial contribution and to properly support these Afghan students?

Michelle Donelan: I welcome the contribution that universities are also making to Afghan refugees. I will meet the hon. Member to detail exactly what the Government have done to support those studying here.

T6. [905357] **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in thanking the headteacher and staff of Ivel Valley School in my constituency? They are in discussions regarding a much-needed refurbishment. Will the Minister advise me on what the Government's plan is for upgrading the estate of schools that deal with children who have severe learning difficulties?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend and I recently visited an excellent alternative provision setting—the Academy of Central Bedfordshire—and he will know that we are investing an extra £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to deliver an additional 30,000 places and to improve existing provision for children with SEND. Of course, I echo his thanks.

T2. [905353] **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Schools in east Hull have gone above and beyond to ensure that kids keep learning during the pandemic, and I thank each and every school leader, teacher and support staff member for that, but they have been badly let down by this Government. Last term, 10,600 school days were lost as a result of this Government's failure. When will the Minister adopt the ambitious, comprehensive schools recovery plan put forward by the shadow Secretary of State, which will do what needs to be done?

Mr Robin Walker: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but we have a strong plan for recovery in schools and a strong plan for attendance, which is vital. There has been unavoidable absence as a result of covid, but we must crack down on avoidable absence, which is a reason for one of my visits to the north-east last week.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): We in Stoke-on-Trent are proud to be the home of Staffordshire University, but sadly it seems that cancel culture has arrived on our doorstep after the wokerati made formal complaints about criminology professor James Treadwell for tweeting that transgender women should not be allowed in women's prisons, citing research that found that half of women in prison have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Does my right hon. Friend share my despair over this tiny extreme minority, who wish to silence anyone whose opinion they disagree with, and will she join me in lending support to Professor Treadwell?

Michelle Donelan: We are a Government who are committed to ensuring free speech on our campuses, which is exactly why we are honouring our manifesto commitment and bringing free speech legislation to the House. I point out that the University of Sussex is already being investigated by the Office for Students. Other universities should take note.

T5. [905356] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Research published by the Social Market Foundation has shown that students from working-class backgrounds accepted into university are more likely than their peers to hold a BTEC qualification. After failing my GCSEs as a working-class 16-year-old, it was a BTEC in performing arts that got me back into education and ultimately into university. The Minister has already been asked this question by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), but does he agree that the decision to hastily remove BTEC funding makes a mockery of the Government's claims to be levelling up in education?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady will have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State extend the timescale for T-levels on Second Reading of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. I am sure that she would have benefited from being able to do a T-level when she was at school. It would have given her nine weeks of work placement, and she would have done a qualification designed with employers that would have led to a job in the economy.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that section 406(1)(b) of the Education Act 1996 already outlaws

"the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school",

will the Government take appropriate action without further delay against Brighton and Hove City Council, which is planning to indoctrinate seven-year-olds with critical race theory?

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities has been clear that critical race theory should never be taught as that—it is a contentious political viewpoint. We are working on making sure that we update our guidance on political impartiality in school, to make that absolutely clear.

T7. [905359] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Upton-by-Chester High School in my constituency is rated good with an outstanding sixth form, but it keeps getting overlooked for replacement of its 1960s prefab buildings, which are falling apart. When will the Government announce the new guidelines, and will they look kindly on Upton High's application?

Mr Walker: I know that the hon. Gentleman recently met my noble Friend the Minister for the School System to discuss the case for that school. Cheshire West and Chester Council received £4.6 million in school condition allocations this financial year. Our school rebuilding programme will deliver 500 projects over the next decade, transforming education for thousands of pupils. The hon. Gentleman has made his case once again.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to lifelong learning and level 3 qualifications, but my hon. Friend the Skills Minister will know that many residents across the country will need significant help with levels 1 and 2 in order to access that offer. Will he meet representatives of West Notts College and me to discuss how we might be able to offer that support to people in Mansfield?

Alex Burghart: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. We are reforming level 2 qualifications. The Chancellor has announced our plans for Multiply, a new project to help people with numeracy of all ages.

T8. [905360] **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): Primary and secondary schools alike are telling me that the biggest challenge they face is covid-related staff absence. Anywhere between 15% and 20% of school staff are missing. Could the Minister confirm how many volunteers have signed up to the teacher volunteer drive? What are we doing to keep teachers in schools so that we can keep them safe?

Mr Robin Walker: The Government's covid guidance is about keeping both staff and pupils safe. On the hon. Lady's point about volunteers, we published figures at the beginning of January that show that, at that point, responses from about a quarter of supply agencies showed that 585 teachers had come forward in answer to that call to arms. We expect the full number to be significantly higher.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): According to the latest Ofsted inspection ratings, only 55% of Derbyshire secondary schools are rated good or better, compared with a national benchmark of 80%. If levelling up is to mean anything, it must be about fixing the glaring educational inequality. Will the Minister agree to meet me and fellow Derbyshire MPs to discuss how we can improve education standards and opportunity for all in Derbyshire?

Mr Walker: I will certainly be happy to do that.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The chatty mums network of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe recently met me to raise concerns about the cost of living and lack of affordable childcare. What assessment have Ministers made of the impact of cuts to universal credit and the new Tory tax on working mums from April?

Will Quince: There is a substantial offer in place to support parents with childcare costs. In 2021, 328,700 children had a Government-funded early education entitlement place for 30 hours, worth up to £6,000.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Before Christmas, the Secretary of State made a statement about the tragic deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. To that grisly list has now been added Amina-Faye Johnson. He announced a review by the serious case review national panel. When will that review be published, and can the Minister assure us that it will be published in full and action will be taken?

Will Quince: The child safeguarding practice review panel will deliver a national independent review of Arthur and Star's tragic deaths, to identify what we must learn, and it will report in May.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Last week, the journalist and presenter Ashley John-Baptiste shared his personal story in the BBC documentary "Split Up In Care—Life Without Siblings". His story is not unusual, nor is it a past feature of our care system. Thousands of children removed from their families, alone and scared, are denied relationships with their siblings, despite all the evidence showing that this relationship and bond is one of the most significant and enduring. Why do this Government stubbornly refuse to make changes to the Children Act 1989 and give sibling contact for children in care?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. We have the independent review into children's social care led by Josh MacAlister, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss this important issue further.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I recently met my school leaders and heard how, in a recent inspection by Ofsted, no account had been taken of staff absence due to covid. Can my hon. Friend confirm that Ofsted should take into account covid impact when inspecting and set that out in writing?

Mr Robin Walker: I can say to my hon. Friend that having discussed this matter with Her Majesty's chief inspector, I know that she does take such impacts into account. Ofsted is offering deferrals to schools facing particularly high levels of staff absence, but I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the case to which he refers.

Mr Speaker: Before we move on to the first statement, I assure the House that following the comments made at the start of questions—*[Interruption.]* I do not think that is appropriate for what I am going to say. You ought to be ashamed. I assure the House that following the comments made at the start of questions, there will be an opportunity to pay tribute to our friend and colleague the late Jack Dromey. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] That will take place on Wednesday. I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members will welcome the opportunity to pay tribute at that point.

I should inform the House that given the brief period of time available to review the report, I will be allowing the Leaders of the Opposition parties a little longer to question the Prime Minister than is usually the case. I am sure the Prime Minister may wish to take a little longer at the beginning.

Sue Gray Report

3.31 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement. First, I express my deepest gratitude to Sue Gray and all the people who have contributed to this report, which I have placed in the Library of this House and which the Government have published in full today for everyone to read.

I will address the report's findings in this statement, but first I want to say sorry. I am sorry for the things we simply did not get right and sorry for the way this matter has been handled. It is no use saying that this or that was within the rules, and it is no use saying that people were working hard—this pandemic was hard for everyone. We asked people across this country to make the most extraordinary sacrifices—not to meet loved ones, not to visit relatives before they died—and I understand the anger that people feel.

But it is not enough to say sorry. This is a moment when we must look at ourselves in the mirror, and we must learn. While the Metropolitan police must yet complete their investigation, and that means there are no details of specific events in Sue Gray's report, I of course accept Sue Gray's general findings in full, and above all her recommendation that we must learn from these events and act now.

With respect to the events under police investigation, she says:

"No conclusions should be drawn, or inferences made from this other than it is now for the police to consider the relevant material in relation to those incidents."

More broadly, she finds:

"There is significant learning to be drawn from these events which must be addressed immediately across Government. This does not need to wait for the police investigations to be concluded."

That is why we are making changes now to the way Downing Street and the Cabinet Office run, so that we can get on with the job—the job that I was elected to do, and the job that this Government were elected to do.

First, it is time to sort out what Sue Gray rightly calls the "fragmented and complicated" leadership structures of Downing Street, which she says

"have not evolved sufficiently to meet the demands"

of the expansion of No. 10. We will do that, including by creating an Office of the Prime Minister, with a permanent secretary to lead No. 10.

Secondly, it is clear from Sue Gray's report that it is time not just to review the civil service and special adviser codes of conduct, wherever necessary, to ensure that they take account of Sue Gray's recommendations, but to make sure that those codes are properly enforced. Thirdly, I will be saying more in the coming days about the steps we will take to improve the No. 10 operation and the work of the Cabinet Office, to strengthen Cabinet Government, and to improve the vital connection between No. 10 and Parliament.

Mr Speaker, I get it and I will fix it. I want to say to the people of this country: I know what the issue is. [Hon. Members: "No!"] Yes. [Hon. Members: "You!"] It is whether this Government can be trusted to deliver. And I say yes, we can be trusted—yes, we can be trusted to deliver. We said that we would get Brexit done, and we did. We are setting up freeports around the whole United Kingdom. I have been to one of them today that is creating tens of thousands of new jobs. We said we would get this country through covid, and we did. We delivered the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe and the fastest booster programme of any major economy, so that we have been able to restore people's freedoms faster than any comparable economy. At the same time, we have been cutting crime by 14%, building 40 new hospitals and rolling out gigabit broadband, and delivering all the promises of our 2019 agenda, so that we have the fastest economic growth of the G7. We have shown that we have done things that people thought were impossible, and that we can deliver for the British people. *[Interruption.]* I remind those on the Opposition Benches that the reason we are coming out of covid so fast is partly because we doubled the speed of the booster roll-out.

I can tell the House and this country that we are going to bring the same energy and commitment to getting on with the job, to delivering for the British people, and to our mission to unite and level up across this country. I commend this statement to the House.

3.37 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I would like to thank Sue Gray for the diligence and professionalism with which she has carried out her work. It is no fault of hers that she has only been able to produce an update today, not the full report.

The Prime Minister repeatedly assured the House that the guidance was followed and the rules were followed. But we now know that 12 cases have reached the threshold of criminal investigation, which I remind the House means that there is evidence of serious and flagrant breaches of lockdown, including the party on 20 May 2020, which we know the Prime Minister attended, and the party on 13 November 2020 in the Prime Minister's flat. There can be no doubt that the Prime Minister himself is now subject to criminal investigation.

The Prime Minister must keep his promise to publish Sue Gray's report in full when it is available. But it is already clear that the report discloses the most damning conclusion possible. Over the last two years, the British public have been asked to make the most heart-wrenching sacrifices—a collective trauma endured by all, enjoyed by none. Funerals have been missed, dying relatives have been unvisited. Every family has been marred by what we have been through. And revelations about the Prime Minister's behaviour have forced us all to rethink and relive those darkest moments. Many have been overcome by rage, by grief and even by guilt. Guilt that because they stuck to the law, they did not see their parents one last time. Guilt that because they did not bend the rules, their children went months without seeing friends. Guilt that because they did as they were asked, they did not go and visit lonely relatives.

But people should not feel guilty. They should feel pride in themselves and their country, because by abiding by those rules they have saved the lives of people they will probably never meet. They have shown the deep public spirit and the love and respect for others that has always characterised this nation at its best.

Our national story about covid is one of a people who stood up when they were tested, but that will be forever tainted by the behaviour of this Conservative Prime Minister. By routinely breaking the rules he set,

the Prime Minister took us all for fools. He held people's sacrifice in contempt. He showed himself unfit for office.

The Prime Minister's desperate denials since he was exposed have only made matters worse. Rather than come clean, every step of the way, he has insulted the public's intelligence. Now he has finally fallen back on his usual excuse: it is everybody's fault but his. They go; he stays. Even now, he is hiding behind a police investigation into criminality in his home and his office.

The Prime Minister gleefully treats what should be a mark of shame as a welcome shield, but the British public are not fools. They never believed a word of it. They think that the Prime Minister should do the decent thing and resign. Of course, he will not, because he is a man without shame. Just as he has done throughout the life, he has damaged everyone and everything around him along the way. His colleagues have spent weeks defending the indefensible, touring the TV studios, parroting his absurd denials, degrading themselves and their offices, fraying the bond of trust between the Government—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) is my neighbour. I expect better from my neighbours.

Keir Starmer: They have spent weeks fraying the bond of trust between the Government and the public, eroding our democracy and the rule of law.

Margaret Thatcher once said:

"The first duty of Government is to uphold the law. If it tries to bob and weave and duck around that duty when its inconvenient…then so will the governed".

To govern this country is an honour, not a birthright. It is an act of service to the British people, not the keys to a court to parade to friends. It requires honesty, integrity and moral authority. I cannot tell hon. Members how many times people have said to me that this Prime Minister's lack of integrity is somehow "priced in"—that his behaviour and character do not matter. I have never accepted that and I never will.

Whatever people's politics, whatever party they vote for, honesty and decency matter. Our great democracy depends on them. Cherishing and nurturing British democracy is what it means to be patriotic. There are Conservative Members who know that, and they know that the Prime Minister is incapable of it. The question that they must now ask themselves is what they are going to do about it.

Conservative Members can heap their reputation, the reputation of their party, and the reputation of this country on the bonfire that is the Prime Minister's leadership, or they can spare the country a Prime Minister totally unworthy of his responsibilities. It is their duty to do so. They know better than anyone how unsuitable he is for high office. Many of them knew in their hearts that we would inevitably come to this one day and they know that, as night follows day, continuing his leadership will mean further misconduct, cover-up and deceit. Only they can end this farce. The eyes of the country are upon them. They will be judged by the decisions they take now.

The Prime Minister: There is a reason why the right hon. and learned Gentleman said absolutely nothing about the report that was presented by the Government and put in the Library of this House earlier today. That is because the report does absolutely nothing to substantiate the tissue of nonsense that he has just spoken—absolutely nothing. Instead, this Leader of the Opposition, a former Director of Public Prosecutions—although he spent most of his time prosecuting journalists and failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile, as far as I can make out—chose to use this moment continually to prejudge a police inquiry. That is what he chose to do. He has reached his conclusions about it. I am not going to reach any conclusions, and he would be entirely wrong to do so. I direct him again to what Sue Gray says in her report about the conclusions that can be drawn from her inquiry about what the police may or may not do. I have complete confidence in the police, and I hope that they will be allowed simply to get on with their job. I do not propose to offer any more commentary about it, and I do not believe that he should either.

I must say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, with greatest respect to those on the Opposition Benches, that what I think the country wants us all in this House to focus on are the issues that matter to them and getting on with taking this country forward. Today, we have delivered yet more Brexit freedoms with a new freeport in Tilbury, as I said, when he voted 48 times to take this country back into the EU. We have the most open society, the most open economy—*[Interruption.]* This is I think what people want us to focus on. We have the most open society and the most open economy in Europe because of the vaccine roll-out, because of the booster roll-out, and never forget that he voted to keep us in the European Medicines Agency, which would have made that impossible. Today, we are standing together with our NATO allies against the potential aggression of Vladimir Putin, when he wanted, not so long ago, to install as Prime Minister a Labour leader who would actually have abolished NATO. That is what he believes in and those are his priorities. Well, I can say to him: he can continue with his political opportunism; we are going to get on and I am going to get on with the job.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): The covid regulations imposed significant restrictions on the freedoms of members of the public. They had a right to expect their Prime Minister to have read the rules, to understand the meaning of the rules—and, indeed, those around them him to have done so, too—and to set an example in following those rules. What the Gray report does show is that No. 10 Downing Street was not observing the regulations they had imposed on members of the public, so either my right hon. Friend had not read the rules, or did not understand what they meant—and others around him—or they did not think the rules applied to No. 10. Which was it?

The Prime Minister: I would say, with great respect to my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a very important question, and I want to hear the answer, even if other people do not.

The Prime Minister: No, that is not what the Gray report says. *[Interruption.]* It is not what the Gray report says, but I suggest that my right hon. Friend waits to see the conclusion of the inquiry.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Can I say that it is a pleasure to follow the former Prime Minister? Perhaps her behaviour in office, like that of many who went before her, was about dignity and about the importance of the office, of respect and of truthfulness, and the Prime Minister would be well advised to focus on those who have not dishonoured the office like he has done.

We stand here today faced with the systematic decimation of public trust in Government and the institutions of the state, and at its heart a Prime Minister—a Prime Minister—being investigated by the police. So here we have it: the long-awaited Sue Gray report—what a farce. It was carefully engineered to be a fact-finding exercise with no conclusions, and now we find it is a fact-finding exercise with no facts, so let us talk facts. The Prime Minister has told the House that

"all guidance was followed completely"—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2021; Vol. 704, c. 909.]

that "there was no party", covid rules were followed, and

"I believed…this was a work event".—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 562.]

Nobody—nobody—believed him then, and nobody believes you now, Prime Minister. That is the crux. No ifs, no buts; he has wilfully misled Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Order. It would be acceptable to say "inadvertently misled the House", but "misled the House" is not acceptable. The right hon. Member must withdraw that comment.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister inadvertently told the House on 8 December that no parties had taken place and then he had to admit that they had.

It is bad enough that the Prime Minister's personal integrity is in the ditch, but this murky business is tainting everything around it. It is the Scottish National party's intention to submit a motion instructing the Prime Minister to publish the Gray report in full. Will the Prime Minister obey an instruction by this House to publish as required?

Amid allegations of blackmail by Tory Whips, Tory Members have been defending the indefensible. We were told, "Wait for the report." Well, here it is, and it tells us very little—except it does state that

"There were failures of leadership and judgment by different parts of No. 10"

and that

"Some…events should not have been allowed to take place."

That is the Prime Minister's responsibility. If there was any honour in public life, he would resign. Where is—*[Laughter.]* The Prime Minister laughs. We ought to remind ourselves in this House that 150,000-plus of our citizens have lost their lives and family members could not be with them. That is a sight that people will remember: a Prime Minister laughing at our public. I extend the hand of friendship to all those who have sacrificed. I certainly do not extend the hand of friendship to the Prime Minister, who is no friend of mine.

Where is the shame? Where is the dignity? Meanwhile, the police investigation will drag on and on. Every moment the Prime Minister stays, trust in Government and the rule of law is ebbing away. With the litany of rule breaking, the culture of contempt and the utter disdain for the anguish felt by the public who have sacrificed so much, what the public see is a man who has debased the office of Prime Minister, shirked responsibility, dodged accountability and blamed his staff at every turn, presided over sleaze and corruption and tainted the very institutions of the state. In short—*[Laughter.]* Government Members can laugh, but the public know that this is a man they can no longer trust. He is being investigated by the police. He misled the House. He must now resign.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member will have to withdraw that last comment.

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, I gave the evidence of 8 December.

Mr Speaker: Order. You will have to withdraw "misled".

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister has misled the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. Unless you withdraw, I will have to stop, and that is not good. Just withdraw the words.

Ian Blackford: I am standing up for my constituents who know that this Prime Minister has lied and misled the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will give you, as leader of the SNP, one more chance to say "inadvertently misled." I do not want to have to throw you out, so I will give you this chance. Please.

Ian Blackford: I will speak truth to power. That man has misled the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry that it has come to this, and I am sorry that the leader of the party has not got the decency just to withdraw those words in order that this debate can be represented by all political leaders. Would you like to say "inadvertently"?

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, if the Prime Minister has inadvertently misled the House, I will state that.

Mr Speaker: Right. We will leave it at that.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for withdrawing what he just said, because he was wrong, and I am afraid that he is wrong in his analysis. I apologise, as I have said, for all the suffering that people have had throughout the pandemic and for the anger that people feel about what has taken place in No. 10 Downing Street. But I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that, for much of what he said, his best course is simply to wait for the inquiry to conclude.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say: I take it that the right hon. Member has withdrawn his remark?

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister may have inadvertently misled the House—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. To help me and to help the House, has the right hon. Gentleman withdrawn his earlier comment and replaced it with "inadvertently"?

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, it is not my fault if the Prime Minister cannot be trusted to tell the truth—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Under the power given to me by Standing Order No. 43, I order the right hon. Member to withdraw immediately from the House—

An hon. Member: He has left anyway!

Mr Speaker: It's all right; we do not need to bother. Let us move on. I call Andrew Mitchell.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall that ever since he joined the party's candidates list 30 years ago, and until we got him into No. 10, he has enjoyed my full-throated support? But I am deeply concerned by these events, and very concerned indeed by some of the things he has said from that Dispatch Box, and has said to the British public and to our constituents. When he kindly invited me to see him 10 days ago, I told him that I thought he should think very carefully about what was now in the best interests of our country, and of the Conservative party. I have to tell him that he no longer enjoys my support.

The Prime Minister: I must respectfully tell my right hon. Friend, great though the admiration is that I have for him, that I simply think he is mistaken in his views, and I urge him to reconsider upon full consideration of the inquiry.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister told us:

"I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no covid rules were broken."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

We now know that 12 of the 16 parties are subject to a police investigation, and that of the remaining four, the Sue Gray report states that she has seen a "serious failure" to observe the high standards at No. 10. She has seen "failures of leadership" and of judgment, yet the Prime Minister thinks that is fine. Just how bad do things have to be before he takes personal responsibility, does what everybody in the country wants him to do, and resigns?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is taking the action that I have described to set up a Prime Minister's department to improve the operation of No. 10. We will be taking further steps in the days ahead.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The inquiry has found that there have been serious failings, and it has suggested there be changes in the way that No. 10 is run. There is a real opportunity now to take forward this new Office of the Prime Minister, and ensure that further improvements are made so that we can carry on delivering. What the Opposition parties hate is the fact that this Government will carry on delivering on the things that matter most to people, while also making sure that the governance within No. 10 is improved.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I think he is completely right. The Opposition, of course, want to keep their focus trained on this. That is their decision. I think that what people in this country want us to do is get on with the job that they want us to do. That is to serve them and, frankly, to stop talking about ourselves.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): There is no word in the English language for a parent who has lost a child. There is no equivalent of "widow" or "orphan" for that particular horror. It is a loss that is literally beyond words; a loss that hundreds and thousands of parents have tragically experienced during this pandemic. Many had to bury their children alone; many could not be there with them at the end. Meanwhile, No. 10 partied. Does the Prime Minister understand? Does he care about the enormous hurt his actions have caused to bereaved families across our country? Will he finally accept that the only decent thing he can do now is to resign?

The Prime Minister: I do care deeply about the hurt that is felt across the country about the suggestion that things were going on in No. 10 that were in contravention of the covid rules. I understand how deeply people feel about this and how angry they are. I have apologised several times, but I must say that I think we should wait for the outcome of the inquiry before jumping to the conclusions that the right hon. Gentleman has raised. In the meantime, we should focus on the issues that matter to the British people.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): The public and this House have been frustrated by having to wait for Sue Gray and the Metropolitan police, and today the Prime Minister has announced his new office at No. 10. Will he please let the House know what specific structures will be put in place so that this House can hold it accountable?

The Prime Minister: We will make sure that there is a new permanent secretary, who will be accountable to me, and that the codes of conduct that apply both to special advisers and to civil servants are properly enforced. Of course, all of that will be properly communicated to the House. What I want to see is much better communication and links between No. 10 and the entirety of the House of Commons, and we will do that.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Yesterday, at the local Tesco store in my constituency, a constituent asked me in a tone more in sorrow than in anger, "Why doesn't the Prime Minister realise that as every day goes by, he damages the reputation of our country abroad, around the world?" How would the Prime Minister respond to that constituent?

The Prime Minister: I think that the reputation of our country around the world is built on the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, if not in all the major economies; it is built on having, therefore, the fastest growth in the G7; and it is built on our ability to bring our allies together to stand up against Vladimir Putin. That is what the world is focused on, that is what I am focused on, and that, frankly, is what the right hon. Gentleman should be focused on.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend first of all remind the Leader of the Opposition and the Labour party that the Back

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

Benchers of the Conservative party need no reminders about how to dispose of a failing leader? Will he also, when he is restructuring No. 10, concentrate on the fact that the country wants results? We cannot see the point of such a large No. 10 superstructure; it needs to be slimmed down and streamlined. May I commend his determination to restore Cabinet government? It is on results, over the next few months, that he will be judged.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much; I think he is entirely right. I am more than content to be judged on the results we have already delivered and the results that we will deliver. I am sure that we will be greatly assisted by the reforms of No. 10 that I have outlined.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Anybody who has actually read the Sue Gray report can only wonder what she was made to leave out. Will the Prime Minister give the House an undertaking that as soon as he is able, he will release the full unredacted report to this House?

The Prime Minister: Sue Gray has published everything that she can. I propose that we wait until the conclusion of the inquiry. In the meantime, I think it peculiar that the report is being simultaneously hailed as utterly damning and condemned for not having enough in it—it cannot be both.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): President Truman had on his desk, "The buck stops here", so the Prime Minister was right to apologise for the events that happened in No. 10 Downing Street. Two weeks ago, I reminded Tom Harwood that Tony Blair suggested that there should be an Office of the Prime Minister, so that it could be governed not from 70 Whitehall but from the building itself. Will the Prime Minister tell me how he envisions the office working? Will the permanent secretary be based in No. 10, controlling what civil servants do in No. 10?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think the House understands, even if many people outside do not, that No. 10 hosts more than 400 officials on a busy day. They have a huge amount to do —*[Interruption.]* No, they are working very hard. We need to make sure there are proper lines of authority and that we sort out the command structures, and that is what we are doing.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Whatever the police decide, this update, severely limited as it is, would be enough to persuade any other Prime Minister to resign. This Prime Minister could resign and salvage a crumb or two of honour, or he may try to delay and take his party down with him. Is it not clear that, with notable exceptions, his Back Benchers should discover their backbone and sack him?

The Prime Minister: I have answered several questions like that. I must ask the hon. Gentleman to look at the report properly and to wait for the inquiry when it comes.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): We have been asked to keep some sense of perspective, and I think that is right. The question here is whether those who make the law obey the law—that is pretty fundamental. Many, including some of my constituents, have questioned the Prime Minister's honesty, integrity and fitness to hold that office. In judging him, he rightly asked us to wait for all the facts. Sue Gray has made it clear in her update that she could not produce a meaningful report with the facts, so may I ask the Prime Minister the question that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) asked, and to which he did not give an answer? When Sue Gray produces all the facts in her full report after the police investigation, will the Prime Minister commit to publishing it immediately and in full?

The Prime Minister: What we have to do is wait for the police to conclude their inquiries. That is the proper thing to do. People have given all sorts of evidence in the expectation that it would not necessarily be published. At that stage, I will take a decision about what to publish.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I imagine I am going to be asked to wait for something else, but was the Prime Minister present at the event in his flat on 13 November? I assume he does not need other people to tell him whether he was there. Was he at the flat event on 13 November listed in the report?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for inviting me to comment on something that is being investigated. With great respect to her, I simply will not indulge in running commentary. She will have to wait.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Saying sorry is very important, but my right hon. Friend will be judged by the deeds he undertakes as a result. I heard today a proper acknowledgment that he needs to look in the mirror, and I am glad to hear about reforms to the centre of Government that I think are overdue, as he knows from our previous conversations. Will he give me and the House an undertaking today that, in co-operating with the Metropolitan police inquiry, he will show the appropriate tone and approach that I think the British public demand of him as a person of serious purpose who is up to the level of the events? That is what we expect from him now, and that is what I will be expecting him to do.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. I stress that I have great admiration for and full confidence in the Metropolitan police. I suggest that they now be allowed to get on with their job.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We now know that there is a criminal investigation into the party that took place on 13 November 2020 in the Prime Minister's flat to celebrate the exit of Mr Cummings. On 8 December last year, the Prime Minister came to that Dispatch Box and flatly denied the very idea that any such party had taken place—*[Interruption.]* He is shaking his head. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), he said that it had not happened. He has inadvertently misled the House, so the very least he should do is get to that Dispatch Box and correct the record.

The Prime Minister: No. I stand by what I said, and I would simply urge the hon. Member to wait for the outcome of the inquiry. That is what he needs to do.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I advise my right hon. Friend publicly what I have said to emissaries from his campaign team privately? It is truly in his interest, in the Government's interest and in the national interest that he should insist on receiving the full, unredacted report immediately, as I believe he can, and that he should then publish the uncensored version without any further delay.

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, but I think extensive legal advice has been taken on this point and Sue Gray has published everything that she thinks she can that is consistent with that advice.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If the police investigation were to result in serious criminal charges necessitating a criminal trial such as, I don't know, misconduct in public office or conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, how would the Prime Minister feel about having to give evidence on oath?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to speculate about hypothetical questions which, frankly, I reject.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): You will know, Mr Speaker, that it is a very rare event for any Prime Minister to come to this House and apologise—it is a difficult thing for any Prime Minister to do—but on the issue of the police investigation, does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be due process, free and unfettered access to all at No. 10 and, most of all, no prejudging or undermining of the police inquiry before it has concluded?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I completely agree, and I must say that I am shocked by some of the commentary that I have heard from the Benches opposite about that matter today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is, this is who the Prime Minister is:

"a serious failure to observe…high standards…failures of leadership and judgment…excessive consumption of alcohol…in a professional workplace".

"gatherings" that "should not have been" able "to take place"; staff too frightened to raise concerns; parties in his own private flat. A leopard does not change its spots, does it? Every single one who defends this will face this again and again and again, because he still will not even admit to the House that when he came to us and said, of 13 November, that

"the guidance…and the rules were followed at all times"—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 379]—

and, on 1 December, that all the guidelines were observed, those things simply were not true. If he will not correct the record today, there is nothing accidental about this, is there? It is deliberate.

The Prime Minister: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman is trying to say, but I direct him again to the point made by Sue Gray:

"No conclusions should be drawn, or inferences made from this other than it is now"

time

"for the police to consider the relevant material".

That is what the House should allow them, frankly, to do.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is absolutely right that over the past few weeks constituents of Members on both sides of the House have been writing to us about this hugely important issue, and I do not wish in any way to minimise its importance, but there are military bases in my constituency, and I am receiving emails from families who are concerned about their loved ones and the potential role that they may end up playing given the conflict on the Russia-Ukraine border. Opposition Members may treat this lightly, but the families of those serving in the military do not treat it lightly. Will my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that, notwithstanding the importance of the issue we are discussing at present, his Government will start to address other important matters that concern my constituents and those of Members throughout the House?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed. I think he is completely right. Of course these matters are important, and we have to wait for the inquiry, but in the meantime the UK must play the leading role that we are playing, in bringing the west together to form a united front against Vladimir Putin, in particular with the economic sanctions that we need. That is the priority of the Government right now.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): While the Prime Minister was eating birthday cake with his pals, people were standing outside nursing home windows looking in at their loved ones dying. Contrary to what the Prime Minister has said multiple times from that very Dispatch Box, any objective reading of Sue Gray's update makes it absolutely clear that the rules were broken multiple times in Downing Street. Will the Prime Minister continue the habit of a lifetime and keep blaming everybody else, or will he finally stand up, take responsibility, and just go?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman really has to read the report. He has to look at the report, and he must wait—*[Interruption.]* Everything he has said is, I am afraid, not substantiated by the report. He should look at it, and wait for the police inquiry.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Millions of people took seriously a communications campaign apparently designed by behavioural psychologists to bully, to shame and to terrify them into compliance with minute restrictions on their freedom. What is my right hon. Friend's central message to those people who complied meticulously with all the rules and suffered terribly for it, including, I might say, those whose mental health will have suffered appallingly as a result of the messages that his Government were sending out?

The Prime Minister: I want to thank all those people for everything that they did, because together they helped us to control coronavirus. Thanks to their amazing actions in coming forward to be vaccinated, we are now

[The Prime Minister]

in a far better position than many other countries around the world, so I have a massive debt of gratitude to all the people whom my hon. Friend has described.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I am not asking for a running commentary, but I would like to know whether the Prime Minister was present in his flat at the event on 13 November 2020.

The Prime Minister: I am really grateful to the right hon. Lady, and I understand why people want me to elaborate on all sorts of points, but I am not going to give a running commentary on a matter that is now being considered by the authorities. I have to wait for them to conclude.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The update from Sue Gray is, as she says herself, "extremely limited". She says that

"it is not possible at present to provide a meaningful report".

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that at the earliest opportunity he will have the report published in full?

The Prime Minister: What we will do is wait until the police have concluded their inquiries, and then see what more we can publish. That is what we are going to do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As the Prime Minister will recall, during Prime Minister's Question Time on 8 December, I asked

"whether there was a party in Downing Street on 13 November".—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 379.]

Now the report says, as one of the bullet points on the first page, that there was

"a gathering in the No 10 Downing Street flat"

and

"a gathering in No 10 Downing Street on the departure of a special adviser".

Did the Prime Minister inadvertently mislead this House? Will he put us all out of our agony, and stop dragging democracy through the mud?

The Prime Minister: I stick by what I said to the hon. Lady, and if she cares about democracy and due process, she should wait until the inquiry has been concluded.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): As a non-drinker who long ago realised that sobriety delivers everything that alcohol promised, I have noted with interest that a drinking culture exists in Downing Street and that it predates my right hon. Friend's tenure by some decades. Does he, like me, welcome Sue Gray's report, and will he commit to fixing that culture?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend very much, and we are certainly going to take up the relevant parts of the recommendations and see that they are properly enforced within the civil service and the spad—special adviser—code.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The shocking incompetence of the Met police has meant that we have a report that has been gutted, but frankly, we did not need Sue Gray to tell us about the level of dishonour and deception that has infected not only Downing Street but so many Tory Members. It has been excruciating to watch so many Tory MPs and Ministers willing to defend the indefensible and calculating what is in their own party political interests rather than what is right for our country, complicit in the same decaying system where the pursuit of power trumps integrity. The Prime Minister is certainly a bad apple, but the whole tree is rotten and the whole country wants reform. Could we not make a start with a major overhaul of the ministerial code, given that its founding assumption—that it could be policed by the Prime Minister of the day, because they would be a person of honesty and integrity—has been so widely, comprehensively and utterly discredited?

The Prime Minister: We are reforming the ministerial code. Of all the things that the hon. Lady has just said, I disagree with her most passionately about what she said about the police. I think they do an outstanding job, and I think we should allow them to get on with that job. I will await their conclusions.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I draw attention to general finding number (vii) in the report, which documents that No. 10 Downing Street has morphed from a small team supporting the Prime Minister into a self-indulgent bureaucracy all of its own. I am personally tired of reading in Sunday newspapers about officials briefing against Ministers, and about delays as things are stuck in No.10. I have spoken to Ministers who are getting frustrated by this. Call me old-fashioned, but when my right hon. Friend institutes his review, could he ensure that it is Ministers who are accountable for decisions that are taken in their name, not flunkies in No.10? Will he ensure that the reforms properly restore ministerial accountability?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much; I enjoyed our joint trip to Tilbury this morning. Yes, I do think it is vital, as Sue Gray says, that we learn from this and that we strengthen Cabinet Government and the principle of ministerial responsibility.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I have spoken about my own experience of loss during the pandemic many times. I do not claim that my experience is special—indeed, it has been all too common—but as a member of Parliament I have a responsibility to provide a voice for the bereaved families. Make no mistake, this report is utterly damning and suggests that the Prime Minister's and the Government's actions were a risk to public health. How on earth can the Prime Minister stand there and justify this? Does he now accept that his actions were a complete and absolute failure of leadership and judgment?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I have said: that I am deeply sorry for all the suffering there has been throughout this pandemic, whether of the hon. Gentleman's constituents or anyone in the country. As to his points about what is in the report, I do not think his views are substantiated by what the report says. I think he should wait to see where the inquiry goes. That is what I propose to do.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Opposition Members have used up far too much parliamentary time debating this? I can assure him that the residents of Stourbridge want the Prime Minister to focus on the matters that they really care about.

Mr Speaker: Just a moment. In fairness, the Prime Minister asked to make the statement. I am not going to attack the Prime Minister for making the statement, and I certainly would not expect it from his own side.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to say how strongly I agree, none the less, with my hon. Friend, because, yes, of course it is vital that we make this statement, that we learn from Sue Gray's report and that we take action, which is what the Government are doing, but it is also vital, frankly, that we get on with the people's priorities. That is what this Government are also doing.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Just to summarise, we have had, "I didn't know there was a party", "There wasn't a party, it was a work meeting" and, "There was a party but I wasn't there". The Prime Minister mentioned international negotiations. Why should anybody—any country, any Government—with whom we enter into negotiations deal at all with, and take any kind of word from, a Government who clearly act with mendacity aforethought from the start?

The Prime Minister: This is the Government who took this country out of the European Union—did what was necessary—and who are bringing the west together to stand up against Vladimir Putin. Those are the important considerations. As for the rest of what the hon. Gentleman said, it is nonsense but he should wait for the police inquiry.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My constituents in Scunthorpe are very keen to see industrial energy prices fixed, so will the Prime Minister reassure me that he will not be distracted by any of this, and that he will get on with the job and come forward with a solution to that issue?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is completely right; we need to address not only consumer energy costs, but business and industrial energy costs, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be bringing forward a package of measures as soon as he can.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): During his statement, the Prime Minister kept referring to "we" when he talked about the sorry saga that Sue Gray has reported, but it is his rules, his rule-breaking and his inability to tell the truth about it that is the issue. He is the Prime Minister. Does he not take any personal responsibility at all for this disgraceful fiasco?

The Prime Minister: I have taken full responsibility throughout the pandemic.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): As with the report on Owen Paterson, I felt it was important to support the process and read the report, because it is important to separate fact from allegation, and to know what the report actually says, rather than what I would wish it to say. Those are two lessons that the Leader of the Opposition needs to learn. I promised my constituents that I would ask the Prime Minister to say that he would support the recommendations in the report, and there are four. One is that

"every Government Department has a clear and robust policy in place covering the consumption of alcohol in the workplace."

Another is that access to the garden,

"including for meetings, should be by invitation only and in a controlled environment."

A third is:

"There should be easier ways for staff to raise such concerns".

That is basically about whistleblowing. Another is:

"Too much responsibility and expectation is placed on the senior official whose principal function is the direct support of the Prime Minister."

Those are the facts and the findings of the report. Will the Prime Minister accept them in full?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. As I have said to the House earlier, I accept the findings of the report in full—the general findings—and we are immediately taking steps to implement the changes.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has just said that he accepts the findings of the report. One of them says:

"There were failures of leadership and judgment by different parts of No 10 and the Cabinet Office at different times."

He provides the political leadership and the political judgment at No. 10. Does he accept his own personal wrongdoing and failings in this regard?

The Prime Minister: Not only have I accepted full responsibility throughout, but I have apologised repeatedly to the House for any misjudgments that I may have made myself, but, again, I must urge the hon. Lady to wait for the conclusion of the inquiry.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It seems that a lot of people attended events in May 2020. The one I recall attending was my grandmother's funeral. She was a wonderful woman. As well as her love for her family, she served her community as a councillor and she served Dartford Conservative Association loyally for many years. I drove for three hours from Staffordshire to Kent. There were only 10 people at the funeral; many people who loved her had to watch online. I did not hug my siblings. I did not hug my parents. I gave a eulogy and afterwards I did not even go into her house for a cup of tea; I drove back, for three hours, from Kent to Staffordshire. Does the Prime Minister think I am a fool?

The Prime Minister: No. I want to thank my hon. Friend and say how deeply I sympathise with him and his family for their loss. All I can say, again, is that I am very, very sorry for misjudgments that may have been made by me or anybody else in No.10 and the Cabinet Office. I can only ask him respectfully to look at what Sue Gray has said and to wait for the conclusion of the inquiry.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is important that this House can trust what Ministers tell us from that Dispatch Box. On 8 December, regarding events at No.10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister said:

[Clive Efford]

"I repeat that I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no covid rules were broken. That is what I have been repeatedly assured."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

The people who gave him those assurances led to his inadvertently misleading the House. Have those people faced any disciplinary proceedings?

The Prime Minister: First, the hon. Gentleman needs, I am afraid, to await the conclusions of the police inquiry, because the premise of his question may or may not be substantiated. What I can tell the House is that, yes, as I have said before, there will certainly be changes in the way that we do things, and changes in No.10.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): North Norfolk consistently had some of the lowest levels of infection in the country; we followed the rules. Many of my constituents have been incensed by this matter, and the damage it is doing to the Government is enormous. It is about integrity and trust. May I ask again, because people want to know, how can the Prime Minister satisfy my constituents and assure me that full accountability and transparency on the findings of the final Gray report will swiftly follow?

The Prime Minister: I will do whatever I can to ensure that the House has as much clarity as possible. There are legal issues that we face about some of the testimony that has been given, but, in the meantime, what Sue Gray wants us to do is to wait for the conclusion of the investigation and to see where that goes, and to support the police in their work.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the Prime Minister need somebody else to tell him whether he was there, or that he is there now?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I have already given.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): We all recognise that No. 10 Downing Street is an unusual amalgam of workplace, office space and private home. What steps will the Prime Minister take to ensure that the lines between each of them are made clearer in the future?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will see reference to that very problem in Sue Gray's report and we will take steps to clarify things and make sure that there is greater transparency in the lines of command.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister recognise that repeatedly making statements, including from the Dispatch Box, which turn out subsequently to be untrue, is a serious problem, or does he not recognise that?

The Prime Minister: I really think the right hon. Gentleman is prejudging things, and he should wait for the conclusion of the inquiries.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend has come to this House as a first step in responding to the report. He has also rightly outlined that the relationship between No. 10 and this House needs to improve. Will he reassure me that he will continue to come to the House to update us on the implementation of the recommendations in Sue Gray's report and say how that will happen?

The Prime Minister: I am only too happy to assure the House that we intend to make changes starting from now and that I will keep the House updated.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): When there is a failure of leadership and an inappropriate culture in an organisation, the person at the top should go. This outrageous debacle has not happened in spite of the Prime Minister; it has happened because of him. Will he now do the right thing and resign?

The Prime Minister: The answer is no, because I am going to wait for the conclusions of the inquiry before any of the assertions that the hon. Lady has made can be established.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, particularly the acknowledgement of the enormous sacrifice that many British people went through. As somebody who was unable to say goodbye to their grandparents this time last year, I welcome his sincere apology. As we wait for the Metropolitan police's findings, can he give me a categoric assurance that it will be full speed ahead on fixing the Northern Ireland protocol, standing up for our friends in Ukraine and fixing the cost of living crisis?

The Prime Minister: Yes. That is exactly what the Government are going to do and we will not be distracted for one minute.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): In the general findings of Sue Gray's report, there is a reference to the

"failures of leadership and judgment by…No 10".

Does the Prime Minister accept that she was largely referring to him?

The Prime Minister: I really think that the hon. Gentleman should recite the whole report. I have told him that I accept the findings that Sue Gray has given in full and we are acting on them today.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's apology. He has taken responsibility; he has apologised; and it is right that he should do so. Can he confirm that tackling the small boats crisis will remain top in the new Office of the Prime Minister, because that is what the country wants to see—this Prime Minister getting on with the job?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is right. That is why we brought forward the Nationality and Borders Bill, which I am delighted to say that my hon. Friend supports and that the Government are getting through, and which the Labour party voted against.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The flippancy of some of the answers today and the non-answers to other questions do not suggest that the Prime Minister is genuinely sorry. Does he recognise the long-term damage that he risks doing to historical norms of democracy? Is it right that they are sacrificed in the interests of one man who refuses to do what the country knows needs to happen? Can he point to one single example where he personally has improved standards in public life?

The Prime Minister: How about deciding to honour the wishes of the people and deliver Brexit in spite of the Opposition's attempts to subvert democracy?

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): Delivery is key. The Prime Minister delivers. He delivered on Brexit. He delivered with furlough and with the self-employment income support scheme, which ensured that businesses were able to survive. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition shout it down because they do not like it; that is fine. He delivered one of the best vaccination programmes in the world. He delivered a country that is coming out of a pandemic and an economy that is thriving, with people who sadly lost their jobs in the last two years having more vacancies than ever to choose from. Nobody talks about those things, however, because all—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Prime Minister has a grip of what the hon. Gentleman is saying.

The Prime Minister: We will deliver on the people's priorities. We will deliver and keep delivering for Wales.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): One of the hardest things I have had to do as an MP is speak to the family of Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab, who was 13 years old when he died on 30 March 2020. He was one of the youngest people to lose his life to covid. I will admit that when I spoke to his mother, I broke down on the call.

Ismail's family, like so many other constituents in Vauxhall, followed the rules. Many of them were scared to go out; many of them had to bury their loved ones without being there; many of them walk past the covid memorial wall in my constituency with that heart showing their loss. Does the Prime Minister now understand, and does he not feel ashamed, that his actions have brought disrepute to the office that he holds?

The Prime Minister: Of course I share the hon. Lady's grief for Ismail.

I sympathise with his family. I understand the pain and loss that everyone has experienced throughout this country. All I can say is that I will continue to do my best to fight covid, as I have done throughout this pandemic, and to deliver for the British people. I cannot say more than that.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Having the required management expertise to run dozens of offices with hundreds of people within, is one thing. Running the country and getting the big decisions right is quite another. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to have a look at what is happening at No. 10 and those management structures, so we can deliver on the Brexit promises we made to the people of this country.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. That is why we are taking up the findings of the Sue Gray report. We want to make sure that No. 10 works better and that the whole of the Government work better. It has been focused very much on covid, but we now need to deliver exclusively on the great priorities of the people.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Last summer, my team and I said goodbye to our colleague through the window of her hospice as she died of cancer. We did not get to hug her, and we were just like many millions of people across the UK. We followed the rules, while the Prime Minister and his colleagues did not.

It makes me sick to my stomach that we will not get the findings of the report because the police were so late to the party—the same Met police who were happy to arrest women who were protesting the murder of Sarah Everard. It makes me sick to my stomach that he does not understand the anger, fury and upset of millions of people across the UK. Sometimes, an apology will not cut it. It is time for action. It is time for a clear out. It is time for him to resign.

The Prime Minister: Again, I sympathise very much with the experience of the hon. Lady's constituents and all the pain that people have gone through throughout this pandemic. I must say to her, though, that she is prejudging the issue in question. I do not think that is the right thing to do. I have a great deal of respect for the police and they should be allowed to get on with their job.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I think we have to remember that we are all talking about the breaking of the rules. Clearly, the rules and what happened are under question here. The rules that were put out by this Government have got this country to where it is. We have to remember that the rules did the right thing. Yes, there must be consequences in No. 10 for any rules that have been broken, but the right thing was done by instigating the rules in the first place. When I talk to my constituents, they say, yes, we need to ask the question about what happened, but can we stop making that the only sore subject, and can the Opposition talk about something else? We need to move on and level up this country.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. The rules are important. It was amazing to see the way people pulled together throughout the pandemic. I thank people very much. But what we need to do, if we possibly can—I think the Opposition would agree—is to focus on the issues that matter above all to the British people: fixing the cost of living, rebuilding our economy and clearing the covid backlogs. That is what this Government are doing.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have known the Prime Minister a long time, and we have always got on quite well. He is not a wicked man, but he is a man who, for years and in every job, has got by flying on the seat of his pants. He has a chaotic management style, and that is a question of character. I ask him really to look in the mirror, as he said this morning, and say, "Am I the man for this challenging time for our country abroad, at home and in every sense?" Has he the character to carry on and do that job properly?

The Prime Minister: Yes, because quite frankly I think it was absolutely indispensable that we had a strong No. 10 that was able to take us out of the EU, in spite of all the efforts of the Labour party to block it, and not only that but a booster campaign and a vaccine campaign that were led by No. 10 and have made a dramatic difference not just to the health of this country, but to the economic fortunes of this country. Whatever the hon. Gentleman says about me and my leadership, that is what we have delivered in the last year alone.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): When I was knocking on doors in Blackpool at the weekend, I spoke to Julie, who said: "This Prime Minister has had the most difficult job in living history. He's been dealing with a pandemic in which he nearly died. He's been dealing with a media who haven't forgiven him yet for delivering Brexit. And he hasn't had a chance to crack on and deliver yet for the British people on their priorities." The report has come out today and the Prime Minister has apologised. Let us allow him to get on and— *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: I want to say how passionately, vehemently and emphatically I agree with my hon. Friend's remarks, which I could not quite hear. He is completely right. That is the priority of the British people and that is the priority of the Government.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As limited as the Gray report is, the findings are still incredibly damning. There are multiples issues related to failures of leadership and judgment. Given that the Nolan principles and standards of public life describe the centrality of integrity, honesty and leadership, how can the Prime Minister continue?

The Prime Minister: I really think that the hon. Lady needs to read the report carefully. I am afraid that the conclusions she has drawn are not ones that I support. We are following Sue Gray's advice and changing the way that No. 10 runs. We are going to do things differently, but I cannot agree with what the hon. Lady says.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): On Saturday, I was out and about in Lancashire enjoying ice cream—as I know you and your family do, Mr Speaker—in some of the finest ice cream parlours in the north of England. People said to me, "He's a wally, but 100,000 Russians have just turned up. What the bloody hell are we doing talking about cake?" Does the Prime Minister agree with that statement?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. What the country needs and what the west needs— *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members do not want to carry on the questioning, I am happy to pull stumps now. If we are going to have questions, I am going to hear the answers as well as the questions. *[Interruption.]* There is no use in the Member keeping standing up; you are going to have to sit down for a bit.

The Prime Minister: What the country needs now is the UK Government working with our friends and partners to stand up to Vladimir Putin and to make sure that we have a strong package of sanctions. That is what we are doing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Prime Minister sets the culture at No. 10. Why does he think staff members there felt unable to raise their concerns about the bad behaviours reported today?

The Prime Minister: That is one of the recommendations of the Sue Gray inquiry that we are going to take up to make sure that nobody should feel that in No. 10. That is why we are going to review the code to ensure that nobody feels that they have any inhibition on coming forward with any complaint that they may have.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Prime Minister and his allies are trying to distract and deflect from the truth, but here are the indisputable facts: the Prime Minister attended Downing Street parties; he told this House and the people we represent that he attended no parties and, in fact, that there were no parties. The rules were clearly broken and the ministerial code has been violated, so when will he stop insulting the intelligence of the British people, do the right thing and resign?

The Prime Minister: I really think the hon. Lady has got to let the Metropolitan police get on and do their job.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister not recognise that the public are rapidly losing faith in the institutions that they must be able to trust if our democracy is to survive? It appears that there is no individual, no organisation, no group and no force whose reputation will not be sacrificed on the altar of saving this Prime Minister. Does he consider the erosion of public trust and the foundations of our democracy a price worth paying to ensure his personal survival?

The Prime Minister: I believe that among the foundations of our democracy are due process and the rule of law, and allowing the police to get on with their job, and that is what we are going to do.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Paragraph iv of Sue Gray's general findings states that there is a culture of "excessive consumption of alcohol" and that it is "not appropriate". Is there also a culture of excessive drug taking in Downing Street?

The Prime Minister: Any drug taking would be excessive. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should direct that question to the Labour Front Bench.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): We have heard a lot about prejudging things today, but we only have to look at paragraph iii of the general findings for mention of

> "failures of leadership and judgment by different parts of No 10 and the Cabinet Office… Some of the events should not have been allowed to take place. Other events should not have been allowed to develop as they did."

I do not think that that is prejudging anything; it is very clear. There is only one person in charge at No. 10 in totality, and that is the Prime Minister. Let me remind the Prime Minister why this rule breaking and the way No. 10 behaved matters. Let me quote a constituent. This is from one of a number of emails I have had from constituents who have lost loved ones. She said:

> "We received a call at 11.15pm on 29th May saying mum was deteriorating. Both my sister & I drove to the home and I spent the night sat on a chair outside her bedroom window watching her die! All I could do was sob & shout to her and tell her that I loved her. I couldn't even hold her hand".

That is why you should go, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I totally understand the feelings of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, and I accept that things could have been done better in No. 10, as I have told the House before, but I must ask him to study what Sue Gray has said. We are acting on all her recommendations.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister explain how changing the civil service hierarchy would have prevented him from breaching the covid regulations, as he has admitted in this House? When will he take responsibility for his own actions and stop hiding behind other people? My constituents do not want another Government Department; they want him to resign.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is wrong in what she says and I direct her to what I said earlier.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It has been revealed that in April 2021, as the Prime Minister partied, he swiftly rejected the idea of bereavement bubbles for those who had lost loved ones or suffered miscarriages, stillbirths or a child neonatal death. Far from getting it, he has deflected, laughed and smirked his way through this statement. He is a disingenuous man, isn't he?

The Prime Minister: No. This has been a harrowing and tragic experience for the entire country. We have done our best to deal with it. As for what the hon. Lady says about what has been going on in No. 10, I ask her to look at the report but also to wait for the police inquiry.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): This afternoon we have heard distraction, deflection and confusion, and we cannot even get an answer to the simplest of questions about whether the full report will be published when available. May I therefore ask the Prime Minister whether we are now looking at a situation of hobble, hobble, quack, quack?

The Prime Minister: Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to publish everything that we currently have, but the fact is that there are legal impediments and we have to wait until the police inquiry has concluded.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I accept entirely what the Prime Minister has just said. It is absolutely essential that we wait until we hear the next stage in these proceedings in relation to any future investigations. I would also like to draw attention to the historic achievements of this Prime Minister in relation not only to delivering Brexit but to the vaccine roll-out and to his dealings with Mr Putin. I believe that everybody should take that most firmly into account.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and I think he is completely right. He might have added that we have the fastest economic growth in the G7, thanks to the steps that this Government have been taking.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We have established that there were parties, so we are just arguing about who is responsible. As the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said, that is a Minister. If it is not the Prime Minister, is it the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who should be facing the sack?

The Prime Minister: I remind the hon. Lady of what Sue Gray says in paragraph 12, that no such conclusion can be drawn so far. The hon. Lady must wait for the conclusion of the inquiry.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Prime Minister announced at the weekend that he will be calling President Putin to urge de-escalation of the situation in Ukraine. The *Daily Mirror* has just reported that the call has been cancelled because the Prime Minister has been dealing with the Sue Gray report. Can he confirm that, on a matter of such grave importance, the report is correct and that he will be speaking to Vladimir Putin as soon as he leaves the Chamber?

The Prime Minister: I will be speaking to President Putin as soon as I can.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have read the report in full, and I think this is the most striking sentence:

"There were failures of leadership and judgment by different parts of No 10 and the Cabinet Office at different times."

My constituents have been writing to me while the Prime Minister has been speaking to say that he should resign, but they also want to know the full facts. Once the Met has concluded, why could he not then publish the full, unredacted report?

The Prime Minister: We will have to see where the police get to, we will have to see the conclusion of their inquiry, and we will have to see what the legal position is then.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): My constituents are deeply troubled and angered by the frequent scandals that are engulfing the Prime Minister's Administration. It is not just partygate and the ongoing cover-up but all the other things: the proroguing of Parliament, the treatment of the Queen, the £3.5 billion of crony covid contracts, the writing off of £4.3 billion of covid loan fraud and the Russia report, to name but a few. Sussex University researchers have warned that this Administration is more corrupt

"than any UK government since the Second World War."

The Prime Minister knows this, doesn't he?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman's point is completely ridiculous. He mentions what we did to get Brexit done, which was crucial to restoring public trust in democracy.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Like me, many of my constituents have been appalled by the reports of what has been happening in No. 10 and will welcome that my right hon. Friend has come to the House today to apologise as a first step in responding to this. Will he assure me that he will continue to keep the House updated on the implementation of the measures he is taking in response to the report? Will he also

[Mr Richard Holden]

ensure that the whole No. 10 team fully co-operates with the Met's inquiries so that they conclude as swiftly as possible?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course I will keep the House updated, and of course everybody in No. 10 will co-operate with the Met to the full.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): This is surely a new low: a Prime Minister of our country forced to come here to the mother of Parliaments to plead the fifth in a criminal investigation because, if the truth were told, he knows it would incriminate him. Let me ask a simple question. If he cannot get his facts straight on whether he was at a party in his own flat, how will anyone in this House ever again believe a word he says, and how will our partners around the world ever put their trust in him?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to dignify that question with an answer, except to say that the right hon. Gentleman has to wait. Everything he said is completely prejudicial.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thought the people of Lancashire were supposed to be straight speaking, but I can assure people that my constituents are calling the Prime Minister a lot more than a wally—words I cannot repeat. We have staff who were too frightened to raise concerns about behaviour that they knew was ongoing. Half the staff invited to the bring your own booze party did not turn up, because they knew it was wrong, yet the Prime Minister said he thought it was a work event and within the rules. His lack of leadership and judgment is also shown by the "let the bodies pile high" comment about a second lockdown. The one thing that the leader of the Scottish Tories has said that is true is that this Prime Minister is not fit for office. Given that the Prime Minister will do anything to save his own skin, does that mean that the leader of the Scottish Tories will get binned as well?

The Prime Minister: I direct the hon. Gentleman to what I have said earlier.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): No one has said in the House this afternoon that 155,000 people died of covid. That is why we introduced the rules. This is simply not the comprehensive report that the British public were promised for so long, but at least it is clear in its findings that there was

"a serious failure to observe not just the high standards expected of those working at the heart of Government but also of the standards expected of the entire British population"

at the height of the pandemic. Does the Prime Minister accept responsibility for his failure to live up to the standards that the rest of us were expected to uphold?

The Prime Minister: I take responsibility for everything that happened in No. 10 and that the Government did throughout the pandemic.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Gray report is clear that there should be no excessive consumption of alcohol in a workplace. Can the Prime Minister therefore assure the House that his own consumption of alcohol was not excessive and in particular that his judgment was at no time so clouded that he was in danger of telling the truth?

The Prime Minister: I could not quite hear the end of the hon. Gentleman's question, but the answer is no. If he thinks I drunk too much, no.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister wants my constituents to suspend their disbelief and wait for the Met police to report. In which case, will he at least give them clarity that should the Metropolitan police issue him with a fixed penalty notice for participation at his party, he will resign?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman really needs to wait and see what the Met decide.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have had excessive what-aboutery, bluster and bravado from the Prime Minister. I suggest to him politely that we need a lot more humility from him, given that while the Gray report might be paper thin, it is very clear about the serious failings at No. 10. A fish rots from its head. May I suggest to the Prime Minister that it is not a new Prime Minister's office that we need, but a new Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I hear the hon. Gentleman, and I simply repeat what I have said earlier. I am grateful to Sue Gray. We are taking action following her report, but he needs to wait for the conclusion of the inquiry.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Sue Gray has made it clear that this is not a report, but an update on the investigation into covid breaches in Downing Street. Indeed, in her update she says that she is "extremely limited" in what she can say and that

"it is not possible at present to provide a meaningful report".

If it is a case of, "Nothing to see here, move on", as the Prime Minister is desperately trying to convince us, why has he repeatedly refused to commit to publish the full report, even after the police investigation has concluded? What does it say about those populating the Government Benches if they still genuinely think he is the best among them to be Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: That is not what I have said.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Prime Minister told Parliament and the British people that there were no parties. We now know that he attended several, including one at which he was ambushed with cake, in his most pathetic excuse yet. Given his previous statements, which we know to be patently false, how does he explain why this report says that at least 12 parties in his home warrant police investigation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has proved several times in that question that he has not got the faintest idea what he is talking about, and he should wait for the outcome of the inquiry.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): In the Prime Minister's apologies up to now, he has explained these things away as one-offs—a work do, ambushed by a cake and all those kinds of things. But this report makes it clear that there was a repeated pattern of behaviour, with the booze-ups after work that nobody

else was having—not all our constituents who followed the rules. The report says that there is an investigation of a Downing Street party on 13 November 2020. Why did the Prime Minister tell my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on 8 December that no such gathering took place? Subsequently, he told my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party that anyone who tells mistruths from that Dispatch Box should resign. Is he a man of his word?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady needs to look at what I said and she needs to look at the outcome of the inquiry.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Prime Minister said in his statement that he understands the anger of people in this country, but does he also understand that for many people in this country who are watching, their greatest fears about how this would be handled have been realised? They have seen an apology, yes, but they have also seen obfuscation, delay and tinkering, rather than an acceptance of responsibility. The Prime Minister says that he wants to get on and deal with the important issues facing this country. Perhaps the only way we will be able to do that is for him to accept that he has become an obstacle to it and resign.

The Prime Minister: No, we are going to get on with the job.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Prime Minister was wrong in something he said earlier: the Sue Gray update can be both damning and incomplete. Most of us can only guess how much more damning the full report will be. His colleagues should worry about that. I think he knows how bad it is going to be, because he knows what has gone on. Is that not the real reason why he will not commit to publishing the report in full when the police have completed their investigation?

The Prime Minister: No. The hon. Gentleman is totally prejudging the whole thing. He needs to contain himself and wait for the police to complete their inquiries.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Sue Gray update is not the report that this House deserves and it is not the transparency that the public were expecting, but it does make it very clear that there were "failures of leadership" at No. 10. The Prime Minister is the leader at No. 10, so will he now pack his suitcase, or will he leave it to his officials to carry his cans?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman just needs to look at the report again and to wait for the conclusion of the inquiry.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): "Look her in the eyes and tell her you never bend the rules." A lot of us remember that campaign. It cost of tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. On 13 November 2020, the Prime Minister bent the rules, didn't he?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier in this House. Frankly, he needs to wait until the conclusion of the police inquiry.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): This morning, the Conservative party in Scotland issued a press release that stated:

"The pandemic sees rise in criminals getting away with crimes".

Was it talking about the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: What we are actually doing is cutting crime by 14% and putting 20,000 more police on the streets.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Week in, week out throughout the pandemic, I, like many of my colleagues, had to deal with constituents who could not see their dying relatives or grieve with their families. Some of us were directly affected when we lost family members and loved ones. The Prime Minister's actions have made a mockery of the British people's sacrifices during the pandemic, and now he is the subject of a criminal investigation. It is a new low for our country and it makes a mockery of our democracy to the rest of the world. If the Prime Minister takes responsibility for everything that has happened, as he has said, is it not time that he puts his party, this Parliament and the country out of their misery and steps down, so that we can move on and focus on the national interest? At the moment, that is not possible because of the crisis that he and No. 10 have created.

The Prime Minister: No.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is clear that the Prime Minister has used these parties, like many an under-par manager, to buy popularity and favour. Can the Prime Minister tell us if he is using the same techniques when negotiating treaties and trade deals with international leaders?

The Prime Minister: No.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today should have been about contrition and remorse, but it seems that the Prime Minister does not understand the meaning of "sorry"; instead, it has insulted the people who have suffered and sacrificed for the last two years. One question many people want to know is: who is paying for these investigations—the police and Sue Gray's report—and who is paying for his legal advice? Is it the taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: I must say I think the hon. Member is wrong in what she says. As for who is covering the police costs, the police are covering the police costs.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Prime Minister has inadvertently referred to this as "the" Gray report when, if he had read as far as the front cover, he would see that it is called an "update". It is because it is an update that it makes public trust in the Met's investigation even more important. The public must know that the Met will investigate without fear or favour, so can the Prime Minister confirm that, not at any single stage, has anybody in No. 10 or the Cabinet Office sought to influence the Met's decision on delaying its initial investigation, or was the delay the result of its own incompetence?

The Prime Minister: No, and the only people calling into question the Met's independence are I think those on the side opposite—on the hon. Member's Benches.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has seriously misjudged the mood of the country, and indeed he has misjudged the mood of his own Back Benchers. My constituent wrote to me devastated and upset: he could not see his disabled son, his elderly mother with dementia and his newborn child, putting a serious toll on his mental health. Like millions across the country, he followed the rules, but the Prime Minister thinks he is above the rules. Instead, he blames his civil service and he restructures. Will he do the decent thing and resign?

The Prime Minister: I disagree with the hon. Member profoundly, because I do understand people's feelings and I do understand why this is so important for people. But I must say that I think the best thing now is for the inquiry to be concluded, and in the meantime for us all to get on with the work that I think everybody wants us to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I have enjoyed the exercise this afternoon. I also wanted to enjoy the Prime Minister's answers to questions, but unfortunately he has ducked and dived, and done everything but answer questions about a party on 13 November, about whether he will put out the final report—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Just ask the question!

Marion Fellows: Okay, I will ask the Prime Minister one more, which has been asked already. If he gets a fine—a fixed penalty fine—from the Metropolitan police after all this is over, will he pay it himself or ask a Tory donor to pay it for him?

The Prime Minister: There is a process, and we have to wait for it to conclude.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Among those who were the most isolated during the pandemic were people with learning disabilities, cut off from visits by their families and not even allowed an advocate if they were admitted to hospital. For too many, restrictions to services and the awful isolation without visitors that the Prime Minister's rules expected them to follow were a matter of life and death. The mortality rate for people with learning disabilities from covid was eight times that of the general population. When he thinks about the damage done to all those groups who were so isolated and their families, and the serious failings of leadership and judgment in No. 10 found by this independent investigation, how can he think his position is tenable?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is entirely right about the suffering of people with learning disabilities, and indeed all vulnerable groups who were exposed to lockdowns for long periods. That is why, actually, we worked so hard to make sure that we could get this country out of lockdown and keep it out of lockdown, and that was our objective.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I do not need to wait for the full Sue Gray report, because this one tells me one important fact: there were a heck of a lot of parties. At which point during this catalogue of frivolity, while the Prime Minister was clearing last night's empty wine bottles off his desk before settling down to work the following afternoon, did he conclude that having one rule for him and another for the general public was undermining his own health messaging and costing people's lives?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is misrepresenting what Sue Gray says. He is also, perhaps inadvertently, completely mispresenting what happened.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): This report confirms what we already know: the abject failure in leadership at No. 10. Will the Prime Minister take responsibility and do what the constituents of Liverpool, Riverside are asking for—resign, so that we can get on and deal with the crisis facing this country?

The Prime Minister: No. I refer to what I said earlier.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 8 December, the Prime Minister told this House:

"I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no covid rules were broken."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

Well, just who gave him those assurances? Given that he was at some of the parties, and at least one of them was in his own flat, he should not need anyone else to tell him what happened, so it looks like when the Prime Minister spoke those words he was fooling himself—or was he just trying to fool everyone else?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman needs to wait and see what the inquiry concludes. That is what due process demands. I stick by what I said.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I can see eight people standing, and they are the last eight I will take—just to let the House know.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Section 5.1 of the ministerial code states:

"Ministers must uphold the political impartiality of the Civil Service, and not ask civil servants to act in any way which would conflict with the Civil Service Code",

and finding vi. of Sue Gray's report, which I have read, says:

"Some staff wanted to raise concerns about behaviours they witnessed at work but…felt unable to do so."

Does the Prime Minister agree that if his staff—in fact, civil servants and workers everywhere—feel afraid to raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour at work, they should contact their trade union rep, or join a trade union?

The Prime Minister: That is why I have accepted the conclusions and Sue Gray's findings in full, and we will implement the changes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I assume that everyone standing has been here for the opening statement and throughout.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I have listened carefully to the statement, the questions and the answers, and indeed to my constituents, many of whom are devastated to hear that there may have been parties and some of whom have suffered great hardship. I am glad that the Prime Minister has come here to apologise and to take on board the recommendations, but I am concerned that this is taking time and attention from key issues. This statement alone has been going on for nearly two hours. The Prime Minister has achieved great things with Brexit and vaccines, but can he assure this House, me and my constituents that this ongoing investigation and the reorganisation of No. 10 will not take his laser-like focus away from the issues that matter to us?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that absolute assurance.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Has a date been set for the Prime Minister to be interviewed by the Metropolitan police in connection with their inquiry?

The Prime Minister: The police are independent and they must get on with their inquiry.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): This reads like a dreadful, poorly written soap opera—an unbelievable soap opera. I hear Government Members say how important it is to their constituents to go into the detail, but my constituents are incandescent at the behaviour of this Prime Minister. Will he accept the damage he is doing to the office of elected representative—to all of us—and will he do the right thing and clear out?

The Prime Minister: No, for the reasons I have already given.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): We do know that staff were made to work in conditions that made them feel uneasy, and perhaps even unsafe, and they also felt that they were unable to say something. People were exposed to a potentially deadly virus, unable to say something about it, in their workplace, while parties were raging on around and about them, "At least some" of which, says Mrs Gray,

"represent a serious failure to observe…the high standards expected of those working at the heart of Government".

Who is responsible for that, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is completely misrepresenting what took place.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Despite the omissions from Sue Gray's update, it makes crystal clear that the office that the Prime Minister occupies and the Government that he leads behaved in a despicable and disrespectful way when the public faced the gravest of threats. Does he not accept that his personal conduct before becoming Prime Minister and since has been completely unacceptable and that if he had any respect for his own office and for the public—and, indeed, a scintilla of integrity—he would announce his resignation to the 1922 committee tonight?

The Prime Minister: No.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): When will the various statements made by the Prime Minister from the Dispatch Box about parties and gatherings at Downing Street be investigated under the ministerial code? Is it not absolutely farcical that that is a question for the Prime Minister at all?

The Prime Minister: We have an investigation going on. That is the one that I think people should focus on, and they should allow the police to get on with their job.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The Prime Minister said in his statement, "sorry for the things we…did not get right" and, "sorry for the way this…has been handled", which is a generic non-apology that will mean absolutely nothing to anyone who heard it. What I and millions of others want to hear is: apart from getting caught out in all of this, what is the Prime Minister personally sorry and genuinely regretful for in his own conduct? If he just resorts to that tired, hackneyed form of words that he used to begin with, does that not show that it is not a new Office of the Prime Minister that we need but a new Prime Minister in office?

The Prime Minister: I have repeated several times how sorry I am for any misjudgements that I made, and I continue to apologise for them. All I can say is that we need to get on and await the outcome of the inquiry and allow the Government to deliver on the priorities of the country, which are: to unite and level up; to continue to cut crime; and to make colossal investments across our whole country. That is what we are going to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for answering questions for just short of two hours.

Russia: Sanctions

5.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on what we are doing to tackle Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Moscow's malign intent is clear: it has massed over 100,000 troops on Ukraine's frontier and Russian forces are continuing to arrive in Belarus. It is only eight years since Russia illegally annexed Crimea and stoked conflict in the Donbass region, so we know that the danger is real. It has been pursuing a campaign of hybrid warfare aimed at destabilising the country. Just last week, we exposed the Kremlin's plans to install a puppet regime in Kyiv.

This threatening behaviour towards a sovereign, democratic, independent country is completely unacceptable. It is a clear violation of the commitments and obligations that Russia freely signed up to, from the Helsinki Final Act and the Minsk protocols to the Budapest memorandum, which guaranteed to

"respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine."

The only way forward is for Russia to de-escalate, pull back its troops and engage in meaningful talks on the basis of those existing obligations. That is why the UK is determined to lead the way through deterrence and diplomacy.

The Prime Minister will travel to the region this week, and later today the UK will be joining discussions at the UN Security Council to apply further pressure on Russia to take the diplomatic route. I will be flying out to Moscow over the next fortnight. That builds on our campaign of diplomatic engagement over recent weeks and months. I have led calls from the G7, NATO and the OSCE to urge Russia to desist from its reckless and destabilising activities in Ukraine, as well as in Georgia, the Baltics and the Western Balkans. I have raised these issues directly with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov. Both the United States and NATO have set out areas where we could explore reciprocal measures to increase transparency, reduce risk, and take forward arms control. The ball is firmly in Russia's court.

While we are determined to accelerate those efforts, we do so from a position of strength. We are combining dialogue with deterrence. That is why the Prime Minister is considering options for further deployments of our armed forces, to reassure and protect allies on NATO's eastern flank. We are preparing to offer to support NATO with additional fast jets, warships and military specialists. As NATO's biggest spender in Europe on defence, we are prepared to deploy our forces accordingly.

We have been very clear that a united alliance would meet any further Russian invasion of Ukraine with massive consequences for Russia's interests and economy. We are preparing an unprecedented package of co-ordinated sanctions with our partners, which would impose severe costs. Today, I am setting out our readiness to act. We will be laying legislation before the House that will significantly strengthen our hand in dealing with Russia's aggressive action towards Ukraine. It will go further than ever before.

Until now, the UK has only been able to sanction those linked to the destabilisation of Ukraine. This new legislation will give us the power to sanction a much broader range of individuals and businesses. We will be able to target any company that is linked to the Russian state, engages in business of economic significance to the Russian state, or operates in a sector of strategic significance to the Russian state. Not only will we be able to target these entities, we will also be able to go after those who own or control them. This will be the toughest sanctions regime against Russia we have ever had, and it is the most radical departure in approach since leaving the European Union. Those in and around the Kremlin will have nowhere to hide.

We will make sure that those who share responsibility for the Kremlin's aggressive and destabilising action will share in bearing a heavy cost. Their assets in the UK will be frozen. No UK business or individual would be able to transact with them, and should they seek to enter the UK, they would be turned back. Laying this legislation now will enable us to act in concert with the United States and other partners rapidly, multiplying our collective impact. We will use these new powers in a targeted manner, designed to damage the interests of those who bear greatest responsibility for Russia's actions and exert the greatest pressure to change course. I will not say now exactly who we may target, or with what measure, but Moscow should be clear that we will use these new powers to maximum effect if it pursues its aggressive intent towards Ukraine. Nothing is off the table.

We are also standing with our Ukrainian friends by providing vital support to help them defend themselves. That is why we are supplying the country with defensive, anti-tank missiles, and deploying a training team of British personnel. We have already trained over 21,000 members of the Ukrainian army through Operation Orbital. In addition, we are stepping up our investment in Ukraine's future, ramping up support for trade up to £3.5 billion, including £1.7 billion to boost Ukraine's naval capability. We will continue to stand united with Ukraine.

It might seem hard to believe that in the 21st century the citizens of a proud, sovereign, European democracy are living under the threat of invasion. We know from the lessons of history that this course of action would benefit no one. I do not believe that ordinary Russian citizens want to enter into an intractable quagmire of needless death and destruction that could rival the Soviet-Afghan war or the conflict in Chechnya. Indeed, we have no quarrel whatsoever with the Russian people, only with the policies pursued by its leader. It is time for the Kremlin to step back from the brink, to de-escalate and to enter into meaningful dialogue. If it does not, it should be in no doubt: we will be ready to use the powers that I have set out today to maximum effect. We will join our allies and partners to ensure that such reckless action will bring strategic consequences at a massive cost. We will defend freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

I commend this statement to the House.

5.30 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for advance sight of her statement, and for our discussions on this issue. I am very grateful.

As we in the Opposition have made clear since this crisis began, we stand in resolute support of Ukraine's sovereignty and in opposition to Russian aggression. We support the essential international diplomatic efforts

to achieve de-escalation and the defensive support provided to Ukraine. I said it in Kyiv two weeks ago, and I say it again now: we on these Benches believe that it is important to send a united message from the whole House. That is why we welcome moves by the Government to lay the groundwork for a robust and extensive package of sanctions against Russia in the event of any incursion or attack on Ukraine.

We believe that these measures must be broad, severe and comprehensive. They must apply widely to crucial sectors of the Russian economy, without gaps or loopholes. They must target corrupt elites who store their money in our country. They must target not just relevant Russian entities, but those who enable, support, service or facilitate their activities. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that UK subsidiaries of any new sanctioned targets would not be carved out of scope? We know that some oligarchs have used their wealth to seek influence and protect themselves from criticism, so may I ask for her assurance that these measures will be applied without fear or favour? Given that the measures were pre-briefed and include broad categories of potential targets, may I ask what assessment she has made of the risks of asset flight, and what steps she has taken to protect against it?

These sanctions are conditional on Russia's actions. Their purpose is to form a serious deterrent, which when matched by unified action and the work of the G7, NATO and the OSCE, will make President Putin think again. However, there is much more that we must do irrespective of the decisions made by President Putin—things that it should not have taken an army threatening Ukraine to put in place; things that the Opposition have repeatedly urged the Government to address. For years, the Labour party and colleagues across the House have raised the alarm about the role of dirty money in keeping Putin in power.

For too long, our defences have been let down at home while the Government looked abroad. Despite warning after warning and report after report, the Government have been asleep at the wheel. London is the destination of choice for the world's kleptocrats. We are home to the services and enablers who help corrupt elites to hide their ill-gotten wealth. We have a system of corporate transparency that permits the products of larceny on a grand scale to be hidden under our noses—and the result is the embarrassing spectacle of President Biden being warned that the widespread presence of suspect Russian money in the UK could jeopardise Britain's response to this crisis. This is not a matter simply of individuals, welcome though that action is; it is about fixing a broken system—our openness to fraud and money laundering, our inadequate regulation of political donations, our lax mechanisms of corporate governance, and our weakness to foreign interference.

I therefore ask the right hon. Lady the following questions. Where is the economic crime Bill that the Government have just pulled? Where is the comprehensive reform of Companies House? Where is the register of overseas entities Bill? Where is the foreign agent registration law? Where are the new counter-espionage laws? Where are the new rules on political donations? Where is the reform of tier 1 golden visas? Where is the replacement of the outdated Computer Misuse Act 1990? Where is the reform of the Electoral Commission, and why does the Government's Elections Bill make these problems worse by enabling political donations from donors based overseas?

The right hon. Lady's movement on sanctions is welcome, but there is much, much more to do. These steps at home are not distinct from sanctions or diplomacy abroad. They must form part of a unified and coherent response—one that has been urged consistently by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. If she truly wants to fix the problem, she must start there.

Elizabeth Truss: First, may I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his constructive approach? It is vital that all Members of the House demonstrate their support for freedom and democracy in the face of severe aggression by the Russian regime, not just on the borders of Ukraine, but through Belarus, into the western Balkans, and across the world. I will take forward the united message that I have heard from the whole House to our friends in Ukraine, who very much welcome the support that they have been offered by the United Kingdom—the economic support, the support in terms of defensive weaponry, and the support in the face of Russian aggression.

The package that we are putting forward in legislation will be in place by 10 February, which means that we are able to enact wide-ranging sanctions in broad categories that really target anybody who is providing strategic or economic support to the Russian regime. There will be nowhere to hide, and I am very clear that we will apply those sanctions without fear or favour.

We have already taken steps to tighten up our regime on corruption and illicit finance through the Criminal Finances Act 2017, the global anti-corruption sanctions regimes that we have put in place and our review of all tier 1 visas granted before 5 April.[1] We will also be introducing the economic crime Bill. The Prime Minister committed to that at the summit for democracy with President Biden at the end of last year. Let me assure the House that our priority is the defence of freedom and democracy. That comes before any short-term economic interest not only for our country, but for the whole of Europe. We must wean ourselves and others off dependence on Russian gas. We must target the criminal and corrupt money, and that is what we are determined to do with this extension of our sanctions regime, the most radical that we have put together yet.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a pleasure to hear from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary about the tightening of the sanctions regime. She knows that the Foreign Affairs Committee has called for that for four years. It is extremely welcome that she is looking hard at dirty money, and here I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). The need to clean up the dirty money in our economy is not just about doing the right thing and standing up alongside the people of Ukraine, but about standing up for the British people, defending ourselves against the corruption that flows through our system, and making sure that our houses, our homes, are not being exploited to pay murderers on behalf of a dictator. This is not a foreign problem; this is a problem for the United Kingdom to deal with at home. The strongest thing that we can do to defend Ukraine is to defend ourselves against filth and corruption in our City.

1. *[Official Report, 20 April 2022, Vol. 712, c. 3MC.]*

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right in what he says about the work that the Foreign Affairs Committee has done to champion this issue. This is why we are introducing a much tougher sanctions regime on Russia. As I have said, we will be bringing forward the economic crime Bill to add to the work that we already doing to tackle illicit finance.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I, too, am grateful for sight of the statement, which we support. I have already said in the House that the SNP will be part of the coalition to defend Ukraine and our democracy. It is not a blank cheque, because we will want to see some details, but hon. Members can rest assured that we will stand behind the measures.

I would be grateful for reassurance that Scottish limited partnerships will be included in the package, because they are a clear risk in terms of dubious transactions, and that property transactions will be part of it as well. I also ask for reassurance that there will be co-ordination with the EU precisely to avoid asset flight, given that the measures have been telegraphed.

I have another question, to which I do want an answer. I have pledged the SNP's support for the measures, but I want a statement from the Foreign Secretary in response to Pippa Crerar, the political editor of the *Daily Mirror*, who is an impeccable journalist with impeccable sources. She reports that there was supposed to be a call between the Prime Minister and President Putin today but that:

> "When the Gray report landed the Russians were asked to shift the time—but they couldn't. So it's off…".

What in the name of hell impression does that give to our friends and our allies if it is true—perhaps it is not? I would be grateful for an assurance that it is not true, or if it is true, I would be grateful for an assurance that that conversation will take place.

Elizabeth Truss: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that absolutely nothing is off the table in terms of who and which organisations we will target with these sanctions. We are very committed to working with our partners, including the EU. We had a big discussion at the G7 in Liverpool about the sanctions regime. I have had discussions since then with Josep Borrell and my EU counterparts to ensure that we are fully co-ordinated, as well as with the US. The Prime Minister will shortly be speaking to President Putin. As I have said, I will be travelling to Moscow in the next fortnight to speak to my counterpart Sergey Lavrov.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Cutting out a cancer is both painful and dangerous. Is the Foreign Secretary aware that the previous Intelligence and Security Committee, in its Russia report, drew on the expertise of Edward Lucas, who today has a comment column in *The Times* headed, "Britain has become addicted to dirty money"? May I suggest that if she wants to be sure that the cancer will indeed be cut out of the body politic and the country's wider economy, she could do far worse than to consult Mr Lucas before she finalises her proposed sanctions and their structures?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestion. I would be happy to meet the gentleman he mentions.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Six months ago, the Government said that they were finalising their report into how more than 700 Russian millionaires were fast-tracked for British residency via their so-called golden visa scheme. Can the Foreign Secretary tell the House when that long-overdue report will be published? Does she agree that the reason for the delay relates directly to the £4 million that has been donated to the Conservative party by seven individuals who have deep and highly dubious links to the Kremlin?

Elizabeth Truss: We are reviewing the tier 1 visas that were granted before 5 April.[1] I am sure the Home Secretary will have more to say about that in due course.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the statement and the wider steps that the UK is taking to support Ukraine. My concern is that western tactical responses are playing into Putin's strategy. Seeking meetings with him, for example, plays to his self-importance; any sanctions actioned will drive Russia ever closer to China, which is exactly what he wants; and sending NATO reinforcements around Ukraine, but not in it, is not the way to deter an attack.

I worry that we are missing the bigger picture. Putin is using the Ukraine crisis to realign Russia militarily, economically and geopolitically with China, which has massive security implications for the west. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the only way to halt an invasion and check that dangerous trajectory is to support Ukraine militarily? This is our Cuban missile crisis. I encourage Britain to lead the call to deploy an offensive alliance and stand up to Putin's aggression.

Elizabeth Truss: Our approach in dealing with the issue of Russian aggression is both deterrence and diplomacy. That is why the UK has been at the forefront in supplying defensive weapons to Ukraine, training up Ukrainian forces and working with our allies, many of whom are also supplying defensive support into Ukraine. But we have to be clear that there is a difference between a country that is a member of NATO, which has a security guarantee—Baltic states such as Estonia, where UK troops are in place—and the situation in Ukraine.

In my view, the best way of deterring Vladimir Putin from an invasion of Ukraine is by making it very clear, first, that that will not be simple or easy and is likely to result in a quagmire, as we saw in the Soviet-Afghan war or in Chechnya; and, secondly, that there will be severe economic consequences—and those are, of course, sanctions that target oligarchs and companies close to Vladimir Putin. Also, not going ahead with Nord Stream 2 is very important from the Russian point of view.

It is important that we talk to Russia and communicate these messages. We will not resile from our position on the protection of the open-door policy into NATO, but we will communicate directly with Russia so that it understands those messages.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary comes to the House, talks tough and says that the Government have a readiness to act. It is four years since the Foreign Affairs Committee produced its "Moscow's Gold" report, which outlined Russian corruption in the UK. It is two years since the Intelligence and Security Committee published its report on Russia,

1. *[Official Report, 20 April 2022, Vol. 712, c. 4MC.]*

which outlined similar concerns. Why have the Government not acted in those years? If we are going to implement sanctions, how can we believe that they will be effective without strong political will and the determination to make them work?

Elizabeth Truss: We have taken a number of measures in recent years: namely, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and the review we are conducting of visas. I am saying that the most far-reaching sanctions regime will be in place by 10 February, making sure that Russia understands that there is a severe package ready to be in place. Of course, I am absolutely prepared to do what is necessary to make those costs severe.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right that our argument is with President Putin and his cronies, not with the Russian people, but she will be aware that Russian citizens, and, indeed, many in eastern Ukraine, are able only to access Russian propaganda from state-owned or oligarch-owned media channels, while independent journalists are put into prison and the internet is censored. Will she look at what more can be done, perhaps through the BBC World Service and the tech platforms, to ensure that the Russian people can access objective and factual reporting?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are looking at all the channels that we can communicate through directly to the Russian people as well as to the Russian Government. That is something that I will look to do on my visit to Russia.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): This is just weak, weak, weak. Honestly, since 2010, when the Conservatives came to power and they first started saying that they wanted to press the reset button with Putin, we have been weak, ambivalent and vacillating towards the Russian Federation. We have no quarrel with the Russian people; it is with President Putin. It does not work to try to look tough when the Government have refused to deal with the issue of tier 1 visas. It is shocking that the Foreign Secretary does not even have a proper answer to that question this afternoon. This has been going on for ages; we have been giving them out to thousands of Russian oligarchs. She still does not have an answer—maybe she will have now—to the question about unexplained wealth orders. If we cannot make them, how will this new legislation make any difference? This is far, far too late. It is not a question of whether the horse has bolted; they have invited the horse in, sat it down at the table and given it plenty to eat.

Elizabeth Truss: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman goes to Ukraine—

Chris Bryant: I have been!

Elizabeth Truss: I suggest he goes to Ukraine and asks the Ukrainian Government which of their allies they think is giving them the most support. The answer is that the United Kingdom has supplied more defensive weapons to Ukraine than any of our NATO— *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please, the question has been asked; let us hear the answer.

Elizabeth Truss: The answer is that the Ukrainian Government are very grateful for the support that the United Kingdom is giving. Of all the European NATO allies, we are the largest supplier of defensive weapons to Ukraine. We have helped to train up the Ukrainian forces, we are providing economic support, and the sanctions package that I am announcing today goes far further than the EU sanctions regime which, presumably, the hon. Gentleman supports.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I very much welcome what my right hon. Friend has said today. It is quite understandable and right that our focus is currently on Ukraine, but is not this just part of a bigger picture? What we have is a Russia that is trying to build an arc of instability around NATO, from the Arctic through the Baltic to the Balkans and the Caucasus. Does this not require a sustained, consistent and strong policy of deterrence, using diplomatic, economic and military elements? Would it not be a good start if all members of NATO carried their fair share of the defence spending burden?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the UK is supplying support from the high north through to the Baltics and through to the Black sea, backing up NATO as the largest defence spender of all the European NATO allies. That is being recognised. Contrary to what those on the Opposition Benches say, that is being recognised by our allies in the Baltic, by our allies in eastern Europe, and by our allies in Ukraine.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We cannot sanction what we cannot see, and while I welcome this statement, I would like some clarity on whether this new legislation will finally include a register of beneficial owners for overseas entities. The Foreign Secretary will know that many of these oligarchs hide their money, particularly in UK property. The press release from the FCDO says that it is going to leave Russia "nowhere to hide", so is that loophole finally going to be closed?

Elizabeth Truss: The legislation we are putting forward is about being able to target entities and individuals that are of strategic or economic interest in the Russian state. We are broadening it out much more widely than before, when we would have been able to apply sanctions only to those who were actively destabilising Ukraine. We can target asset freezing, and we can target the ability to enter the UK of those individuals and entities. The register of interests that the hon. Lady is talking about is part of the economic crime Bill that is being brought forward by the Treasury, and the Prime Minister has committed to that happening this year.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement today, and the announcement of new powers. They are long overdue, but I am glad that it is this Government who are delivering them, and doing so by 10 February. That will also be welcomed by the Rada in Kyiv and by the Government of Ukraine. Is it not the case that Ukraine is not NATO's border and not the EU's border, but that it is democracy's border, which is why Ukraine matters? I thank her for her good offices in working hard to galvanise opinion in Washington and across EU capitals to ensure that we have that strong defence, strong deterrence and strong diplomacy.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine. Ukraine is vital. It is a freedom-loving democracy in Europe. If we do not work hard—we are—to defend Ukraine from Russian aggression, that will simply encourage aggressors around the world. This is not just a regional security issue, important though it is; it is a global security issue.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), I support much of what is in the statement. The statement says that the Secretary of State will not name who or what may be targeted with sanctions, but can she clarify that whatever the new legislation looks like, it will enable the Government to take action against Kremlin mouthpieces and outlets in this country, for example RT UK?

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, I am not going to talk about the individuals or entities that could be targeted, but it will be anyone who is of strategic or economic interest to the Russian state. The hon. Gentleman can imagine that that is quite a broad list of people and entities.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know well that Kyiv was the original capital of Rus, and was an area of fabulous wealth and education until invaded by the Khans. The Russians and the Rus called them the Tatars. Many reports have come out that tens of thousands of Tatars have disappeared from Crimea. That human rights atrocity cannot be properly investigated. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must try to find out exactly what has been happening to the Tatar population?

Equally, for those who do not feel it is important or that we should somehow let Russia have the Russian empire, as President Putin outlined in his essay last year, that goes against every principle of freedom and democracy of standing up to fascist Governments who want to ethnically cleanse people over centuries of hatred.

Elizabeth Truss: My right. Friend is completely right. Let us remember that Russia signed up to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest agreement. It signed up to that, and what it is seeking to do is renege on its commitments, stoke aggression and seek to undermine Ukrainian democracy in a variety of ways, whether by false flag operations or cyber-attacks or by trying to install puppet regimes in Kyiv.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A few minutes ago, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and said, in response to questions on partygate, that his is the Government who are bringing countries together "to stand up against Putin", but just last week, our closest allies went public with their concerns over Russian influence in this country. Will the Secretary of State admit that her Government have undermined our diplomatic status and our national security by refusing for so long to take seriously Russian influence and dirty money?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not accept the hon. Lady's talking down of the UK's role. It was at the G7 meeting in Liverpool that we agreed with our allies, including the United States, the EU and Japan, that the Russian regime would face severe consequences of an incursion into Ukraine. That language has now been adopted by all our allies and partners. We have led the way in providing defensive weaponry to Ukraine. We have led the way today with our package of economic sanctions, which go beyond what we were able to do as a member of the EU.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The time for deterrence diplomacy is now. Over the last two weeks, from Kramatorsk to Donetsk, from Kyiv to Sarajevo and Mostar, civilians have been clear with me that they believe the west will either save them or there will be bloodshed in Europe. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to blacklisting Russian banks? Will she look at joining the US in sanctioning Milorad Dodik in Bosnia, whose ethno-nationalist, separatist, genocide-denying agitation also risks bringing bloodshed to Europe?

Elizabeth Truss: I know that my hon. Friend has recently visited the western Balkans. We are absolutely looking at what more we can do on sanctions on the regime there, as well as at how we target some of the Russian entities that she talked about.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Any war on the border between Ukraine and Russia will be utterly disastrous for the people of Ukraine, the people of Russia and the future of peace throughout the whole continent of Europe. When the Foreign Secretary travels to Moscow to have discussions with the Russian Government, I hope that she will be able to reassert the agreements reached in the 1990s that recognised Ukrainian independence, but will she also try to take the whole thing a stage further with a new disarmament agreement with Russia, revisiting the previous agreements? Will she ensure that the British state is represented at the Vienna convention on nuclear weapons in the middle of March, as a way to take forward the de-escalation of stress and threats and thereby to wind down the tensions on the border? If we carry on building up massive numbers of troops on both sides of the border, something awful is going to happen and it will be very hard to get out of it.

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear: it is the Russian regime that has amassed the tanks and troops on the Ukrainian border. It is the Russian regime that has escalated aggression, and not just towards Ukraine but through Belarus and in the western Balkans. It is the Russian regime that needs to step back before it ends up entering into what could be—I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on this point—a very serious quagmire, with appalling consequences for the people of both Ukraine and Russia. That is the point that I will make when I travel to Moscow in the next fortnight.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her very robust approach. This is not a criticism of her, but we still lack a comprehensive and coherent approach to dealing with Russia's hybrid war. Frankly, this is a decade too late—so there is no criticism of her—and it is clear that deterrence is not working. My question is on facilitators, which a few other people have mentioned. Does she understand how corrosive it is to have young UK service personnel—ordinary kids in uniform—in forward positions in the Baltics while in

London a morally vacant and corrupted class of lawyers, bankers, reputation launderers and kompromat-style private investigators coin it, serving the needs of a parasitic, murderous oligarch class that is part of a neo-fascist regime that now threatens war in Europe? What are we doing about this corrupt facilitator class?

Elizabeth Truss: As I outlined earlier, we have taken action against illicit finance and corruption. We have established the National Cyber Security Centre and we are working hard to support Ukraine on the cyber-attacks it faces from the Russian regime, and I have announced today a sanctions regime that is by far the toughest we have ever had against Russia.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary's announcement shows that the Government can act speedily when they want to—these measures will be on the statute book by 10 February—so will she explain to the House why we are still waiting for all the measures referred to by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), in his response to the statement? Why can those measures not be acted on as speedily as the sanctions that the Foreign Secretary has announced to the House today?

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, we put through the Criminal Finances Act 2017, our global anti-corruption sanctions regime. We are reviewing the tier 1 visas and will introduce the economic crime Bill, which Her Majesty's Treasury is working on.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is absolutely correct to highlight that our partners in central and eastern Europe—Poland and the Baltic states—recognise the leadership that Britain is providing with regard to these new tensions, but they also recognise the increasing divergence between London and Berlin in how to tackle Russia over this nefarious behaviour. Does she agree that it is important now to go back to our German partners and re-emphasise the need for them to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which gives the Russians an umbilical cord to the heart of Europe? We import less than 1.5% of our gas requirements from Russia, whereas the Germans import more than 60% of their energy requirements from Moscow.

Elizabeth Truss: I had a discussion with my colleague Foreign Minister Baerbock last week about precisely this issue, and I welcome the statements from her and Chancellor Scholz about Nord Stream 2, in which they were very clear that it will not go ahead in the event of a Russian incursion. We do need to reduce dependence on Russian gas. I welcome the work that the United States is doing to look at how supplies can be augmented, and we are working with partners across the middle east. This is a strategic issue for Europe and we do need to reduce dependence on Russian gas—there is no doubt about it.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): More than £4 million has been donated to Tory MPs, including to a quarter of the current Cabinet, by Russian-linked individuals—this is dirty money from an evil regime. Is that why the Government have so far failed to take the Russian threat to our democracy seriously? How will what has been announced today help? Will the Foreign Secretary pledge to this House to fly at least business class to Moscow in the next couple of weeks, instead of using half a million pounds of taxpayers' money, as she did when she flew to Australia?

Elizabeth Truss: We have Government planes for a reason: for Government Ministers to use on Government business.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In addition to targeted sanctions against Kremlin-linked individuals, our friends and allies in the US Senate are considering three further steps. The first is sanctioning Russian state banks, to prevent the flow of foreign capital. The second is having export controls on key technologies that are useful to the Kremlin. Thirdly, a number of Senators, led by Ted Cruz, are proposing a return to sanctions against Nord Stream itself, and related entities and individuals linked to the organisation. Will each of those be included in the Bill that my right hon. Friend intends to bring forward?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the legislation we are bringing forward is very wide-ranging and targets a number of sectors and interests in relation to the Kremlin, and I assure my right hon. Friend that nothing is off the table.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Our American allies have just issued an unprecedented rebuke to the British Government, saying that any new sanctions would be worthless as long as London remains the main international laundromat for dirty Russian money. I remember that this Prime Minister tried to stop the publication of the Russia report and removed the Whip from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who now chairs the Intelligence and Security Committee, when his own patsy candidate failed to get the job. I am still not clear, however, whether the Foreign Secretary is reinstating the economic crime Bill, because that has not been said on the record from the Dispatch Box before. If she is, can the admirable Lord Agnew have his job back, please?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said already this afternoon, we remain committed to bringing in the economic crime Bill, and the Prime Minister committed that that would be done this year.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) rather took my thunder, but this is such an important point that I would like to reiterate: if ever there was a reason to take a fresh look at NATO and its role and responsibilities, this threat by Russia of an invasion in Europe must be it. Has the Foreign Secretary spoken to the other NATO countries that are not spending the 2%? Has she been given reassurance that they will spend 2%? If they have not given her that, what does she intend to do to make them spend 2% of their GDP?

Elizabeth Truss: We are already spending more than 2% of our GDP; we are the largest European NATO supplier of troops and security around Europe, and we want to see others step up, because, as my hon. Friend says, these threats are getting worse. We have seen an increase in aggression and we need to see all NATO allies step up and fulfil their commitments.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Government's attempt to claim some kind of moral high ground on Russian sanctions is sheer hypocrisy when the right hon. Lady's party has accepted donations from oligarchs and her Government have turned a blind eye to the Kremlin meddling in our democracy and have held open the door to Putin's cronies to have their money laundered in London. Can she tell us whether that is why there is still this delay to the promised register of overseas entities, which would shine a light on Russian ownership of British property? In her replies to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), she showed a remarkable lack of urgency on whether the economic crime Bill might be introduced sometime this year. That is not good enough when we are talking about what pressure can be brought to bear on Russia now.

Elizabeth Truss: I had hoped that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that we are introducing our toughest ever sanctions regime on Russia, which will be in place by 10 February. We are acting with urgency to deal with this crisis.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome the actions my right hon. Friend is taking. Nobody should think they are safe from sanctions, so will she confirm that this new legislation will ensure that any company of interest to the Kremlin will be able to be targeted so there can be nowhere for Putin's oligarchs to hide?

Elizabeth Truss: We will be able to target any company linked to the Russian state that engages in business of economic significance to the Russian state or in a sector of strategic significance. We will be able not just to target those entities but to go after those who own or control them, so the net is very wide.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am going to give the Foreign Secretary a third chance. Does she agree that the UK Government will continue to look weak on the Russian threat while Tory MPs and Members of the other House continue to accept cash from Russian-linked individuals?

Elizabeth Truss: I had hoped that the hon. Lady would welcome the package of tough sanctions that we are introducing today. In fact, that is what our allies across the world are saying.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. She is absolutely right that we need to widen the breadth of sanctions on Russia to reflect the reality on the ground. In my constituency those realities are very clear to see—the dirty money invested week in, week out. Can she assure me that this Government will follow through on the legislation and ensure that the financial and professional services involved will be held to account, and that we follow a "banks and tanks" strategy in fighting corruption and Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and across Europe?

Elizabeth Truss: We have taken steps to deal with illicit finance and corrupt elites through the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and our anti-corruption sanctions regime. I have already talked about the commitment to introduce legislation through the economic crime Bill. Today is about showing that the UK is ready with a package of severe sanctions that can target any organisation or individual who is remotely linked or of economic significance to the Russian state, showing there will be nowhere to hide in the event of an incursion into Ukraine. This is about making sure that those economic consequences are as severe as possible. My hon. Friend makes excellent points on the broader issue, but today we are talking about deterring Vladimir Putin from an incursion into Ukraine.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Why have the Government delayed the economic crime Bill? Why are they doing nothing to stop lawfare in the UK courts? Why is the Serious Fraud Office being sued by oligarchs rather than indicting them? Without the laws, the courts and the prosecutors to tackle corruption and dirty money here in Londongrad, are the Foreign Secretary's threats not empty and vacuous? Will she ensure that the Tories' Russian gold finds its way back to Moscow?

Elizabeth Truss: I have already given the steps that Her Majesty's Treasury and the Ministry of Justice are taking on the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. The sanctions regime is under direct Foreign Office control. That is why we are taking action as soon as we can, by 10 February, to get these sanctions in place so that we can exercise them in the event of an incursion.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for her announcement on sanctions. She said in her statement that the UK will join discussions at the UN Security Council to apply further pressure on Russia. Could she explain what she hopes to gain out of this and what success would look like?

Elizabeth Truss: Russia is a member of the permanent Security Council and needs to be held to account for its aggressive actions with respect to Ukraine.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I, too, welcome the broad tenet of the Foreign Secretary's statement, the details of which included fast jets going to bolster NATO forces in Europe. Has she had discussions with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that when, quite appropriately, bolstering Ukraine's eastern flank, we do not create any problems for the United Kingdom's northern flank by redeploying quick reaction alert Typhoon aircraft from either Lossiemouth or Coningsby?

Elizabeth Truss: I am in regular touch with the Defence Secretary to make sure that, of course, we protect UK defence interests at the same time as we provide air support, particularly around the Black sea region, to make sure that we are working with our NATO allies to keep a free and safe Europe.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): President Putin is reported as saying:

"Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere"—

of artificial intelligence—

"will become the ruler of the world."

Given the dangers posed by lethal autonomous weapons, will the Foreign Secretary explain why the British Government seem reluctant to support efforts to place legally binding instruments to control their development and use?

Elizabeth Truss: We are shortly about to launch our international tech strategy, which will talk precisely about setting standards in areas like artificial intelligence and quantum. It is important that it is the free world that is setting those standards rather than their being dictated by authoritarian regimes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): There are concerns in the food industry that a Russian invasion of Ukraine could lead to food shortages in the UK, as Ukraine is becoming a significant exporter of goods such as cereal products to the UK. What plans do the Government have to protect UK food supplies if Putin opts to disregard sanctions and presses ahead?

Elizabeth Truss: We have an important trade relationship with Ukraine, which is why it is so important that we support Ukraine economically. That is why we have built in extra trade co-operation, and why it is so important that we deter the Russian Government from an incursion into Ukraine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would like to thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement and for taking five minutes shorter than an hour to answer questions.

Vaccination: Condition of Deployment

6.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on vaccination as a condition of deployment.

Last Thursday, we woke up to a new phase of this pandemic as we returned to plan A. People are no longer advised to work from home. Face coverings are no longer mandatory. Organisations no longer have to require the NHS covid pass. And, from today, there is no limit on the number of visitors allowed in care homes.

Week by week, we are carefully moving our covid response from being one of rules and restrictions back to being one of personal responsibility. We are able to do this because of the defences that we have built throughout this pandemic—in vaccines and antivirals, in testing and surveillance.

We know, of course, that covid-19 is here to stay. While some countries remain stuck on a zero-covid strategy and others think about how they will safely open up, here we are showing the way forward and showing the world what successfully living with covid looks like. The principle we are applying is the same principle that has guided our actions throughout this pandemic, and that is to achieve the maximum protection of public health with the minimum intrusion in people's everyday lives. To me, that is what learning to live with covid is all about.

Even with this progress, we must of course remain vigilant. While overall cases and hospitalisations continue to fall, we are seeing rises in cases in primary and secondary schoolchildren. Part of living with covid means living with new variants and subvariants. Our world-class health surveillance operations are currently keeping a close watch on a subvariant of omicron called BA.2, which the UK Health Security Agency has marked as a variant under investigation—one below a variant of concern. Some 1,072 genomically confirmed cases of BA.2 have been identified in England. While early data from Denmark suggests that BA.2 may be more transmissible, there is currently no evidence that it is any more severe. In addition, an initial analysis of vaccine effectiveness against BA.2 reveals a similar level of protection against symptomatic infection compared with BA.1—the original variant of omicron—which underlines, once again, the importance of being vaccinated against covid-19 and the imperative to get the booster if you are eligible.

Nowhere is vaccination more important than in our health and social care system. Throughout this pandemic, we have always put the safety of vulnerable people first, and we always will do. It has always been this Government's expectation that everyone gets vaccinated against covid-19, especially those people working in health and social care settings, who have a professional duty to do so. When designing policy, there will always be a balance of opportunities and risks, and responsible policy making must take that balance into account.

When we consulted on vaccination as a condition of deployment in health and wider social care settings, the evidence showed that the vaccine effectiveness against infection from the dominant delta variant was between

[Sajid Javid]

65% and 80%, depending on which of the vaccines people had received. It was clear that vaccination was the very best way to keep vulnerable people safe from delta because, quite simply, if you are not infected, you cannot infect someone else. Balanced against this clear benefit was the risk that there would always be some people who would not do the responsible thing and would choose to remain unvaccinated—and, in doing so, choose to walk away from their jobs in health and care. Despite its being their choice to leave their jobs, we have to consider the impact on the workforce in NHS and social care settings, especially at a time when we already have a shortage of workers and near full employment across the economy.

In December, I argued—and this House overwhelmingly agreed—that the weight of clinical evidence in favour of vaccination as a condition of deployment outweighed the risks to the workforce. It was the right policy at the time, supported by the clinical evidence, and the Government make no apology for it. It has also proved to be the right policy in retrospect, given the severity of delta. Since we launched the consultation on vaccination as a condition of deployment in the NHS and wider social care settings in September, there has been a net increase of 127,000 people working across the NHS who have done the right thing and got jabbed, becoming part of the 19 out of 20 NHS workers who have done their professional duty. During the same time, we have also seen a net increase of 32,000 people getting jabbed in social care—22,000 people in care homes and 10,000 people working in domiciliary care.

I am grateful to the millions of health and care colleagues who have come forward to do the right thing, and the health and care leaders who have supported them. Together, they have played a vital part in raising our wall of protection even higher, and keeping thousands of vulnerable people out of hospital this winter.

When we laid the November regulations, the delta variant represented 99% of infections. A few short weeks later, we discovered omicron, which has now become the dominant variant in the UK, representing over 99% of infections. Incredibly, over a third of the UK's total number of covid-19 cases have happened in just the last eight weeks. Given that delta has been replaced, it is only right that our policy on vaccination as a condition of deployment be reviewed. I therefore asked for fresh advice, including from the UK Health Security Agency and England's chief medical officer.

In weighing up the risks and opportunity of this policy once again, there are two new factors. The first is that our population as a whole is now better protected against hospitalisation from covid-19. Omicron's increased infectiousness means that at the peak of the recent winter spike one in 15 people had a covid-19 infection, according to the Office for National Statistics. Around 24% of England's population has had at least one positive covid-19 test, and as of today in England 84% of people over 12 have had a primary course of vaccines and 64% have been boosted, including over 90% of over-50s. The second factor is that the dominant variant, omicron, is intrinsically less severe. When taken together with the first factor—greater population protection—the evidence shows that the risk of presentation to emergency care or hospital admission with omicron is approximately half of that for delta.

Given those dramatic changes, it is not only right but responsible to revisit the balance of risks and opportunities that guided our original decision last year. While vaccination remains our very best line of defence against covid-19, I believe that it is no longer proportionate to require vaccination as a condition of deployment through statute. So today I am announcing that we will launch a consultation on ending vaccination as a condition of deployment in health and all social care settings. Subject to the responses and the will of this House, the Government will revoke the regulations. I have always been clear that our rules must remain proportionate and balanced, and of course, should we see another dramatic change in the virus, it would be only responsible to review the policy again.

Some basic facts remain. Vaccines save lives, and everyone working in health and social care has a professional duty to be vaccinated against covid-19. So although we will seek to end vaccination as a condition of deployment in health and social care settings using statute, I am taking the following steps. First, I have written to professional regulators operating across health to ask them to urgently review current guidance to registrants on vaccinations including covid-19 to emphasise their professional responsibilities in this respect. Secondly, I have asked the NHS to review its policies on the hiring of new staff and deployment of existing staff, taking into account their vaccination status. Thirdly, I have asked my officials to consult on updating my Department's code of practice, which applies to all Care Quality Commission-registered providers of healthcare and social care settings in England. They will consult on strengthening requirements in relation to covid-19, including reflecting the latest advice on infection protection control.

Finally, our vital work to promote vaccine uptake continues. I am sure that the whole House will join me in thanking NHS trusts and care providers for their relentless efforts in putting patient safety first. I also thank the shadow Health Secretary and the Opposition for their support of the Government's approach to this policy area. One of the reasons that we have the highest vaccine uptake rates in the world is the confidence in our vaccines that comes from this place and from both sides of the House. We may not agree on everything, but when it comes to vaccination, together we have put the national interest first. It is now in our national interest to embark on this new phase of the pandemic, when we keep the British people safe while showing the world how we can successfully learn to live with covid-19.

I commend this statement to the House.

6.29 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and also for his regular contact and briefings on this issue at both ministerial and official level. He is right to say that Labour worked with the Government to ensure maximum take-up of the vaccine across health and social care, and we do not regret that decision. Indeed, we welcome the decision that he has come to today.

Let me be clear from the start: vaccines are safe, effective, and the best defence that we have against the virus. Whether compulsory or not, it remains the professional duty of all NHS and care workers to get themselves vaccinated, just as it is the duty of all of us to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our society from the greater spread of infections and hospitalisations,

and from the need for harsh restrictions that impact on our lives, livelihoods and liberties. The debate over this policy is about whether the state should mandate the vaccine for health and care staff, or whether it should take a voluntary approach. It is not a discussion about the need to get vaccinated, the arguments for which are overwhelmingly one-sided. With five million people in the UK still to have their first jab, we cannot afford to take our foot off the pedal in getting the message out.

Labour Members supported the initial policy in early December. Since then we have seen a significant increase in vaccinations among NHS staff, with tens of thousands more staff now protected. I say an enormous thank you to the NHS trusts that worked tirelessly to persuade hesitant staff of the need to get vaccinated, and to those colleagues who have given up considerable time to have supportive conversations with their peers. I thank the health unions and royal colleges which, despite their misgivings about the mandatory nature of the policy, nonetheless did everything they could to encourage their members to get vaccinated.

Clearly, things have now moved on, in terms of both our overall levels of infections, and our understanding of this latest variant. It has also become clear that to follow through with this policy could see tens of thousands of staff forced to leave their roles, at a time when our health service is already understaffed and overstretched—indeed, that has been a particular anxiety on these Benches and right across the House. However, efforts must continue to persuade those staff who are still hesitant.

What lessons have the Secretary of State and his Department learned from the Welsh Government, where 95% of staff were double jabbed by November without any mandate? What can we learn from the Welsh Government's approach to persuasion, and how can we emulate their success? In light of today's decision, it is all the more important that health and care workers are empowered to do the right thing and isolate when they need to, without the fear of being unable to feed their families. One in five care homes do not pay staff their full wages to isolate. If we are to learn to live well with covid, that must change. Labour's plan for living well with covid includes making all workers eligible for proper levels of sick pay. Why have the Government still not sorted this? I appreciate that those are also Treasury issues, but that approach is penny-wise and pound-foolish when it comes to protecting public health.

The Labour party supported this measure in December, put the national interest before party politics, and made sure it had the votes needed to pass through the House. We understand the difficulties faced by the Government in coming to today's decision, and we will continue to be as constructive and helpful as we can be in a national crisis, just as Labour has been throughout the past two years. I welcome very much what the Secretary of State said this afternoon about welcoming Labour support for this policy, and indeed about our wider support for the vaccination roll-out, but let me end on a point of criticism, which is not in any way levelled at the Secretary of State. Given the way that the Labour party has handled its approach to the pandemic response, and the constructive way that we sought to work with the Government, it is not unreasonable to expect the Prime Minister, and others in his party, to stop pretending that that has not been the case. Perhaps he might stop seeking to turn the pandemic—the greatest threat we have faced to our nation for more than 70 years—into a party political mud fight. Surely we can do better than that, and I would like to think that the Secretary of State and I have been leading by example.

Sajid Javid: Once again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his approach to this policy area and to vaccinations in general. He is absolutely right in the comments he has made on that and the importance of working across the House and working together on such an important issue in the national interest, as he has done. I very much welcome that approach. Not all countries take such an approach to such an important issue, and they have sadly paid a price for that. I believe that one of the reasons we have such high vaccine uptake in this country is the cross-party approach that has been taken, and I thank him once again for that.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to point to the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines, as independently set out by our world-class regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, and other reputable regulators across the world. No one should doubt the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines. It is because of the success of this country's vaccination programme that we are able to open up again in the way that we have and to start returning to normal life.

Very importantly for the people we are talking about today—the fantastic people working in the NHS and across social care—one of the key reasons we have been able to keep down the pressure on the NHS in particular is that so many people have come forward and got vaccinated. That is why it remains troubling that some people, in particular in the NHS, still refuse to get vaccinated, even when they know it is safe and effective, and do not do the responsible thing and act in a professional way.

We will keep going to work with those people in a positive way to try to persuade them about the benefits of vaccination and to provide them with the information they need. We will continue with the work of one-to-one meetings with clinicians if necessary and encouraging them to make that positive choice, but it will be about encouragement and helping them to come to the right decision. We will learn and look at what other parts of the UK have done in making sure that we have the very best practice and have learned from each other.

Finally, on the point that the hon. Gentleman raised about sick pay, I understand what he is saying. I just point to the fact that we have kept rules in place to allow sick pay to be claimed from day one, and a hardship fund is in place to give extra support where needed.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that my instinct is to support him in the very difficult decisions he has to take in a pandemic, and I think he is doing an excellent job, but I have some concerns about today's announcement. I think they may not be shared widely in the House, so I hope colleagues will indulge me if I explain why. Frontline workers have done an extraordinary job in this pandemic, but I have yet to meet a single one who believes that anyone in contact with patients has a right to put them at increased risk by not having a vaccine, unless there is a medical exemption. My concern is that having marched the NHS to the top of the hill and having won a very important patient safety argument, we are now doing a

[Jeremy Hunt]

U-turn. What will happen the next time the Secretary of State wants to introduce an important vaccine, for example for flu, and make it mandatory? Is not the real reason that we have made this decision that we have a staffing crisis that the Government have still not brought forward their plans to address? When will those plans be brought forward?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend speaks with great experience, and I have the utmost respect for him, especially given the many years he spent successfully running this Department. I understand what he says, and I hope he will understand, having listened carefully to the statement, that when the facts change, it is right for the Government to review the policy and determine whether it is still proportionate. Many things have changed in the past couple of months with respect to covid, but the one big thing that has changed is that since this policy was originally implemented, we have moved from 99% of covid infections being delta to 99% being omicron. That is why we have had to change approach.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it. I welcome the intention to U-turn on vaccination as a condition of employment. I have never supported mandatory vaccination for workers—a policy that, I am pleased to say, Scotland has avoided going down. Adding a further 70,000 or more vacancies to the existing 100,000 in NHS England would be a serious act of self-sabotage.

Vaccines remain one of the best defences against covid-19, as they reduce the likelihood of infection and therefore break the chain of transmission, and are something we should all continue to encourage. The Scottish Government have pursued an "educate and encourage" strategy in their vaccine roll-out, which has resulted in a higher vaccine take-up to date through entirely voluntary means. The five most vaccinated areas in the UK are all in Scotland.

Why are the UK Government taking so long to drop their damaging policy and adopt the Scottish practice? When will the consultation conclude and a decision finally be made? The UK Government's vaccination mandate may have alienated many NHS staff, so what will be done to repair relations and encourage continued voluntary vaccine take-up?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw the House's attention to the importance of vaccination, as other Members have done. As was reflected in his remarks, it is the UK's first line of defence against covid. Thankfully, the UK has put in place many other defences, such as the antivirals that are used across the UK and our testing and surveillance regime, but vaccines are the first line of defence. He is right to talk about encouraging as many people as we possibly can to take up the vaccine if they have so far not done so, whether they work in health and social care or otherwise. He is right that the best general approach is to educate and inform, and that is what we will continue to do.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): What a disappointment this statement is. Having read the newspapers, I was hoping to be able to come here and congratulate the Secretary of State on the Government's recent conversion to common sense in halting the mandatory vaccination of NHS workers. Instead, he is making a half-and-half decision today, knowing that the sword of Damocles hangs over those 100,000 NHS workers, because they have to have their first vaccination on Thursday. He will then be sending them on a pathway to unemployment, along with the thousands of care workers who have already lost their jobs. What I want to know is what he is now going to do to help those thousands of people get a job, and what compensation he will pay them.

Sajid Javid: I am happy to clarify the point raised by my right hon. Friend. The Government have made a decision on this matter, which I hope I was very clear about in my statement, but for statutory reasons there needs to be a consultation. There will be a two-week consultation and then a statutory instrument will be presented to the House and will be subject to the will of the House.

The Government have made their decision on this, and the Department will write today to all NHS trusts and contact care home providers and wider social care settings, such as domiciliary care, to make it clear that the deadline my right hon. Friend referred to is no longer applicable. I am very happy to make that clear. She has raised an important point. While the decision is subject to this House, there will be no further enforcement of the regulations, for the reasons I have set out today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Health Secretary has not only bullied and threatened NHS staff at a time when they are so fragile, but ignored the royal colleges and all the trade unions when they said that the initial statutory instruments should not have been made. In fact, he has not made it clear today that both will be withdrawn, so I ask him to make that clear. I also ask him to say whether or not all those staff who have lost their employment to date will be reinstated with continuity of employment, including their pensions and other conditions.

Sajid Javid: I am happy to answer those questions. First, the Government's decision is to revoke both statutory instruments; I am happy to confirm that. On those who, following the statutory instrument on care home settings, chose not to get vaccinated and preferred to leave their job than do the professional thing and get vaccinated, that was their choice, and that does not change. That policy was right at the time—I have set out the reasons why—because the dominant variant was delta. Should those people choose to apply for a job in a care home once the restrictions have been lifted, that is a decision for them. However, I continue to encourage them to make the right positive decision and get vaccinated.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I promised my wife that I would stop being angry, but I just cannot. Long before vaccines existed, these people who we cast as pariahs were day in, day out, coming into hospitals and care homes and holding the hands of the dying because their children and grandchildren could not. They were doing that while most people in this House were sitting on their backsides safely at home. Now, by all means, let us encourage people to get vaccines, but the language used, suggesting that these people who, for whatever reason—they may have needle phobia, like

me—have chosen not to get vaccinated are somehow deserving of our bile is a disgrace. It does not reflect badly on them; it reflects badly on us.

Sajid Javid: What I hear from my hon. Friend, and I very much agree, is that vaccines are safe and effective. They remain our most important weapon in fighting the pandemic and, as more people come forward and choose to get vaccinated, that is not only good for them but right for the rest of society, their loved ones and everyone else around them. That is especially so if the people around them—they might be in a care setting or a hospital—are more vulnerable than most of the population. The best way forward is therefore to encourage everyone now to continue to think of the vaccine in that positive, sensible way and to come forward.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I welcome this change of tack because I, like many others, opposed the compulsory vaccination policy. However, I fear that, in the care sector, the damage has been done—there are reports that about 40,000 people have already left—and it is damaging patient safety. With the change of tack, will the Secretary of State tell us his plans to get more carers quickly into the sector? With regard to the shortage occupation list, how many carers does he hope to recruit, and by when?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for that good question. She referenced 40,000 people having left care homes as a result of vaccine as a condition of deployment, and I can give her more information on that. While there is no exact data because care homes are independent and the people who work in them are not employed directly by the state, the Department's best estimate, which is from the industry, is that the change in workforce during the final half of last year was a fall of 19,300. We do not believe that the 40,000 number is representative—the best proxy number is 19,300. Having said that, no one would want to see anyone leaving the care home sector when, as she rightly identified, we need more people coming forward. That is why we put in place a £162.5 million retention fund before omicron, and we have added to that fund by more than £300 million during omicron. We are also supporting the sector in having the largest recruitment campaign that it has ever run.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the change of policy. In order to reassure both patients and staff about safety, what progress can the Secretary of State report to the House on better air extraction, air cleaning and ultraviolet filtration? I think that we need to control the virus without telling people exactly what they have to do in their own health treatments.

Sajid Javid: As always, my right hon. Friend has asked a very good question. He will know that infection protection control measures have been in place during the pandemic; they change along with the pandemic over time, depending on the risk profile, and that applies to care settings. The Government have supported care homes with hundreds of millions of pounds to make adaptations and changes and to implement these measures, and I know that many care settings have taken advantage of those funds to provide, for instance, air filtration and ventilation. That is the kind of support that the Government will continue to give.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): This has always been a difficult issue, because it involves balancing two different sets of rights, and I think that the Secretary of State has made a sensible choice. He talked about changing circumstances, but the one thing that has not changed is the fact that a considerable number of NHS staff remain unvaccinated. In reaching this decision, what representations did he receive from NHS leaders about the impact that those staff having to leave—which they will not now have to do—would have on the ability of the NHS to cope, and was that a factor in the reaching of the decision? I think most of us sitting here today know that it probably was.

Sajid Javid: I hoped that my statement had been clear enough to answer a question such as that asked by the right hon. Gentleman, but I am happy to emphasise what I said earlier. As I said, when coming to any decision, but certainly this decision, we must bear in mind that there are benefits and there are costs. The costs to which I referred related to the fact that obviously some people would no longer be employed in the NHS or in care settings, and that balance remains important. Because of the change in the variant and real change in the benefit part of the equation, the scales tilted, and that is why I no longer think that the policy as set out is proportionate.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and thank him for listening to those of us on both sides of the House who have raised concerns about this policy. Of course it is right to change policy in the light of new evidence—particularly, in this case, the evidence that omicron is less severe and that vaccines are no longer as effective in reducing transmission. However, as reducing transmission was the only reason for pushing ahead with the vaccination of children, will the Secretary of State now commit himself to a review of that policy, given that children are at almost no risk from covid but there are small but potentially significant risks, both known and unknown—particularly to boys—from covid vaccinations?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her introductory remarks. As for her question about children and vaccines, she will know that when it comes to vaccination in general, we take advice from the expert committee of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which, as she would rightly expect, keeps vaccination decisions under review at all times.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I hope that the Secretary of State can recognise the very important message given by the unions and the royal colleges only seven weeks ago about the short-sightedness of a compulsion policy, which would drive people—vital workers—out of the care sector and the NHS. I hope that we will never go down the road of compulsory vaccination. I support vaccination, but persuasion is much more powerful than compulsion. Persuasion, when people understand it, is a far more powerful message to get across.

Will the Secretary of State tell us what is the cost of each vaccine to each resident of this country, what is the cost of its manufacture, and whether he has any plans for the patent to be moved into public ownership so that the massive profiteering from these vaccinations can end and the public can get the benefit of it?

Sajid Javid: Where I agree with the right hon. Gentleman is on the importance of persuasion in vaccination. Where I am afraid I disagree with him is on the idea that public ownership of patents connected with vaccinations or drug development in general would help. In fact, I think it would be a backward step and we would not see the innovation that has saved lives.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Many patients in hospital will presumably be protected by having undertaken their own vaccination process, but some will be clinically extremely vulnerable because of compromised immune systems. Is the Secretary of State saying that these people are at no greater risk of being made seriously ill or dying as a result of coming into contact with unvaccinated frontline staff? If they are at greater risk, is there something else that can be done to lessen that risk, such as a testing regime, before that contact takes place?

Sajid Javid: That is another good question from my right hon. Friend. I will say two things. First, this is not about zero risk; it is about less risk. What I am saying is that, based on the advice that I have received and for the reasons that I set out in my statement, whether or not someone is immunosuppressed, omicron, in general, represents less risk. It is also right to ask whether other measures could be taken to provide additional support. Yes, they can, which is why I have asked the NHS to review its own policies on the deployment of staff in certain settings, and that would include interaction with the most vulnerable patients.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for today's U-turn. I know that many of my constituents, both NHS staff and patients, will be deeply grateful for it. We all wanted to see as many NHS staff as possible take up the vaccine, but no one wanted to see people being forced to take the vaccine, especially after all that they have done for us. Can the Secretary of State promise the House that, if there are future outbreaks, he will listen to the overwhelming body of public health evidence, which says that carrot, not stick, persuasion, not enforcement, has better results when it comes to vaccine take-up?

Sajid Javid: This Government will always listen to the evidence and be guided by it, as they have been today.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Unlike a number of my colleagues here, I did actually vote in favour of these measures back in December. I did so because I felt that it was important that those going into hospital had the reassurance that those caring for them were fully protected. I understand the Secretary of State's point that the matter has now changed, but I regret that that is so, because I still feel that my vote was the correct one. May I ask my right hon. Friend this specific question just to assist me to get to the right place with him? He mentions that he asked for fresh advice from the health regulators, and no doubt they advised that this was no longer proportionate in these changed circumstances. Did that precipitate a change in the legal position—that being one of the limbs for judicial review—which means that there is a legal requirement for our having to change course as well?

Sajid Javid: I understand my hon. Friend's question. When the evidence changes—or, in this case, the change in the variant from delta to omicron—Ministers receive different advice. That advice always comes with up-to-date legal analysis as well, and that legal analysis is certainly taken into account when making a decision.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), I too am angry. I am angry because, in December last year, I twice asked the Secretary of State to pause and let us do this via consensus, rather than by making it mandatory. The language we use in this place is extremely important, and the Secretary of State has spoken this evening about care workers and their "choice" to be sacked. What I say is that they did not choose to be sacked. This Government chose not to give them appropriate personal protective equipment at the height of the pandemic. This Government chose to discharge elderly patients into care homes at the height of the pandemic. That is the real choice that this Government have made. Will the Secretary of State re-evaluate? Will he go back and apologise to those care workers, some of the lowest paid in our labour market, and ensure that they have continuity of service and of pension contributions?

Sajid Javid: Where the hon. Lady and I will absolutely agree is on the service that we have seen as a country from care home workers and domiciliary care workers over the pandemic. It has been the test of a lifetime for anyone working in that sector and each and every one of those people has risen to that challenge and provided the best care that they could in the most difficult circumstances. As the hon. Lady will know, there is an inquiry into the pandemic, where I am sure that many of the issues will be looked at, such as whether better support could have been provided under the circumstances. Looking ahead, however, it is important that we continue to do everything we can to continue to support that vital sector.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision, which is important for the continuity and delivery of our local services. We were faced with losing more than 3,000 health and care staff in Nottinghamshire alone in a few weeks' time, so this will massively take the pressure off come March and April. I urge him to go further if possible: I do not think it is fair to present the decision that care home workers made in November as leaving by choice. The truth is that we need those staff and more if we are to implement the reforms that the Government are asking the care sector to deliver on at a local level in the coming months, rather than having to focus all our energy on everyday firefighting. Will he change the view that he has stated so far, reach out to those staff and try to help them back into the sector?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, we need more people in care and in the NHS. We have a waiting list in both sectors. There are many people out there who will have experience and will want to do that. He asked whether we can work with the sector to reach out and to support and help people to re-enter it where they wish to do so. Of course we can. At the same time, we can continue to give any information that may be helpful and necessary to help to persuade those who remain unvaccinated to make that positive choice and get vaccinated.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hospital trust, Imperial College, has done its best to care for staff in the past two years. Like other trusts, it has found it difficult to implement what was, until a few moments ago, Government policy, but it did so because it was good clinical practice to protect its patients and it gave confidence to the general public, who might say, "Why should I get vaccinated if my doctor won't?" What advice does the Secretary of State have for the hospitals and care homes, and their staff and ex-staff, who may now feel betrayed?

Sajid Javid: I will say two things to anyone involved in NHS trusts, especially those who were leading the campaign to encourage their colleagues to get vaccinated. First, I say a huge thanks for what they have done and what they have achieved so far. I mentioned earlier that, since we consulted on the original regulations, 127,000 more people across the NHS have been vaccinated, which represents in total some 19 out of every 20 employees in the NHS. That is a phenomenal achievement. My thanks go to all those working in the NHS who have helped to make that happen and are still helping to make that happen.

Secondly, I say to those people that their work, with our support—the support of the Government and my Department—continues. Despite the changes today, for the reasons that I have set out, it is still hugely important to get vaccinated. We must keep reaching out positively to those who have not yet, for whatever reason, chosen to do so by helping them to make the right decision.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He made several references to conditions of employment and he finished by asking regulators, "to urgently review current guidance to registrants on vaccinations". What will he do to ensure that that does not become a compulsion for vaccinations by other means?

Sajid Javid: The regulators I referred to are independent, so all I can do is ask them to review their regulations. My hon. Friend might be aware that some regulators, such as the General Medical Council, already have requirements for vaccinations in certain settings, which is a decision for them. As he will know, however, the independent regulators usually set out guidance and allow some flexibility in how it is interpreted in certain settings.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for this decision. I opposed the policy in December for reasons that have been eloquently laid out by Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), although I was respectful of the Government's position. Overall, persuasion is better than coercion, and honesty is better than the manipulative games that we now hear the nudge unit was playing and that were entirely counterproductive. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that, now we have some breathing space, we can do a bit of forward thinking and prepare a plan for this winter that protects the vulnerable and enables the NHS to continue to treat people but does so without resorting to lockdowns? The idea that lockdown is a cost-free, risk-free option is absolutely untrue, as we have now seen from the 100,000 children who have come off school rolls and disappeared. Lockdown carries an extraordinarily heavy price, and frankly a lot of the modelling and forecasting behind it have been extremely flawed.

Sajid Javid: If we look at the experience from the omicron wave, we can see that we had the fewest restrictions on people's freedom of any large country in Europe, yet we have been the first country to come out of the omicron wave and hit the peak. I believe the main reason for that is that we rightly focused on pharmaceutical defences: vaccines in particular, of course, as well as antivirals and testing. There is a lot to be learned from that.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Though we may have arrived here by different routes, I am grateful that today my right hon. Friend and I agree on this policy area. We also agree that vaccination is the better choice for everybody for whom it is safe if they do not have a pre-existing condition. Can I just pick up the issue of language? He has used a range of tones when talking about people. He has used some quite soft language about persuasion, and we have heard a range of perspectives on that, but he has also used some very strident language, which my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) criticised—rightly, I think. Can I ask my right hon. Friend to set out for the House what his attitude is to the issue of bodily autonomy and using the law to compromise it? If he does respect people's bodily autonomy, can I ask him please to select language that is respectful of that choice?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that my hon. Friend and I agree on what has been set out today, but he is right to raise what he has said in the way that he has. Language is vitally important, especially on issues of this great significance, when we are asking people to be injected with something, to put a needle to themselves and to get vaccinated, for all the right reasons. Of course some people will be more resistant than others to doing that, for whatever reason, and will have some kind of hesitancy. It is our duty to work with them. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that when we reach for a statute in relation to vaccination, there needs to be a very, very high bar. He has heard me say at this Dispatch Box more than once that I would never support universal vaccination or any kind of statute. This policy I have talked about today required a very high bar to be reached. At the time we introduced the policy, I believed that the bar was reached, for the reasons I have set out about protecting vulnerable people. Now I believe it would be disproportionate, and that is why I have set this change out today. What has not changed is the importance of vaccination, and for those people who can get vaccinated and who are not medically exempt from it for some reason, we should continue to work together across this House to encourage them to do so and work with them in the most positive way possible, because they would be better off and we would all be better off.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

ADVANCED RESEARCH AND INVENTION AGENCY (WAYS AND MEANS)

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill, it is expedient to authorise any charges to tax resulting from the Advanced Research and

Invention Agency being a public authority for the purposes of Chapter 10 of Part 2 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.—*(Gareth Johnson.)*

ADVANCED RESEARCH AND INNOVATION AGENCY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 23 March 2021 (Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill (Programme) in the last Session of Parliament):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

2. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

3. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—*(Gareth Johnson.)*

Question agreed to.

Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 1, 12 and 14. If the House agrees to any of these Lords amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the *Journal*.

Clause 2

ARIA's FUNCTIONS

7.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 15.

George Freeman: I am delighted that the Bill to create this exciting new agency has returned to this House and that I am able to speak to it for the first time in my role as Minister for Science, Research and Innovation. I pay tribute to my ministerial colleague Lord Callanan for his work on the Bill in the other place. Not for the first time in matters scientific, their lordships have kept our Minister very busy on the Front Bench. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway), who so capably led the Bill when it was first before the House.

There are 15 amendments for our consideration tonight. Fourteen of those were tabled or supported by the Government. I will summarise them quickly. Amendments 2 to 8 relate to changes the Government made in response to the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee's report on the Bill. In doing so, we demonstrated the seriousness with which we take the DPRRC's recommendations and the Government's commitment to acting upon them. The effect of those amendments is to omit clause 10, which contained a broader power to make consequential provision, and to replace it with a narrower, more specific power in clause 8. The new power can be used only in consequence of regulations dissolving ARIA. Other amendments are needed to tidy up the rest of the Bill and reflect that change. I hope that the changes are, in general, welcome.

Amendments 9 and 10 remove a power for ARIA to pay pensions and gratuities determined by the Secretary of State to non-executive members. We have tested that thoroughly and are content that in ARIA's specific case, that power is not needed. Again, the two amendments reflect the usual process of improving the Bill in response to scrutiny and the expertise that colleagues here—and in particular in the other place—have brought to bear.

Amendments 11 and 13 remove the amendments previously included in the Bill that had the effect of reserving ARIA. I have had productive discussions on this with my ministerial colleagues in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, to reiterate the importance of ARIA and our broader science policy to help strengthen the Union. I am delighted that they share my vision and ambition for ARIA and that we have reached an agreement

on the independence of ARIA—a memorandum of understanding that is a shared commitment to safeguard the organisation's most important characteristics, and which means the reservations are not needed. I am delighted to be able to report that legislative consent motions have been passed in all three devolved legislatures on the basis of that agreement, and I similarly commend it to the House.

Government amendments 12, 14 and 15 apply some relevant obligations to ARIA that would normally apply automatically to public authorities listed in the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The amendments provide for ARIA to be treated as a public authority for the purposes of the Data Protection Act 2018, the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003, the Enterprise Act 2016 and the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. They also amend various regulations and the UK GDPR to reflect that. That ensures that ARIA is treated in the same way as a public organisation normally would be treated in those important areas.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister will know from previous discussions that the question of freedom of information has come up before. Would it not be much simpler just to make ARIA subject to the Freedom of Information Act? In the current climate, would that not reassure the public?

George Freeman: It may reassure the public, but we also have to take into consideration the fact that to succeed, world-class scientists have been recruited to ARIA to lead in cutting-edge science. That very small staff need to be sure that they will not be tied up answering 101—often spurious—freedom of information requests from the media, who are keen on running stories. We want to make sure the agency is accountable properly but not bogged down in what can be hugely onerous freedom of information requests.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In that connection, could the Minister give the House some brief guidance on what he, as the accountable Minister, would expect by way of discussion and influence over corporate plans and budgets and onward reporting to the House?

George Freeman: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question, and he will not be surprised to know that it is one I have also been asking since coming to this role. The point of ARIA is to be a new agency for doing new science in new ways, and it has been structured specifically to avoid meddling Ministers, even those with a good idea, and meddling officials, even those with good intent, and to create an agency that is free.

My right hon. Friend asks an important question. As we appoint the chief executive officer and the chair, the framework agreement will set out, a bit like a subscription agreement, the agency's operating parameters, which will be published in due course. Each year ARIA will have to report on its stated plans. Crucially, as is so often not the case in scientific endeavour, ARIA will report where happy failure has occurred so that we do not continue to pour more money into scientific programmes that have not succeeded, which I know will reassure him. We want ARIA to be free to be honest about that, and not embarrassed. ARIA will be annually accountable through the framework agreement.

Finally, Lords amendment 1 deals with the conditions that ARIA may attach to its financial support. This arises from a series of important discussions in the other place relating to ARIA's duty to commercialise intellectual property that may be generated, which I am keen to address properly. However, the amendment, as drafted, does not actually prevent ARIA from doing anything; it adds examples of conditions that ARIA may attach to financial support, but ARIA already has the general power to do just that. Legally, the amendment simply represents a drafting change. As such, we cannot accept it, but we understand and acknowledge the importance of the point that the noble Lord Browne had in mind.

It is our firm belief that, although it is not appropriate at this stage to specify ARIA's contracting and granting arrangements in legislation, we recognise the substance of the concerns underlying the amendment: namely, that ARIA should have a duty to the taxpayer to ensure it is not haemorrhaging intellectual property of value to the UK. I will outline our position on that.

The amendment focuses principally on overseas acquisition of IP relating to the principles on which the Government intervene in foreign takeovers of UK businesses, particularly where those businesses have benefited from public investment in research and development activities. The National Security and Investment Act 2021, which fully commenced earlier this month, provides just such a framework, and it marks the biggest upgrade of investment screening in the UK for 20 years.

The NSI Act covers relevant sectors, such as quantum technologies and synthetic biology, that have benefited from significant public investment, and it permits the Government to scrutinise acquisitions on national security grounds. This new investment screening regime supports the UK's world-leading reputation as an attractive place to invest, and it has been debated extensively in both Houses very recently. We do not believe that revisiting those debates today would be productive.

Although the NSI Act provides a statutory framework, a much broader strand of work is under way. As Science Minister, I take very seriously the security of our academic and research community. A number of measures have been taken in the past few months and years to strengthen our protections. We are working closely with the sector to help it identify and address risks from overseas collaborations, while supporting academic freedom of thought and institutional independence.

Members do not need me to tell them that intellectual property is incredibly valuable and we increasingly face both sovereign and industrial espionage. It is important that we are able to support our universities to be aware of those risks and to avoid them. The Bill already provides the Secretary of State with a broad power of direction over ARIA on issues of national security, which provides a strong mechanism to intervene in its activities in the unlikely event it is necessary to do so.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box for the first time on this Bill. He is saying that ARIA can already do this, so the Government do not need to legislate in this regard, but that the Government would, none the less, be keen to see ARIA do it. There seems to be a discrepancy in that thought process.

George Freeman: There is no discrepancy. I will explain why but, essentially, the Bill already sets out ARIA's statutory responsibility to generate economic return for the UK, and the hon. Gentleman will know, as I do from my career negotiating intellectual property agreements, that at this stage it would be wholly inappropriate to mandate in statute the form that these intellectual property agreements will take. To be blunt, we do not yet know what programmes the chair and chief executive will put in place. It is only when we know the sort of science that ARIA is doing that we will possibly be in a position, through the framework agreement, to set out the appropriate ways to ensure that value is maximised.

Security issues will also be a core consideration in ARIA's governance arrangements in the framework agreement to ensure its effective functioning as an organisation. I confirm to colleagues that the framework document, which deals with those issues, will include obligations on ARIA to work closely with our national security apparatus. That is prudent to ensure that ARIA's research is protected from hostile states and actors and to stay connected to the Government's wider agenda on strategic technological advantage.

The Government's chief scientist, who will be on the ARIA board, will bring intelligence and expertise across security issues within Government, supported by the new Office for Science and Technology Strategy and the National Science and Technology Council. ARIA will of course have internal expertise to advise its board and programme managers, while also working with recipients of its funding in universities and businesses on research-specific security issues. That will be vital for ARIA to stay at the forefront of responding to the challenging nature of the UK's interests in this area.

There is also the question of how ARIA responds to the UK's strategic interests in science and technology more generally where they may not quite fall under the national security umbrella. The integrated review, the creation of the new OSTS and the National Science and Technology Council, on which I sit, outline our ambition to ensure that there is a serious, strategic machinery of government commitment to the strategic industrial advantage of UK science and technology. That is a fundamental priority for me and the Government more broadly.

ARIA is nestled within that structure and is required to be aware of all those priorities, but we must keep its role in perspective. It will be only a small part of a landscape that we are explicitly seeking to make independent of Government and free to explore new funding approaches. The whole point of ARIA is to be a new agency and to do new science in new ways.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister is being admirably blunt about keeping interfering Ministers and officials from controlling or influencing ARIA, but there is also influence from the scientific establishment, which has its own programmes and would like the sums of money in ARIA to go to them. Given the structure of the board, is he satisfied that ARIA will maintain its independence not just from the civil service and Ministers, but from the scientific establishment?

George Freeman: The hon. Member raises a very important point. Yes, I am satisfied, and for this reason: the way in which the agency has been established through the Bill and our plans to appoint the CEO and the chair on the basis that they will set out a very bold vision for ARIA to be the agency for new science in new ways. All the support that we are providing is specifically designed to allow them to operate in an environment where they can draw on the very best of UK science infrastructure and expertise, but not find themselves bound by either the short-term grant application process that dominates or the often substantial interests seeking investment in their own field. We will be able to attract the people we intend to attract because of that freedom. For that reason, I am confident—as that will be set out in the framework agreement and held to account by the board of ARIA and the scientific advisory board—that we will be able to ensure that that is the case.

Although ARIA will operate independently, it will be guided by key obligations regarding economic and UK benefit. ARIA must, in all its activity, have regard to the economic growth or economic benefit in the UK, alongside other considerations. That statutory obligation is set out clearly in clause 2(6), and it is right that that is in the Bill. Public investment in R&D must drive long-term socioeconomic benefit and deliver value to UK taxpayers. ARIA will be scrutinised by Government and Parliament on how effectively it fulfils its functions, including that one.

I can confirm that mechanisms for that scrutiny will be in the framework agreement. This includes requiring an internal evaluation framework for ARIA programmes—that deals with the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)—and looking at, for example, their expected benefits and alignment with the organisation's strategic objectives. It also includes setting the terms on which ARIA produces annual accounts and reporting, through which ARIA's CEO will be accountable to Parliament for how the resources allocated to it are used. The National Audit Office will be able to examine the value for money of ARIA's activities, and we in the Government must be assured of that value, on which ARIA's future funding will depend. Everyone involved is clear about that.

There are many ways in which the obligations that I have set out might be felt in respect of how ARIA operates. For example, ARIA may employ contracting arrangements that require funding recipients either to seek to exploit the outputs in the UK or forfeit the funding, as other funders routinely do. In some cases, ARIA may retain IP rights—it has that freedom—and will be able to draw on specialist support from the new Government office for technology transfer. That will help ARIA to extract the greatest possible value from its knowledge assets.

In general, we expect ARIA programmes to produce long-term, deep scientific benefits that are felt over the long term, and to support the highest-risk research where there is a clear role for public funding. It would be premature to seek to legislate in statute at this point, before the appointment of the CEO and the chair or the establishment of the funding programme plan. In addition to that being premature, given that its very freedoms will be a major attraction for people to come from around the world to work at the agency, we are concerned that to be seen to shackle those freedoms in statute may well disincentivise the most innovative scientists and researchers from coming to join programmes.

Finally, this issue encompasses the entirety of our R&D system and approach to investment in UK science and technology and we are extremely focused on it, but changes to ARIA alone cannot alter the wider environment. We must ensure that funding from ARIA is not subject to more stringent conditions than other public R&D funders, because that would undermine the independence and agility that are the defining characteristics of this exciting initiative for UK science.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place in leading on this important Bill and echo his thanks to the former Minister, the hon. Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway). I also thank colleagues in the other place who have worked so hard to improve the Bill. In particular, I thank my noble Friend Lord Browne for his successful and much-needed amendment to protect Britain's intellectual property.

The UK has a proud tradition in science and innovation. We are renowned around the world for the scientific breakthroughs and discoveries that have pushed humanity forwards. From the discovery of penicillin to the invention of Stephenson's Rocket—in Newcastle—UK science has again and again pushed the boundaries of humanity's knowledge.

UK science is not only inspiring but key to our health and that of our economy, as the pandemic has shown. Our university research base alone contributes £95 billion to the economy, supporting nearly 1 million jobs in science institutes, charities and businesses of all sizes. We have many innovative start-ups throughout the country that require only the right support to contribute to the innovation nation that our history, economy, security and future prosperity all demand. That is why it is so important that we get the Advanced Research and Invention Agency right.

ARIA, originally the brainchild of very-much-former adviser Dominic Cummings, is positioned as a high-risk, high-reward research agency, based on the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency in the US. Labour welcomed ARIA and continues to support it—it has great potential to fill a gap in the UK's research and development landscape and help deliver fantastic inventions—but we are clear that the benefits of ARIA's investments must be felt in the UK. We are equally clear that without Lords amendment 1, that may not be the case.

Lords amendment 1 would give ARIA the option to treat its financial support to a business as convertible into an equity interest in the business and thus to benefit from intellectual property created with ARIA's support. It would also enable ARIA to require consent during the 10 years following financial or resource support, if the business intended to transfer intellectual property abroad or to transfer a controlling interest to a business not resident in the UK.

7.30 pm

We have to start by acknowledging that the UK does not provide a sufficiently supportive environment for innovation start-ups to thrive. That is why we have already lost so many of them. Too often, tech start-ups face a choice between relocating outside the UK and being bought out by a larger multinational, and the UK loses out. In 2014, Britain had probably the most important and groundbreaking artificial intelligence company in the world, DeepMind, but instead of capitalising on this cutting-edge technology and instead of introducing an effective support system for start-ups, the Government allowed it to be sold to Google for £400 million, with no investigation or action. In 2020, early investor Humayun Sheikh estimated that DeepMind would be worth $30 billion now. That is a huge reward on the investment, but not one that has gone to UK taxpayers or UK citizens, and the UK is now in effect losing out on billions in economic benefits.

In the Labour party, we want to support our start-ups. The Government—and, indeed, the Minister in his comments—have tried to claim that Lords amendment 1 is not needed because they believe that the National Security and Investment Act already gives sufficient powers to scrutinise and intervene in takeover bids. However, the Minister must acknowledge that, despite our attempts to include economic security in the NSI Bill, the Government insisted on a much narrower definition of national security. While it is progress that the Government are reflecting national security in takeovers and mergers policy, for which we have been calling for a long time, the NSI Act does not address the issue of intellectual property and its economic value.

The Government have also argued that the amendment will discourage companies from participating in ARIA because it is important for them to own their intellectual property, but what innovative start-ups really need is support so that they do not have to relocate to scale up. PsiQuantum, a world-leading quantum computing company credited with building the world's first useful quantum company, started in Bristol, but had to relocate to Silicon valley to access greater support. With this amendment, companies can benefit from ARIA's support and the UK can benefit from the innovation, instead of seeing it move abroad.

The Minister has set out that he shares our concerns, but I am afraid that he does not really seem to have a plan to address them. He hints that the framework agreement setting out ARIA's functions will do so under some kind of general requirement to work with Government, but without any detail. In many ways, ARIA is emblematic of the Government's science strategy—big promises followed by a lack of detail, a lack of transparency and a surfeit of confusion. Conservative peer Lord Lansley made the point:

> "If ARIA is to have a strategy for the funding it receives from the Government, it needs to know in advance whether it can retain revenue derived from investment… That is where I want the most specific assurances from my noble friend that the Government will provide that opportunity to ARIA."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 14 December 2021; Vol. 817, c. 82, 83.]

I agree with him.

We only want what is truly in the interests of our nation. We are not wedded to a particular form of words and we are willing to discuss an alternative that protects IP, but we need assurances that inventions generated by ARIA support, financial or otherwise, will benefit the UK, and I am afraid to say that the Minister just really has not given such assurances.

George Freeman: To assist the hon. Lady before she decides whether to divide the House, I just wanted to make it very clear that there is a statutory obligation on ARIA, set out clearly in clause 2(6), that it must have regard to

> "economic growth, or an economic benefit, in the United Kingdom"

[George Freeman]

as a core part of its statutory duties. We simply want to make sure that the leadership team, through the framework agreement, have the freedom to set out what the right mechanism is, rather than to mandate it now.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for that intervention, which demonstrates that he is with us in spirit but he just does not want to be with us in actual legislation. There is something of a confusion of thought there. I am very familiar with the clauses that require ARIA to have regard to economic benefit, but if he thinks this is something ARIA should be doing and should look to do—again, as we have said, this amendment is enabling and not prescriptive—surely he should be happy to make that clear. If he thinks it is too constraining for ARIA to do this, he ought to make that clear. He is the Minister and this Bill should reflect what the intent is, and the intent should be to ensure that the benefits from intellectual property generated, created and invented in the UK should be felt in the UK.

Lords amendments 2 to 8 limit ministerial powers to dissolve ARIA, in response to the delegated powers in the Regulatory Reform Committee's report on the Bill, and we will not oppose those amendments. They prohibit the Minister from making consequential amendments to primary legislation and from dissolving ARIA in the first 10 years. Lords amendments 9 and 10 remove the Minister's powers to determine a pension or gratuity for non-executive ARIA members. It should be noted that the Minister appoints non-executive members to ARIA's board, and it is refreshing to see a Conservative Government taking steps to limit cronyism in advance of major losses to the public purse. Lords amendments 11 and 13 mean that ARIA will no longer be treated a reserved matter in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and we also do not oppose this. Labour is clear that devolved voices must be heard and that scientific opportunities must be spread across the UK, so the consent of devolved Administrations is crucial.

Lords amendments 12, 14 and 15 provide for ARIA to be treated as a public body under the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003, the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, the Enterprise Act 2016 and the Data Protection Act 2018. My colleague in the other place, Baroness Chapman of Darlington, pointed out, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), that this would not be necessary if ARIA was subject to freedom of information requests, something that Labour has repeatedly called for. The Government were so busy trying to ensure that ARIA would not be treated as a public body for the purposes of FOI that they had to tack on these amendments. That these amendments were tabled only at the Committee stage in the Lords points to Government negligence. We have here a Government too busy trying to avoid accountability to do their job properly— why does that sound so familiar?

Graham Stringer: Does my hon. Friend agree that, during the covid epidemic we have been through, some of the mistakes that have been made came about because the Government were not as open as they could have been with the scientific advice, and that FOI and openness are of value to the scientific method itself? To exclude this body from FOI potentially detracts from the science. We saw another example of this 11 years ago, with the "climategate" emails at the University of East Anglia, when people did not operate openly and it caused scientific problems.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes two very important points. First, many of this Government's mistakes have been due to lack of transparency, not only in the original policy of giving contracts to friends but in the follow-up of explaining those actions. Transparency is always a very good thing. Secondly, the scientific method is about openness. That is how ideas, inventions and progress are made in science. Critically, DARPA, on which ARIA is supposedly based, is subject to the freedom of information process and finds that that helps it in its work.

To conclude, Labour welcomes ARIA. Science and research can be the engine of progress for our society, and we welcome investment in our sciences. That investment, however, must benefit the people who pay for it: the British public. Without Lords amendment 1, we have no assurances that that will happen. If the Government want Britain to be a science superpower, why will they not protect British science and tech IP?

Stephen Flynn: In the greatest traditions of this House, I intend to be brief, which I am sure will be to everyone's pleasure.

The biggest issue before us is, of course, Lords amendment 1. I listened closely to what the Minister had to say, but I remain to be convinced. He has paid deference to the clause, which says, if I recall correctly, that ARIA "must have regard to", while the amendment simply seeks to ensure that ARIA "must". That is a strong difference to which the Minister should give cognisance, particularly given that, in effect, we could be talking about the crown jewels. We are all hopeful that ARIA will be an impressive institution that will reap rewards for all of us right across the four nations of this United Kingdom—while we remain within it, of course. I find it a little contemptuous that the Government do not want to be on that side of the argument.

The topic of equity has been raised. There are some very famous examples. For instance, though this is slightly different, the US Government provided a significant amount of money in a loan to Tesla. That money was subsequently paid back a number of years ago, prior to Tesla becoming one of the world's wealthiest companies and, indeed, to Elon Musk becoming one of the world's wealthiest men. There should be a lesson in that for the Government, and it is one that they should heed.

From what I have heard, the Minister seems to be in broad agreement. He thinks that what is in place will allow this to happen in any case. I hope that over the course of the remaining debate, to which I am sure there will be an extensive number of contributions, he may be swayed to agree to Lords amendment 1.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I, too, will keep my comments brief. The Liberal Democrats have been supportive of this Bill from the start, since its Second Reading. We very much welcome the opportunity and, indeed, the new vehicle to get funding into science and technology in this country.

I join the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), however, in saying that the absolute priority

must be to ensure that that investment stays in this country and benefits the people, including the investors, those who may benefit from employment and, indeed, every single one of us who seeks to benefit from the new innovation for which this money may well pay. A couple of weeks ago I visited my former employers at the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, where I saw for myself the incredible work that is taking place on battery technology and hydrogen technology. There is so much potential for the future, but this country has traditionally been really bad at converting that incredible R&D skill into entrepreneurism and innovation and at building sustainable businesses. That is why I think it is so important that we support the Lords amendment, and it is certainly why we will vote against the Government's motion.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 208.

Division No. 178] [7.44 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
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
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
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
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
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
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
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
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, James
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Sir Robert
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John

Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stride, rh Mel
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Shailesh
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
Craig Whittaker and Gareth Johnson

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela *(Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson)*
Creasy, Stella *(Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore)*
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz *(Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)*
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Jeff
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Stephen
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
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:
Liz Twist and
Mary Glindon

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 15 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 12 and 14.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 1;

That George Freeman, Craig Whittaker, Felicity Buchan, Mark Fletcher, Chi Onwurah, Jessica Morden and Stephen Flynn be members of the Committee;

That George Freeman be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reason to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

DORMANT ASSETS BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME) (NO.2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 6 December 2021 (Dormant Assets) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme)) be varied as follows—

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

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

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

Dormant Assets Bill [*Lords*]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

AUTHORISED RECLAIM FUNDS: DUTY TO ASSESS AND REPORT

'(1) The Secretary of State must make an annual assessment of the health and governance of authorised reclaim funds. The assessment must be reported to Parliament.

(2) The first report under subsection (1) must be laid 12 months after—

(a) any restriction imposed under section 18A(1)(a) of the 2008 Act comes into force, or

(b) the provision in section 18A(1)(b) of that Act comes into force,

whichever occurs first.

(3) An assessment under subsection (1) must include an evaluation of the risk of insolvency of the fund.'—*(Alex Davies-Jones.)*

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to assess the health and governance of reclaim funds regularly in relation to the risk of insolvency, and to report on this annually to Parliament.

Brought up, and read the First time.

8 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to consider Government amendments 1 and 2.

Alex Davies-Jones: I rise to speak to new clause 1 in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). As the Bill has moved through this House and the other place, I have been pleased by the progress that has been made, although there is still work to be done to ensure that dormant assets are distributed and governed effectively. Colleagues will be aware that the Bill will expand the current dormant assets scheme, which was first introduced by a Labour Government in 2008. The Government define dormant assets as a financial product, such as a bank account, that has not been used for many years and which the provider has been unable to reunite with its owner, despite efforts aligned with industry best practice.

In 2008, the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act was passed to provide a system to distribute dormant assets to good causes. Currently, 24 banks and building societies participate in the reclaim fund scheme, but Labour has always intended that the dormant assets scheme would broaden the financial products to which that legislation applies.

Although the Bill makes some progress and Labour supports the need for consultation, we urge that the scheme go much further. With the right safeguards in place to find the owners of assets, unclaimed winnings from gambling, pension assets and physical assets could be considered in the future, too. While I am grateful to the Minister for his frankness throughout the passage of this Bill, I must once again put on record that while Labour is generally supportive of the Bill, we urge that further consideration be given to incorporating pension assets into the scheme. While I recognise that the Minister

[Alex Davies-Jones]

has highlighted that occupational pension schemes and personal pension schemes whose owners were automatically enrolled are excluded, or out of scope of the Bill, I hope that in the future those assets will receive further consideration.

The core principles of any scheme must remain clear. Attempts should first be made to reunite assets with their rightful owners before transferring them. Owners should always be able to reclaim their funds, and participation must ultimately be voluntary. Labour is also clear that any funds released to the dormant assets scheme must not be used as a substitute for Government spending. We know that the increasing cost of living is impacting so many people across the country, and this Bill presents an important opportunity to release further funding and to put right some of the wrongs. On that point, I pay particular tribute to colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group for "left behind" neighbourhoods, who have been closely focused on the importance of dormant asset funding for vital community projects in the most left-behind parts of the country.

With that in mind, I place on record Labour's thoughts on community wealth funds, which the Minister knows I feel passionately about. In the other place, Labour secured an amendment that would have allowed the Secretary of State to include community wealth funds as recipients of funding. That amendment had cross-party support and was generally welcomed by the sector. The aim of including community wealth funds as recipients of funding is clear. The designated money would be designed to go towards social infrastructure to further the wellbeing of communities suffering from high levels of deprivation. I was disappointed and also surprised that the Government chose to remove a measure aimed at empowering communities, which is also at the heart of the Government's well-rehearsed levelling-up agenda. That said, I welcome the Minister's collaborative and candid approach throughout the latter stages of this Bill, and Labour welcomes the Government's commitment to including community wealth funds as part of the first round of consultations, as outlined in the Government's amendment 2.

We must now make sure that momentum is not lost on that important development, as community wealth funds are central to reviving so many communities up and down the country. With that in mind, central to any spend is the importance of governance and sustainability in ensuring that funds of this nature are maintained and in good health.

The Minister knows, and I believe agrees, that scrutiny of the reclaim fund is vital. That is why we have tabled new clause 1. Recent events have highlighted the need for a transparent approach to decisions made in this place and the other place, and it is therefore vital that the Government are held to account on the health and governance of reclaim funds, especially in relation to the potential for insolvency.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I endorse entirely what my hon. Friend is saying. Does she agree, given the lack of confidence in some of the decision-making processes that the Government have undertaken before allocating funds, that it is all the more reason why new clause 1 would have real public confidence?

Alex Davies-Jones: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Part of the reason we tabled new clause 1 is for openness and transparency, so that the public and this House can scrutinise exactly where this funding is being placed. Scrutiny is at the very heart of our jobs here in this place, and an annual report brought forward to Parliament, as new clause 1 stipulates, would be a crucial step forward.

Lastly, on Government amendment 1, I am pleased to see the clarification around collective scheme investments. It is vital that such investments remain eligible for incorporation into the reclaim fund. I hope to see further assets incorporated in the future, as I stipulated earlier.

Ultimately, Labour supports the Bill as our priority remains expanding the dormant assets scheme in line with our commitments first made in 2008. The programme so far has been extremely successful, and predictions suggest that expanding the scheme in such a way would identify about £3.7 billion of unclaimed assets, of which about £1.7 billion would be eligible for transfer to the reclaim fund. From that, £880 million would be repurposed for good causes across the UK. Labour supports that extremely welcome step, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister to tackle the challenges around extending the scheme to other assets. I hope that he will take on board our concerns about future governance of the fund, too.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I congratulate the Government on bringing forward the Bill. I recognise that, as the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said, the release of dormant assets started with Labour and has been a cross-party achievement. My thanks, congratulations and appreciation also go to the financial institutions that have made the money available.

I am pleased with the Government's proposals, including the consultation on the potential introduction of a community wealth fund. My congratulations and appreciation to the Minister for including that as a possibility, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for their work in bringing that idea forward.

There are other great ideas—we could abolish personal debt by capitalising credit unions with this money or distribute it direct to community foundations in our constituencies—but I think that the community wealth fund is the best idea. I hope that we will see the money going into civil society and social infrastructure and into supporting the great levelling-up agenda to which the Government are committed. This is a tremendous Bill, and I very much support what the Government are doing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates. I thank the Government and the Minister for all they have done to make this Bill happen. Clauses 12 and 29, to which the Minister's amendments refer, indicate things that the Democratic Unionist party wish to see, and I let him know that our party will support the Government tonight. However, I now wish to speak to new clause 1.

I agree that there must be further provision for dormant assets. Why not make good use of funds that would ultimately lie dormant unless further action was taken?

The Bill aims to expand the current criteria, which will come with some great benefits, so it is great to speak on an important issue such as this. I welcome the Bill and look forward to the debate's conclusion.

The Bill's core purpose is to extend the dormant assets scheme to other financial assets, which could generate an additional £880 million of contributions. The figures are gigantic when we think on them, and they indicate where the Bill is going and what it can achieve. The Bill has three main functions: to track dormant account owners and reunite them with their account; to allow account owners to reclaim any amount they would have been eligible for; and to allow firms to partake as a voluntary process. The Bill will expand the assets involved further, creating a more sustainable economic success rate, make it a requirement for firms to get involved, and remove further financial restrictions. It is a win-win for the Government and for the Minister in particular.

The dormant assets scheme currently supports and boosts, by some £800 million, innovative, long-term programmes that aim to address some of the most pressing social and environmental issues. As I said, its expansion through the Bill will unlock an additional £880 million. It is stated that the Bill's benefits will be felt across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I for one would like reassurances from the Minister that it will extend to Northern Ireland and that we will benefit as well. The potential for benefit in the UK mainland is great, but we also want to see it, if we can, in Northern Ireland.

Thus far, the scheme has benefited many foundations. The Youth Futures Foundation, which has undertaken significant work to tackle youth unemployment, got some £90 million, and Big Society Capital got over £400 million to tackle homelessness. These are great projects. The Bill makes money available to address social issues; how could anyone not say that that is great?

Also at the heart of this scheme is securing protections for those who own any of the financial assets involved. Dormant assets remain the property of their owners, who can reclaim any money owed to them in full at any time. In Northern Ireland, the Dormant Accounts Fund NI works to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, and we can see the benefits immediately. In Northern Ireland more than 44,000 staff are employed in the sector, which accounts for 6% of the total Northern Ireland workforce. I would encourage all organisations to contact the National Lottery Community Fund to take advantage of the wonderful scheme that Northern Ireland has to offer.

I thank Members who have already contributed, and those who will contribute later, to a debate that has made clear the potential for a great economic impact following this expansion. I want to ensure that the devolved institutions can take advantage of this scheme as well, and that the funds generated in England are greater than those generated in Scotland and Northern Ireland. There must also be further engagement with local communities and smaller organisations to ensure that they are not left behind.

I acknowledge the benefits that the Bill has introduced so far, and I shall welcome further discussion and expansion to ensure that financial assets are not wasted and the money is put to good use. We have seen what the scheme can do; it can do more.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I support the Government's proposal for a public consultation on distributions to a new community wealth fund. We talk often and rightly in this House about levelling up, particularly on the Government side of the House. It is right that this is a priority for the Government, but too often we talk as if the work of levelling up were a job for Government alone. I firmly believe that the best decisions for communities are rarely made for them rather than by them. That is why we should treat communities across the country as the legitimate decision makers that they are. We all know that strong community leaders can transform a local community We will all have seen that on our patches. I could name many from East Surrey, including Janine Battersby in Woldingham, and Kay Hammond and the Calvers in Smallfield. With their dedication, charisma and get-up-and-go, they forge friendships, support those who need extra help, and put the local needs of their communities in front of those who might be able to meet them.

Let me give the House a brief example of this in action. I recently visited the residents group Ambition Lawrence Weston. On the edge of Bristol, Lawrence Weston had for too long had been used as a dumping ground for social housing tenants with complex needs. They were trapped in a negative cycle. Low housing costs made it attractive for the council to use it to temporarily house people, often with complex needs. That created disruption and fracturing within the community, which in turn drove low housing costs—and so the cycle went on.

However, with the support of the Local Trust's Big Local community fund programme, the residents decided that they had had enough of things being done to them instead of for them. With some initial capital support from the community fund, they have transformed the area by building a new community centre, bringing in a new supermarket, introducing a local lettings policy, and bidding directly for Government funds themselves. They have a solar farm and even a wind turbine to tackle fuel poverty. I am in awe of that team. I have seen similar developments on my own patch: we have a community fund, Your Fund Surrey, and I am working with some brilliant people in Whyteleafe, Deano, Sara and Marcus, who are pushing to set up their own community centre and are doing it brilliantly.

It was a relatively small amount of funding that made these developments possible, but that funding unleashed the really important thing: the leadership, ambition and energy of a group of remarkable, community-minded individuals, which has made such a difference. Without these funds, that would have been wasted. I believe that the community wealth fund can unlock that level of ambition and energy from individuals up and down the country, and I am pleased to support amendment 2.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome amendment 2 to clause 29. Those who have followed the passage of this Bill from its introduction in the other place to its Report stage today will know that along with other members of the all-party parliamentary group for "left behind" neighbourhoods, including my excellent co-chair, the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), I have long been advocating the establishment of a community wealth fund as part of the extended dormant assets scheme. The Government's

[Dame Diana Johnson]

amendment proposes that a national consultation on the distribution of dormant assets should include consultation on the distribution of these moneys to a community wealth fund through including them on the existing list of beneficiaries set out in the original legislation on dormant assets. Such a fund would be aimed at developing social infrastructure in the most left-behind neighbourhoods of the country—neighbourhoods such as Bransholme and Orchard Park in my constituency of Hull North. They are communities that not only suffer from extreme levels of disadvantage and deprivation, but experience significant deficits in their local community fabric. As research from the all-party group has found, residents of these communities experience well below average outcomes across a whole range of indicators. For example, our recent report on health inequalities found that people living in left-behind neighbourhoods have among the worst health outcomes in England, with growing disparities between them and the rest of the country, including the most shocking statistic that a person from one of those neighbourhoods was 46% more likely to die during the covid pandemic.

8.15 pm

If the Government want levelling up to be a success, they must reach these communities, which, for far too long, have missed out on their fair share of resources. Funding has to be for the long term, supporting transformational change at the neighbourhood level. The principles underlying the dormant assets legislation make it clear that the money from the scheme should be used to have a positive impact on society by contributing dormant assets for systematic change. I am very encouraged by the Government's amendment, which upholds these principles for the use of dormant asset funding, and I very much welcome the inclusion in the Bill of consulting on the distribution to community wealth funds.

I am not alone in welcoming amendment 2. As well as parliamentarians from the all-party group, the proposal for a community wealth fund is backed by a cross-sector alliance of more than 470 organisations, which include 40 councils and combined authorities. I thank Local Trust, the secretariat for our all-party group, for all the work that it has done to promote the role of community wealth funds. I thank the Minister in particular for engaging with us on a cross-party basis and listening to the case that we have been making on behalf of those communities that have the least.

I very much welcome the Government's amendment and look forward to working with the Minister and the Government on how a community wealth fund can be established and implemented swiftly on the conclusion of the national consultation. I hope that Members from across the House will support the amendment.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger), and for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for the comments they have made already. I cannot state how much I welcome the Bill being brought to the House and how successful and efficient its passage has been. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), for tabling his amendment to clause 29. It represents an important step towards establishing a community wealth fund that would level up the social fabric of our most left-behind neighbourhoods across England.

I wish to say a few words on behalf of the all-party group. I know that the Government are committed to regenerating communities that suffer from both extreme levels of poverty and high levels of community need—communities such as Ferryhill, Trimdon and Thornley in my Sedgefield constituency, and communities across the country, from the north of England, through the midlands and down to the coastal communities on the south coast where residents often feel forgotten and cut off from support or funding.

I thank the Minister for meeting me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, my fellow co-chair of the all-party group for left-behind neighbourhoods, to hear our representations and to understand the importance of what we are trying to achieve and how we can address this through the community wealth fund. Together, with other members of our all-party group, I look forward to a continued dialogue with Government and with colleagues across the House and in the other place on how such a fund can quickly be rolled out on swift passage of the Bill and the planned national consultation.

Numerous evidence sessions and research conducted by the all-party group since it was established in June 2020 have shone a light on the high levels of need and deprivation that exist in these communities and neighbourhoods and the issues faced by the residents who live there. Most recently, a report found that the people in these communities live shorter lives and spend more years in ill health than those in the rest of the country. These findings have rightly captured the interests of national media and are another sobering testament to the fact that action is urgently needed to level up social, economic and environmental outcomes in deprived communities across the country. I look forward to what the levelling up White Paper has to say about that, and I know that our all-party group will be keenly following those developments.

It is clear that transforming left-behind neighbourhoods is a long-term job. To deliver on that agenda, we need to go beyond physical infrastructure investment—welcome though that is in bringing hope to an area, as I know from my campaign work to restore local rail links such as Ferryhill station. Good local transport provision is key to levelling up, because it boosts connectivity in disconnected areas.

To level up successfully, however, and truly make a long-lasting difference to people's lives, we must address the rebuilding of social infrastructure. Social infrastructure—places to meet, exchange ideas and take part in civic life—glues communities together. It underpins the vibrant local life that everyone seeks to be part of in their communities; it cements our trust and pride in our local heritage and the places where we live; and it provides us with something to rely on in times of crisis.

As the amendment explains, a community wealth fund would give long-term financial support for the provision of local amenities and other social infrastructure in a way that is led from the bottom up. As was said earlier, we must allow it to be done by people, not to

people. As the Government have acknowledged on several occasions during the Bill's passage, local people are best placed to identify what is needed to make their communities a better place to live.

In our evidence sessions, we heard first-hand the amazing work being done by communities up and down the country, and how powerful an impact local people can have when they work together to improve local outcomes with the right resources and support. We heard truly inspiring stories of communities in neighbourhoods from Bristol to Hartlepool taking the lead in levelling up their local area through widening access to opportunities and employment outcomes for young people, tackling fuel poverty and community led climate action.

Climate action is, of course, an increasingly important focus of activity, given the transition to net zero, and one where left-behind neighbourhoods are particularly at risk of falling further behind as a result of the economic restructuring under way. We therefore need to equip them with the confidence, capacity and resources through patient and long-term support to take action on what matters most to them and to transform their communities for the better. The community wealth fund proposal serves exactly that purpose. It builds on research and learning from previous regeneration policies, which all support the notion that community involvement is essential in achieving lasting change.

As already said, the community wealth fund is supported by more than 470 private, public and civic society organisations that have joined forces to form the community wealth fund alliance to call for the creation of such a fund. To reiterate what I said when presenting my ten-minute rule Bill in December, I believe that it would supercharge the levels of community confidence and capacity in left-behind areas.

In the long run, the social capital that is developed will be reflected in residents' ability to create and lead sustainable strategies on how they can make change happen locally and tap into the wider opportunities offered on a regional level. In short, the investment would pay significant dividends in the longer run through funding from dormant assets at no extra cost to the public. We are presented with the opportunity to create a permanent endowment for communities in need.

For much of the hard work on the community wealth fund, I thank Local Trust and its team, particularly its chief executive Matt Leach. I know that the work is not over—in many respects, the real work starts now—and that I and others will no doubt be working closely with Local Trust to ensure that the fund becomes a reality.

I finish by thanking the Minister again for tabling the amendment to clause 29. It is heartening to hear the Government emphasise the importance of hyperlocal decision making for levelling up. I look forward to working with the Minister, the Government and our APPG to develop social infrastructure and boost civic pride in communities across the country.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I know that the Westminster press corps has been waiting for something exciting to happen in Parliament today, so I am glad to be able to help to provide it. It is good to see the Secretary of State in her place fresh from her "Channel 4 News" interview triumph.

The SNP welcomes the Bill and the expansion of the dormant assets scheme. The extra £880 million available as a result is welcome. The scheme has already delivered £745 million for social and environmental initiatives. By expanding the list of assets that qualify for the scheme, up to £1.7 billion more could be available for use.

I draw the Minister's attention to the remarks made about the Bill in the other place, although I am sure that he is aware of them. Peers wanted clarity on its potential costs and more detailed impact assessments for the expanded scheme. Baroness Barker specifically warned that these details were important, so the scheme does not become a

"piggyback fund for government when times are tough."—[*Official Report, House of Lords,* 26 May 2021; Vol. 1039, c. 812.]

SNP Members welcome the Labour party amendment proposing an annual assessment of the health and governance of authorised reclaimed funds; this will, I think, help to assuage Baroness Barker's concerns. Also, as a principle, the more scrutiny is given to this legislation, the better it will function.

It is good, of course, to see that the Bill makes some changes to distribution in England. Now the Secretary of State will have more freedom to spread assets through secondary legislation. That allows England to catch up with Scotland, which already has such an ability. As Lord Triesman highlighted in the other place, it was the example set by the devolved nations, with their innovative thinking in how they spend the funds allotted to them, that provided the impetus for the expansion of the scheme that the Bill presents. What the pandemic has shown is that the needs of the population can change dramatically and suddenly. Flexibility in secondary legislation is a useful tool to deal with that, and we must continue to ensure that there is adequate scrutiny.

We welcome the requirement for the Secretary of State to launch a public consultation and to consult the national lottery. The Community Fund must always be consulted before replacing or changing an order. However, it may be desirable to expand this consultation beyond the national lottery Community Fund and to include devolved Ministers responsible for spending in their nations, and representatives of the voluntary and social enterprise sectors.

It is reassuring to see that the expanded scheme will focus on reuniting owners with their dormant assets. With the expanded range of qualifying products, it is estimated that £3.7 billion-worth of products are lying dormant. For all the good that the schemes do for various charities, it is of the utmost importance that people are reunited with their assets. With the elderly and the vulnerable, especially those without digital skills, among those most likely to lose access or connection to their accounts in an increasingly digitised world, reunification efforts are more important than ever. That is why the SNP welcomes the enhanced tracing and verification measures, which could lead to £2 billion being returned to members of the public.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contribution to the debate and for the constructive way in which everyone has engaged with the Bill throughout its passage. I thank in particular those who have spoken this evening. My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger)

[Nigel Huddleston]

has made his points about community wealth funds frequently and passionately, as have the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), whom I will acknowledge again later. I can confirm for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that the expansion will cover Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) again spoke passionately about the impact that dormant assets funding will have on local communities. We should never forget that.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) mentioned the principle of additionality, as did my opposite numbers on the Labour Front Bench, the hon. Members for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). That principle underlies the Bill absolutely and completely. Regarding expansion, the Secretary of State is to conduct periodic reviews—within three years and then again in five years. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire mentioned that Scotland currently operates on a different basis, and that is one of the reasons why we have sought to expand where dormant assets money can be used.

I particularly thank my opposite numbers on the Labour Front Bench for their constructive contributions. Throughout, we have agreed on the principles. It is nice and good to see a Bill through its various stages with such a degree of consensus. Although we sometimes disagree on elements of detail, on the Bill's overwhelming purpose and underlying principles there is complete agreement, and I appreciate the constructive way they have engaged with me.

However, I am afraid we do not believe that new clause 1—a proposal we debated in Committee—is necessary, largely on the basis that there is considerable oversight already, as I have explained before. Although the new clause refers to "authorised reclaim funds", in practice it refers specifically to Reclaim Fund Ltd, as it is currently the only authorised reclaim fund in the United Kingdom. RFL publishes its audited annual reports and accounts on its website annually. In 2019 the Office for National Statistics classified RFL to the central Government subsector, and in April 2021 it therefore became a Treasury-owned arm's length body.

8.30 pm

Now that RFL is an ALB, Parliament has greater oversight of its operations and financial information. RFL has been consolidated into HM Treasury's accounts, which are laid before Parliament on a yearly basis. Furthermore, it is standard practice for the annual reports and accounts of ALBs, together with any report from the auditors, to be laid before Parliament by the sponsor Department. That will happen for the first time this year.

Parliament will therefore have the opportunity to view RFL's full statutory accounts and, like all ALBs, RFL cannot publish its accounts until they have been laid before Parliament. The Comptroller and Auditor General, operating through the National Audit Office, will audit RFL's accounts from financial year 2021-22. The Government do not recognise a need for bespoke arrangements under the Bill, as Parliament already has greater oversight of RFL's operations and financial information. I assure Parliament that the Treasury has a robust governance structure in place that ensures that it has oversight of any potential risk of insolvency. For those reasons, I ask that the House does not support new clause 1.

Government amendment 1 is a minor and technical amendment that will ensure that the principle of full restitution continues to be upheld, ensuring that people can reclaim the amount they would have been owed had the transfer to the scheme not happened. It clarifies that money derived from collective scheme investments cannot be transferred into the scheme as client money.

Unfortunately, this amendment will have the effect of excluding collective scheme investments held by investment platforms and ISA fund managers from the scheme at this time. Bringing them into scope would require complex technical work, and we are working with the industry to understand if and how that can be accomplished in future under the power to extend the scheme through regulations.

Finally, Government amendment 2 responds to a key theme in the debates over community wealth funds, on which there has been considerable discussion this evening. It is testimony to the cross-party support for the scheme and the Bill that this issue has been talked about so much. I am very grateful for the spirit of positive collaboration that has been shown throughout the Bill's stages. It is in that spirit that we are placing in the Bill our commitment to consult on community wealth funds.

I especially thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield, the co-chairs of the APPG for "left behind" neighbourhoods, for helping the Government reach this shared position, as well as all those who have made representations. In her speech, the right hon. Lady spoke about creating opportunity, aspiration and inclusivity. I assure her that that is the instruction from my Secretary of State every single day in the Department—it is absolutely what we are here to do.

We have heard both here and in the other place of the many benefits of a community wealth fund model. The Government are committed to giving this important cause its due consideration. Amendment 2 will ensure that the consultation, which will launch as soon as possible following Royal Assent, must include CWFs as an option, along with the current causes of youth, financial inclusion and social investment, which have had widespread support over the past decade.

I understand that there have been concerns that the consultation process will cause undue delays to the money being released. Let me assure hon. Members that that will not be the case. The consultation will not delay the release of funds; rather, it will run in parallel with other necessary preparations.

Once again, I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for the constructive and collaborative debate today. For the reasons I have outlined, I ask that the House does not support new clause 1 and supports the Government amendments.

Alex Davies-Jones: I wish to put on the record my thanks to hon. Members. I am encouraged by our collegiate debate, in stark contrast to the scenes on the Floor of the House earlier today. This evening's debate shows that Parliament is at its best when we all work

together across parties to deliver for our communities. More needs to be made of what we can do when we choose to work together.

As I mentioned, it was a Labour Government who first advanced legislation to place dormant assets from bank and building society accounts into the reclaim fund after significant efforts were made to contact the owners of those assets. For this reason, we are broadly supportive of the Bill and its main aims to expand the scheme. We therefore continue to welcome attempts to incorporate a commitment to community wealth funds, which have the potential to support communities across the nation that have been left behind in recent years.

The Minister knows that Labour Members outlined our concerns at length in Committee and on Report, and my colleagues and I made particular reference to some of the flaws in the Bill that we ultimately sought to correct. It is therefore somewhat disappointing that our concerns on the health and governance of the reclaim fund have not been taken on board, particularly as transparency and scrutiny are such essential facets of our work in this place.

In Committee, the Minister argued that Reclaim Fund Ltd is

"responsible for determining the appropriate proportion of funding that it can prudently release… The amount that RFL reserves for future repayment claims is…based on actuarial modelling and assessment of…risk factors, following guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority."—[*Official Report, Dormant Assets Public Bill Committee,* 11 January 2022; c. 34-35.]

Of course, independence from the Government is vital but it is also important that the Secretary of State makes a regular assessment if this fund is to be available for future generations. I sincerely hope the Minister will take on board our concerns and discuss with the Secretary of State, who is in her place, and departmental colleagues the potential for an annual report, which would be extremely beneficial for those who rely on funds from this important scheme.

Although Labour supports the Bill, we believe the Government have missed several opportunities. I urge the Secretary of State to speed up the timetable to allow for these much-needed funds to reach the communities that need them most. I look forward to closely following the development of the first public consultation. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 12

TRANSFER OF ELIGIBLE CLIENT MONEY TO RECLAIM FUND

Amendment made: 1, page 12, line 9, at end insert—

"(4A) The reference in subsection (4)(b) to money that could be transferred as mentioned in section 8(1)(a) includes money held by an investment institution that is not within the definition in section 8(3) which—

(a) is proceeds of the conversion by the investment institution of a collective scheme investment into a right to payment of an amount, and

(b) could, if it were held by an investment institution falling within section 8(3), be transferred as mentioned in section 8(1)(a)."—*(Craig Whittaker.)*

This amendment clarifies that money held by an investment institution not within clause 8(3) is not client money if it is the proceeds of a conversion to cash of a collective scheme investment and would be capable of being transferred to a reclaim fund if the holder was an investment institution within clause 8(3).

Clause 29

DISTRIBUTION OF DORMANT ASSETS MONEY FOR MEETING ENGLISH EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: 2, page 22, line 21, at end insert—

"(3A) In carrying out the first public consultation under subsection (3)(a) the Secretary of State must invite views as to whether the permitted distributions should be, or include, any one or more of the following—

(a) distributions for the purpose of the provision of services, facilities or opportunities to meet the needs of young people;

(b) distributions for the purpose of the development of individuals' ability to manage their finances or the improvement of access to personal financial services;

(c) distributions to social investment wholesalers (within the meaning of section 18);

(d) distributions to community wealth funds.

(3B) For the purposes of subsection (3A) "community wealth fund" means a fund which gives long term financial support (whether directly or indirectly) for the provision of local amenities or other social infrastructure."—*(Craig Whittaker.)*

This amendment requires the first public consultation under section 18A to include the options of permitting the English dormant asset money distributions currently permitted by section 18(1) and distributions to community wealth funds, whether or not in addition to other permitted purposes or recipients.

Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg relating to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—*(Craig Whittaker.)*

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

[Relevant document: First Report of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, Appointment of IPSA Board Member, HC 1032, published 13 January 2022.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Lea Paterson to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 14 March 2022.—*(Stuart Andrew.)*

8.38 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): In the absence of the Leader of the House, I rise to support the motion. There has been a fair and rigorous process to appoint the new member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority board to fill the vacancy created by Richard Lloyd, who has gone on to chair IPSA. I put on the record the official Opposition's gratitude and thanks to the recruitment panel—particularly Philippa Helme, the chair of the panel—which was conducted with due care and attention. It was noted that Ms Paterson expressed to the recruitment panel her full commitment to public service as her primary motivator, and I know we wish her well as she begins her term on the IPSA board.

8.39 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I will give the Leader of the House the time to recover from the other duties that he has been undertaking during the course of what has undoubtedly been a busy day.

I know nothing of Ms Lea Paterson, either favourable or unfavourable, although it is a reasonable CV. However, once again, the appointment is from a very narrow band of our society. Let us look at the document that specifies who can be on IPSA. By the way, all these experts that it has have not led to a better service for Members of the House. Quite frankly, it is absolutely shocking. The administrative burden on Members of Parliament gets worse and worse for what should be basic, simple jobs.

Let us look at the jobs. At least one Member must have held high judicial office—that has kept the lawyers happy, with a sinecure. Another one must be an auditor, so we have looked after the accountants. Another one is a person who has previously been a Member. This vacancy, however, is not specific; it is a general vacancy. Once again, did they go out and look across the broad spectrum of our society, for people with experience? Well, they went off to recruitment consultants Veredus, to scour beyond a mile of Westminster to find somebody who fitted the bill. I think that is extremely unlikely. I do not think they went to the north, the midlands, Scotland or Wales. They tried to reach out, by going to *The Times* appointments adverts, which does not actually have a very high circulation in Smethwick or, I expect, many other constituencies. It is an excellent newspaper, but it is not the way to reach many people in our society who have great experience.

Interestingly enough, many successful firms are far more adventurous in their recruitment processes. Who do they often look for to bring into the ranks of management? They look for capable shop stewards. Sometimes, in my experience they were the worst ones to deal with because they knew the ropes. These are people who really know how industry and society work: people who are running hospitals; ward sisters who are running wards; people who are managing our transport and logistics system. Those are people who understand how life works.

We are supposed to be running an expenses system, yet we are only recruiting, once again, from the great and the good. That is a problem across Government appointments and society. Then we wonder why government in this country is so badly managed. It is because we draw from such a narrow pool. I regret that the Opposition go along with that. There ought to be a root and branch examination to look at where we draw people from and what their work and life experience is. I hope that the Leader of the House, in dealing with the specific, will also address the general point I am making about how we should broaden our society.

8.42 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I apologise for my momentary delay. The motion proposes that an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint the person to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years, with effect from 14 March 2022.

The Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority produced a report that is tagged to the motion—its first report of 2022. I have no doubt that Members—the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) is certainly one of them—will have studied the report carefully before agreeing to the motion. I thank Philippa Helme for running the selection process diligently.

I would like to try to respond to what the right hon. Gentleman said, because it is important that people are drawn or apply from as wide a background as possible. That is something that he has tirelessly encouraged, and it goes along with the Government policy of trying to move Ministries outside SW1 to other parts of the country, to ensure greater involvement of people up and down the country from various degrees of experience. I know that Mr Speaker is keen to encourage applicants who do not necessarily fit the entirely traditional bill. I have to say, I think he thinks that only applicants from Lancashire would be suitable for most posts, whatever that post happens to be.

John Spellar: Can I put it to the Leader of the House that time after time we get recommendations to appointments, and they all come from the same narrow social circle? It is not even, as it was with the traditional Tory party, that they come from industry. We almost never have anybody from industry; they are always from the professions and the City of London. The person we are being recommended was a journalist and then worked at the Bank of England. Could we not have somebody who worked for Jaguar Land Rover, either as a convenor or as the manager?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. I think we do want to fish in a bigger pool, and I think we should always be very concerned about what might broadly be called the quangocracy.

We do not want this country run by people who pass and bounce from quango to quango, and pick up nice appointments along the way.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In response to the point the Leader of the House has just made, with the earnest desire he expresses to ensure that we broaden the pool, what examples can he point to of how the recruitment panel attempted to broaden the pool in this particular case?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The process of the recruitment panel and what it looked at is all set out in its report. It had quite a large number of applicants, and it has to be said that Lea Paterson was the outstanding applicant by a long margin. She is not a characteristic quangocrat: that has not been her career. Until recently, she was the executive director of people and culture at the Bank of England. She is currently an independent member of the University of Warwick remuneration committee. She has previously held a number of senior management positions at the Bank of England, including being the director of independent evaluation. Before working for the Bank, she was a journalist, as economics editor, at *The Times*. I am afraid I have a particular bias in favour of *The Times*, its being the great newspaper of record and having fantastic editors, particularly in the 1970s. Journalists are not typical quangocrats, it has to be said—they are normally the ones throwing stones into the pools of the quangocracy—so I do not think that is the type of person we are appointing today.

However, I do take very seriously the criticisms from the right hon. Member for Warley. It is really important that we try to attract people of ability from across the country, because that is what we are trying to do as Members of Parliament. We come together from across the country to try to support a Government who will act with wisdom and discernment, which I am glad to say is what we have at the moment. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will continue his campaign, and I know that there are people sympathetic to it.

In the meantime, I am proud to be able to recommend this Humble Address to the House. If the appointment were to be made, Lea Paterson will serve on IPSA for five years. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I propose, with the leave of the House, that we take motions 8 and 9 together.

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

National Health Service

That the draft Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 14 December 2021, be approved.

Dangerous Drugs

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 15 December 2021, be approved.—*(Craig Whittaker.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Stalking advocates

8.48 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on the subject of stalking advocates. In June 2021, my constituent Gracie Spinks was murdered by somebody who had been stalking her for a considerable time. The murder absolutely shocked Chesterfield to its foundations, and her funeral brought the town to a standstill. In the light of that appalling event, my constituent Jackie Barnett-Wheatcroft brought together a petition, which was signed by over 17,500 people, on the issue of stalking advocates. It was a paper petition that was rushed out shortly after the appalling murder, and it did not comply with the exact terms of parliamentary petitions. Subsequently, an e-petition was formed—we have debated it today—which 100,000 people have signed. I also wanted to present a petition in Parliament, which I do today, signed by 204 of my constituents.

The petition reads:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to reallocate funds to provide additional funding for stalking advocates in order to support victims of stalking."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that the 2019/20 Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that 3.6% of adults aged 16-74 experienced stalking in the last year, equivalent to an estimated 1.5 million victims, 977,000 women and 526,000 men; declares that stalking advocates for victims of stalking are invaluable due to the specialist independent support, advice and advocacy that they provide; further that stalking advocates provide victims with a main point of contact and support throughout their journey; further that additional funding for stalking advocates to work with victims of stalking would help support victims; further that increased support would prevent unnecessary distress and suffering of victims and their families; and further that additional support should also be given to police to allow cases to be investigated more thoroughly, possibly preventing threats to life.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to reallocate funds to provide additional funding for stalking advocates in order to support victims of stalking.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002710]

NHS Hysteroscopy Treatment

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

8.50 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am, frankly, very disappointed to have to be raising this issue again in this House. This is the ninth time I have spoken about this, and it is more than eight years since my first speech on this topic. However, the problem of pain and trauma caused during hysteroscopies has not gone away. I want to pay tribute to the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy, who do so much to let women know that they are not alone, that their experience has not been singular, that they were not making it up and they were not hysterical; they were experiencing great pain and discomfort. That campaign offers comfort and a productive outlet for their utterly justifiable anger. My hope is that this Minister will not only take this issue away, but will commit today to getting action at a national level, because it is a true scandal that these horrific abuses are still taking place. Let me be really clear with people. Every time I speak, I have new stories, because women hear my speech as they reel from fresh abuses and they get in touch. So all these stories that I am going to recount today have happened since my last speech on this issue.

I will start with the story of Jane, who had a hysteroscopy late last year. Jane had been warned by her excellent GP that the specialist might attempt to talk her into a hysteroscopy without anaesthetic, and that she had the right to insist on proper pain relief. After all, she has several well-recognised risk factors for pain during hysteroscopy, including endometriosis, a tilted uterus, and never having had children. Fully aware of that, Jane received a letter for an appointment about the results of an ultrasound scan she had had. The letter said nothing about a hysteroscopy, and nothing about her risks or her right to anaesthetic, so she went along expecting simply to have a discussion with a consultant about the results of the scan. But when she got there, she was informed that the consultant wanted to do a hysteroscopy there and then. She said immediately she wanted a general anaesthetic, and explained that she had had terrible pain from similar procedures in the past. Shamefully, the consultant's response was to laugh in her face and say

"if we gave a general anaesthetic to every woman who had a hysteroscopy the queue would be a mile long".

To laugh at a woman in distress in that position, I find abhorrent.

Jane was scared. She shook but she felt she had no choice but to comply. She told the doctor and nurse what she had heard about the pain, but they told her not to believe everything she read. She told me that

"as soon as the speculum went in I felt immense pain that was absolutely unbearable...the doctor was having difficulty finding the opening to my cervix so twisted the speculum and dug around, which caused indescribable pain, I felt I might pass out, I had tunnel vision"—

and she was "shaking and hyperventilating."

At that point, thank heavens, the procedure was stopped but, unbelievably, the doctor said that he simply did not understand why Jane was in so much pain and causing such a fuss, which only worried her more, because it increased her concern that she had cancer. Even after all that, the doctor was still unwilling to consider a proper anaesthetic. Instead, he prescribed a hormonal pessary and suggested that she come back for another go in a fortnight.

Jane was in a fog. She does not remember anything other than getting home and curling up on the sofa, shaking with shock. She has relived the experience over and over, unable to move on because of the threat that she would have to go through it all again without pain relief. She has had trouble sleeping and has had to take time off work because she cannot concentrate. Understandably, Jane believes that she has post-traumatic stress disorder. She told me that she was actually more afraid of having another brutal experience than she was of dealing with possible cancer. How much will the late detection of cancers resulting from this fear cost our NHS and our families? I emphasise to the Minister that this is not major surgery; it could be essentially painless if only proper anaesthetics were offered.

The last I heard, Jane will now have a hysteroscopy with a general anaesthetic. I am praying that she does not have cancer, because if she does, the months-long delay caused by her mistreatment and the callous attitude of that doctor could be deadly to her. What estimate have the Government made of the added cost of failed hysteroscopies that must then be repeated with anaesthetic? Jane is not alone in her experience and in having understandable distrust of the NHS and doctors as a result of her trauma.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on her speech. I was there the last time that she brought this issue to the House, as I am tonight, because my wife has been through the experience that the hon. Lady referred to. As a result, I think it is important that I am here to support her not just for my wife, but for every other lady across the United Kingdom. Pain relief is a way of providing much needed reassurance for women who are having hysteroscopies. This is a potentially life-changing treatment and women must be enabled to be as comfortable as possible—I see how important that is. Some 35% of the women who undergo anaesthesia-free hysteroscopies reported severe pain. Does the hon. Lady agree that the pain medications and anaesthesia must be readily available for those who need it? No one should have to live in this day and age with severe pain that cannot be taken care of.

Ms Brown: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and I am grateful for his intervention. I know he has been in these debates with me, and he makes the same point: no woman should have to go through this. No woman should be held down while procedures happen because they are screaming with pain and they want the pain to stop.

Another woman who contacted me about a hysteroscopy that took place last year told me that she had never experienced so much pain—not from a hip operation, nor from having her spleen removed. As a result of her traumatic experience, she now has anxiety and has been prescribed tablets by her GP just to help her function with the day-to-day. Like Jane, she is losing sleep and no doubt her broader health has been harmed by this. She does not know whether she has cancer, but she told me that she is now too scared to go to the hospital for anything.

There are so many stories that I could have told today. I am sent so many of them, despite the fact that the issue does not get a huge amount of press. Women who experience this are seeking out me and the charity I work with to tell us about it. If there were more publicity, more women would come forward. I really hope that the Minister understands that this is an issue of patient safety, but also an issue of common decency. It is an issue of confidence in the medical professions and the NHS, and it will be costing us all, both in money and in lives, because problems simply are not being caught early enough.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I have the privilege of co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on women's health. We held a meeting at the end of last year to talk about women and the health service, and I must admit that the meeting lit up when one of the medical people spoke about women's experiences and, in particular, hysteroscopy. I could not believe what happened on my Twitter feed immediately afterwards. So many women were sharing their experiences, listening and saying, "We are entitled to have our experiences of pain validated, and to not have to go through that pain." Does my hon. Friend agree that the women's health strategy, which we will be talking about increasingly often, must involve accepting those experiences and seeking to listen more to women, validate their experiences and ensure that the right anaesthetic and treatments are provided?

Ms Brown: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and that will indeed be an ask I have of the Minister at the conclusion of my contribution. My hon. Friend is right: women are not listened to. When they tell a doctor, "This hurts. I am in pain and I can't bear it," their experiences are not considered valid. They are told that they are being hysterical or overreacting and that they need to be as strong as the other woman he saw last night, last week or whenever, and to not be such a baby in demanding that the procedure be stopped.

Another case from last year is that of Sandy. When Sandy was referred for a hysteroscopy, she was told that pain was a risk, but the information that followed about local pain relief gave her false reassurance. She assumed that it meant some kind of anaesthetic. When she met the clinician, he told her that it would be like period cramps. When she asked about pain relief, he just repeated, "No more than just period cramps, if there's any pain at all."

Sandy was well acquainted with period pains. She had had coils inserted and had given vaginal birth twice, one with no pain relief, so she knew she was tough and she thought she would be fine. But when the hysteroscope reached Sandy's uterus, she felt

"the most incredible, searing, tearing pain I have ever experienced. I found the arms of the bed to grab onto and could hear myself shouting no no no stop stop stop."

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be glad to hear that on this occasion the clinician did actually stop, but I would say that by that point the damage had already been done. Sandy has no memory of any questions asked or what the clinicians said to her afterwards. She just remembers the pain, the shaking and the shock. She was completely and utterly dazed, but scant minutes after enduring this, Sandy was ushered out the door. She was given no time to rest and recover, and she was so confused because she had been made to feel that she had made a terrible fuss about nothing. Sandy then had to drive herself home. She told me that she has gone from being fearless and confident to being terrified of going back at all.

Finally, I want to mention Penny. She told me what happened after her "brutally painful failed hysteroscopy". She strongly, and understandably, believes that she was misled about the risk of pain, because if she had known, there is no way she would have consented to having the procedure with just painkillers. Immediately after Penny went through the same agony that I have just described, she had an assessment with a nurse. The nurse told Penny how she had seen many women like her traumatised and in tears after hysteroscopies. The nurse said that she would never, ever go without a full anaesthetic herself, and that to do the procedure on women with no anaesthetic was barbaric. Penny was deeply and rightly angry to hear this, and the nurse was very clear that women were going through this without being fully informed of the risks.

Let us be really clear: the women I have spoken of today are the tip of a massive iceberg. That nurse is right, the GP I mentioned earlier in the debate is right, and there are many others within the NHS who recognise that this is simply unacceptable. So what needs to change? Frankly, there is still a massive problem with the attitude that many doctors take towards women patients. Our words and our wishes are ignored, and when our words are ignored, our rights are ignored. That has got to end, and I believe that that takes a culture of change. I do not accept that there are just a few badly trained, uncaring or even sadistic doctors. There is a broader problem that the Government and the NHS must address.

The Government have talked previously about a women's health agenda, and before that there was the women's health taskforce. Now, there is going to be a women's health strategy. Believe me, the word "strategy" is music to my ears, but I want a guarantee from the Minister today that tackling painful hysteroscopy will be a core issue. That is my first ask. The patient groups that have been raising this issue so forcefully over many years must have a seat at the table in discussing and monitoring that strategy. These issues are common and the structure of the NHS is complex and obscure; it is failing to listen. So we need to find ways to ensure that patient outcomes for hysteroscopies are measured and monitored alongside the strategy.

My second ask is for all NHS trusts to offer patients who need a hysteroscopy a full range of anaesthetics and to inform them accurately about the risk factors for serious pain, so that all women can make an informed decision. That will require more anaesthetists and theatre capacity for hysteroscopy patients. My third ask is that the Government ensure that this investment is made, and that the commissioning decisions required are being made by NHS trusts. In my view, this is something that the women's health strategy should be measuring and monitoring, alongside robust evidence on women's experiences of NHS hysteroscopy, over the coming years.

How many hospital trusts are actually following the guidance to offer anaesthetics up front to all hysteroscopy patients? How many offer a range of effective anaesthetics and have trained staff to discuss women's risk factors so

[Ms Lyn Brown]

that they are given an informed choice? How many women are forced to endure a traumatic failed hysteroscopy without pain relief, with public money wasted as a result, only to have another procedure under anaesthetic?

How many patients do not even know they are going to be asked to have a hysteroscopy until they attend an appointment, with all the pressure that that involves? Can Members imagine going to a doctor in a hospital because of a fear that they have cancer and that doctor telling them they are going to do a hysteroscopy right now? Can Members imagine how much pressure there is on a woman to accept that procedure there and then because of the fear of what might be there and how long they might have to wait? They do not want to upset the doctor, do they? They might have something really awful that needs to be attended to immediately.

Any women's health strategy worth its name would make sure that the answers to the questions I have asked are known and that we are moving in the right direction on all those issues. I am delighted to say that the best practice tariff on hysteroscopy, which financially incentivised the mistreatment of women, is now gone. We had a system under which our hospitals were paid more for hysteroscopies done without anaesthetic than they were paid for those done with anaesthetic. I am thankful that that incentivised mistreatment of women has now gone. That is a massive achievement for the campaign.

Several previous Ministers have engaged with me on this issue—the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) was very good on it when we spoke—and I thank them for hearing me. One benefit is that trusts are now paid the same amount for out-patient and day-case hysteroscopies. That is far better than it was, but it can still cause problems, because day-case procedures with anaesthetic cost more. If a trust will not be compensated for the difference, it might still decide to try to limit access to pain relief, because it will know that if anaesthetic is given, it will not receive a benefit in kind to pay for that procedure. We need to know that individual trusts are actually changing their behaviour and attitude in response to the progress that has been made. If they are not, we might need further action to ensure that no trust will lose money by doing the right thing and providing the pain relief that a woman needs.

I am sure the Minister will be slightly alarmed by an increase in demand for anaesthetists and theatres, and we all understand the massive covid backlog that the Government and the NHS face. I reassure the Minister that both regional or spinal anaesthetic and intravenous sedation with anaesthesia may be good options for many hysteroscopy patients, depending on their needs and risk factors. The NHS has got to offer a real choice in the range of anaesthetics, not a false choice between a general anaesthetic and no effective pain relief at all. It is simply wrong that if a man needs a colonoscopy, the chances are that he will be offered an effective anaesthetic without question, whereas if a woman needs a hysteroscopy, they may be forced to endure such terrible trauma that it shakes them to the very core ,and then made to feel pathetic when they cry out in pain.

I am not going to stop raising this issue, and the courageous women I have been working with will not stop either. I want to work with the Minister on this issue, as I have with other Ministers in the past, and I hope the Government engage fully, because we need to end this scandal and ensure that women are treated like human beings in every single part of our NHS.

9.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) on securing this debate. I thank her for all her hard work. I am very sorry that she has been speaking about this issue for nine years and is still having to share some of the stories and experiences of women who have contacted her, whether that is Jane, who was unaware of the potential for pain when having such a procedure—women being investigated for endometriosis often wait eight to 10 years to get a diagnosis, so if there is an offer of a procedure to find the cause of their problems, of course they will grab it and not necessarily ask questions about what is involved; or Sandy, who got no information on pain relief at all, or Penny. Penny was warned by the nurse—often nurses are attuned to these things—and was worried about what the outcomes were, but went ahead with the procedure. These are shocking tales that should not be happening in this day and age. I appreciate everything that the hon. Lady says, and I offer that I will be happy to work with her on this issue.

As Members will be aware, hysteroscopy is an essential tool to get to the bottom of many complaints. Whether that is cancer, endometriosis, vaginal bleeding or pelvic pain, it is a necessary test. While other tests can be used, they do not necessarily get to the level of clinical detail that a hysteroscopy can provide for clinicians. It is therefore important that the test is available for women, but in a way that does not create the problems we have heard about this evening.

Many women can have the procedure as out-patients in 10 to 15 minutes and it can be relatively painless, but many women, as we have heard today, experience great pain, which puts them off from coming back if they need further procedures, as the hon. Lady has said. If they share that story with other women they know, it can put them off from coming forward, too.

Unfortunately the NHS does not collect data on the number of women who experience pain during a hysteroscopy or the women who fail to have the hysteroscopy and then need to have either a general anaesthetic or further anaesthetic later on. I am aware that the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy estimates that between 5% and 25% of women are affected and have reported severe pain, and frankly that is not good enough. I welcome that NHS England will be meeting the campaign group on 4 February. I look forward to hearing the outcome of that meeting, and I will be following up any recommendations after that.

The hon. Lady is right that for many procedures a man would undertake, anaesthetic is probably routinely provided or offered. We need to ensure that the same applies to those procedures that women have to go through.

There are guidelines in place, and I spoke only last week to the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, because I knew this debate was coming up. Those guidelines were published back in 2011, and they need updating. The guidelines focus on minimising pain and optimising the woman's experience,

as well as making specific recommendations on how to reduce pain, but as the hon. Lady said, we do not have the information to know who is and is not following those guidelines. We are therefore not in a position to say whether, if those guidelines were followed, many women would not experience pain, and that is the difficulty we have. The data is therefore crucial.

In the last debate that the hon. Lady secured on this issue, which I think was in September 2020, my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), informed the House that to ensure the recommendations were robust and up to date, the royal college would be producing a second edition, in which it will assess whether the current guidelines are effective and are being used. The second edition is being jointly developed with the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, and I am assured that patients' voices will be at the heart of its development. The royal college has informed me that good progress is being made, and that it will have the updated guidelines by next year.

Ms Brown: Can I ask specifically that we involve the campaign, because that would be one way of assuring me that the voices of patients are being heard?

Maria Caulfield: I said to the president that I would follow up after the debate, so I can certainly make that request.

The royal college has also said that it is producing a good practice paper specifically on pain relief and how informed decisions should be made, particularly in out-patient hysteroscopy procedures. It is going through the peer review process next month and will be published shortly afterwards. Once it is published, I would be very keen to hear from campaign representatives about whether they feel that those guidelines would make a difference to them in a practical session.

It is crucial that women who are offered a hysteroscopy are given the information they need to make an informed decision, given that they have sometimes waited a long time for the appointment and that serious clinical conditions can be diagnosed from it. That should include information about potential pain, options for pain management and alternative procedures that could be used.

The Department and NHS England recommend that, as part of good practice, the royal college's patient information leaflet, which was published in 2018, should be provided to patients to aid decision making. I think that should be provided in advance of the appointment, because it is often hard for someone to take in all that information in the midst of a consultation. Again, I would be interested to hear from the campaign whether that is happening in practice.

The House will also be interested to learn that the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy recently published a statement to clarify that from the outset women should be offered

"the choice of having the procedure performed as a day case…under general or regional anaesthetic".

It further asserts that the procedure should be stopped immediately if a woman experiences pain.

I encourage any woman offered a hysteroscopy to read those valuable resources along with any additional resources provided by their clinician. I agree with the hon. Lady that women often do not understand what a hysteroscopy is or what is involved, and debates such as this highlight how important the procedure is, the options around pain relief and the different anaesthetics available.

The hon. Lady touched on the tariff. Previously, there was a different rate of payment for hysteroscopies carried out in an out-patient setting compared with in-patient procedures. I recognise that that is a concern for many hon. Members on both sides of the House because of how it affects patient choice and the choices that are offered to them. In the last debate on the topic, my predecessor announced a statutory consultation. I am pleased to say that as of 1 April, hysteroscopy out-patient procedures will no longer attract a higher tariff than elective procedures as an in-patient day case. That will hopefully make a difference to the choices offered to women.

Ms Brown: That is absolutely true and we are delighted about that; I welcomed it in my speech. The problem that we now have is that if a hospital offers an anaesthetic, it does not get compensated for the resource that it has used. We need to go one step further to ensure that there are no incentives for not offering women proper anaesthetic.

Maria Caulfield: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. She made a point about having the data to see how many hysteroscopies fail and whether that money could be better spent on offering an anaesthetic up front to many women. I do not have an answer to that, but it would be interesting to look at that information.

Alongside clinical guidelines and access to high-quality patient information, I stress the importance of the voices of patients, which are critical at every stage of the treatment pathway. Decisions should always be discussed and shared between clinician and patient. The Government are committed to ensuring that the voices of women in particular are more central in the healthcare system.

The women's health strategy has been touched on several times. We have also taken key learnings from reports such as the Cumberlege review, where women were talking for a long time about the issues that they faced before anyone truly listened. We need to improve that so we are not learning from such incidents after nine years of raising them on the Floor of the House. The women's health strategy will include gynae issues such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary disease, which are conditions that do need a hysteroscopy, so I am pretty confident that we will cover that in the strategy. We will also have a women's health ambassador—they will be appointed in the coming weeks; applications are almost closed—with whom I will meet. I want them to lead on these issues, where they can be a real voice for patients, do a deep dive into what is happening at the coalface and speak up for women if it is not working. We have guidelines, but we do not know whether they are being used in clinical practice. From what the hon. Lady says, it sounds like there are clearly issues that need to be addressed.

I reassure the hon. Lady that I am happy to work with her on this issue. Improving the tariffs is one thing, but there are still women who are not getting the information that they need to make informed decisions about pain relief and anaesthetic that could be available. I welcome the new information from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists on pain relief

[Maria Caulfield]

specifically for this procedure, which will be out next month, and I will feed back to it on updating the guidelines to ensure that patients are involved in the process.

I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important matter. I hope that we have raised its profile and that women are more aware of their options. When they go to that clinic appointment, they can ask for pain relief, they can have it as an in-patient, and they do not need to have it right there, right then. I look forward to continuing to work with her and all Members across the House to ensure that women are offered a hysteroscopy and can access the information they need and the care they deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Genuinely, thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

9.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 31 January 2022

[Sir Mark Hendrick *in the Chair*]

Stalking Advocates

4.30 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) to open the debate, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. I have been advised that the petition being debated today directly relates to the death of Gracie Spinks in June last year. An investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct is ongoing, and the inquest relating to the death of Gracie Spinks remains active. Mr Speaker has agreed to exercise the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters sub judice to allow limited reference to the death of Gracie Spinks. However, I ask that Members do not refer to the detailed speculation about the circumstances surrounding the death, including the conduct of the police in this case.

I remind Members to observe social distancing, and to wear masks. I invite Tonia Antoniazzi to move the motion.

4.31 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 593769, relating to funding for stalking advocates.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. As you say, this case is sub judice, so I will not go into details in my contribution. However, I pay heartfelt tribute to the parents of Gracie Spinks, who are here. I spoke to Richard and Alison last week, and was very moved by their story, but also angered. The trauma that they have gone through is unimaginable, and I hope that I am able to do them and Gracie proud today.

I also put on record my thanks to Jackie Barnett-Wheatcroft for starting this important petition, and for taking the time to speak to me last week. The petition, which has more than 105,000 signatures, states:

"The Government should provide more funding for stalking advocates for victims of stalking. This would help support victims, and should also help the police to investigate cases more thoroughly, potentially helping prevent threats to life."

That seems a wholly appropriate way to deal with this issue, and there must be best practice that can be shared between police forces to make sure that the tragedy we are talking about cannot happen again. When I spoke to Richard and Alison, and to Jackie last week, one thing that struck me was their determination to find a solution to this issue.

Gracie's case is a tragic reminder of what seems to be the ever-rising problem of violence against women and girls. Gracie had reported her stalker to the police, which, as we know, takes a huge amount of courage. What I am about to outline is not specifically about Gracie's case, but there may be some similarities with it. Many women are dismissed by the police when they report violence perpetrated by men. Time and again, we have seen cases of women murdered by men who they have recently or previously complained about. Just this week, Yasmin Chkaifi was killed by her ex-husband. He had an interim stalking protection order against him, and was wanted by the police for breaking it, but despite this, he still found the opportunity to kill Yasmin in the street, just yards from her home—her safe place. In Swansea, we have seen the smirking face of Stephen Hill, who beat his girlfriend so badly that she needed a metal plate put in her head. He was given a sentence of just over two years—two years for life-changing injuries.

This is not the first time that I have spoken about violence against women. Just a few months ago, we were in this Chamber debating the rise in drink spiking, and over the past 12 months, we have been inundated with stories of serious attacks on, and murders of, women across the country. We have rightly been appalled by the murder of Sarah Everard at the hands of a policeman; the police's taking photographs of sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman after they were murdered in a park; and the killing of Sabina Nessa as she walked through her local park. It cannot go on like this. The Government must recognise that we have an epidemic on our hands.

When women approach the police for support, they are often turned away and made to feel as though they are wasting police time. If someone is mugged or burgled, they are not asked to provide evidence, but a victim of stalking is. The onus is put on the victim. Many stalkers are also guilty of other crimes against their victims. Affray, criminal damage, voyeurism and other offences are often recorded in stalking cases. If a stalking advocate were on a police force, a link between those offences could be established, and we could avoid such cases as those that we are talking about today.

Much is made of postcode lotteries, but we have a police force lottery when it comes to imposing stalking protection orders. It appears that some forces are using them to much better effect than others. We need to ensure that their use to good effect is replicated. A BBC investigation in March 2021 found that only two full orders had been granted in the whole of Wales since the introduction of stalking protection orders in January 2020, despite more than 3,000 stalking offences being reported to the four police forces. It is paramount that we find out how some forces are protecting women; that information then needs to be shared across the board. Much of this comes down to the training that officers receive. How are police forces learning from their mistakes and improving outcomes for all victims of stalking?

There are also issues with trivialising the crime of stalking. I know that I have used the verb to describe having a nose at somebody on social media, and that is not acceptable. It makes it a bit of a joke, when we know that it is not, and we must all recognise that. The dangers that social media can pose cannot continue to go unchecked. We have become so much more connected. That is great for staying in touch with family and friends, but it exposes us to the dangers of having our details available to the world. Posting photos, checking into places and keeping location services on are tools that can be used to find people. Where there are no checks on people setting up accounts, stalkers can create numerous accounts and use them to bombard victims with messages.

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

Just last week, stories were emerging about the new threat of people using Apple AirTags to follow women without their consent. Tracking devices such as AirTags and Tile are designed to be attached to things that we may lose, such as ours keys or bag, so that we can locate them from our phone, but in the wrong hands they are the ideal tools for stalking and locating someone. Stories emerged last week of that happening in America, and of women having to rely on a beep from the offending device. Even more worryingly, only 100,000 Android users out of a potential 3 million have downloaded an app that Android users are being asked to install that identifies such tracking devices.

Safety concerns about devices and technologies used in the home, such as smart speakers giving away someone's location, or smart devices getting hacked and compromising home security, have not yet been addressed properly by the tech giants. They need to step up and take action. They have a duty of care to everyone using their products and services. I am not sure whether the Minister has had conversations with any of them, but I would welcome their engagement on the issue, and would be interested in hearing more about how she will approach that. I thank her for her engagement on the subject after I sent over questions earlier. We want and need a constructive discussion. I know that she has met the petitioner, Jackie, but I hope that she will agree to meet the family, and other families, to discuss the best way forward.

In the meantime, very simply there are a number of questions that I, and I am sure the family and friends of Gracie and many others, would appreciate the answers to. How many stalking prevention orders have been given out since they were introduced? Are they uniformly spread across all police forces, or are some doing better than others? What assessment has been made of the pilot scheme being run by West Midlands police? Has the Minister discussed with Government colleagues and police representatives the introduction of stalking advocates to police forces in order to deal with the issue? We would also like to know whether there has been an audit of other offences recorded against perpetrators who are later convicted of stalking. It is those red flags that could stop women such as Gracie being murdered.

The themes running through my research on this subject were that police forces need to share best practice in a much more structured and regulated way, and that training across all forces needs to be massively improved—although "massively" does not go far enough. The Minister needs to take a strong lead on these issues, and shadow Front-Bench Members and I are willing to help in any way we can. I echo the calls in the petition for an advocate on each police force to be made available to victims of stalking. Patterns of behaviour can be identified if someone is looking for them, but many police forces simply do not have the time to do that.

Women want to feel safe, but we do not. Just look at this case, and look at the number of women killed in the last 12 months. Every year, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on the Front Bench reads out the number and names of the women killed at the hands of men that year. It is a stark reminder to all of us that we are not getting any better on this, and that we need to address the issue. Look at the conviction rates for rape that have just been released. Look at the Met's response to the Sarah Everard vigil. As a country, we must do better, and I want to work with the Minister across the House to make sure that happens. Gracie's parents have made it clear that they will not let this go; I will not let it go, either. Things must change. I will continue to fight for women everywhere who are suffering at the hands of men.

4.42 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who already knows that she is one of my favourite Members of the House. She gave an exceptional and incredibly powerful speech. I fully endorse her comments on best practice and advocates in police forces, and, indeed, the questions she raised. She opened the debate in a really suitable and fitting way.

This debate comes after a horrible event took place in the constituency of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who is present. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) is in the Gallery; I know that this issue is very close to his heart, and that he wishes he could speak in the debate, although his role on the Front Bench prevents him from doing so. Hopefully, I will do him justice as well.

Victim support is important, and fostering an open and honest culture around stalking, domestic abuse and sexual violence, so that victims feel safe to come forward, is a massive challenge, particularly in areas that are a bit more rural and where education levels are perhaps not quite where we would like them to be. We need well-resourced, locally engaged police forces to protect communities such as those in Bolsover.

I offer my sincerest thanks to Jackie Barnett-Wheatcroft for setting up this petition. I know it must have been very difficult to speak so publicly, and it really demonstrates her courage and strength of character that she has brought about this debate with her activism. I should also say that I have met the Minister to discuss these issues, and I know that she takes them incredibly seriously. I know that she will be able to go only so far in her response, and that there is a big cultural issue that we need to address. She is incredibly committed to ensuring that we make progress in this field. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), is perhaps the most vocal and passionate Member of the House on a matter that we all care about very much.

The fact that Gracie Spinks's death took place in a neighbouring constituency is reflected in the number of signatures—nearly 6,000—from my Bolsover constituency. That shows the strength of local feeling. I have been a Member of this House for two years and one month. The Petitions Committee has been functioning in various iterations during the covid pandemic, and every week I have watched on with envy as all the emails come through for different petitions, because Bolsover has never appeared in the list of most supportive constituencies. That number of signatures really shows how important this issue is to my constituents, so I thank the petitioners.

We are here to talk about the lessons learned and the need for further action. It is an incredibly difficult thing to talk about, and I appreciate that matters being sub judice means that we are unable to go into detail, but Gracie Spinks's case is not the only high-profile case to

have impacted my constituency. In another serious incident, in Tibshelf, the police were able to enforce a restraining order in a robust and effective response. Such incidents are harrowing ordeals for all involved, and effective intervention can and will save lives and protect our families, friends, neighbours and daughters.

I am a Conservative Back Bencher, so I want to make some defence of the Government, who are trying to take action on this matter. It is staggering, however, that 1.5 million people have suffered stalking in the past year; the number is almost unfathomable. I appreciate that it is not just men who engage in stalking—that is a perfectly fine caveat—but there is a challenge around masculinity and malehood, and a culture around being a man that can be deeply corrosive and that needs to be challenged. It is not a bad thing to be a man and sometimes not know the answers. I appreciate that I am a man, albeit a gay one, and some people will not like that, but hey.

There is challenge in being a man in a culture in which we are exposed to things on the internet that we were perhaps not exposed to before; in which we are challenged by culture from different sources; and in which we may not be as educated as we need to be. There is often a lack of role models, and a lack of people who can say, "No, that is not right." There is a challenge around that. It is not impossible to overcome, but we must undoubtedly focus on and acknowledge it, and we must present pathways to ensure that it does not escalate to a point where women and girls are threatened.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that education in our schools on consent and relationships is key? The best time to get the message across about good, healthy relationships and how to deal with everybody is the time between a person's being a small child and their becoming an adult.

Mark Fletcher: I agree wholeheartedly. Indeed, until not long ago, my husband worked for an organisation that used to go into schools to help spread tolerance and understanding—albeit in a slightly different field—to ensure that people were comfortable from a young age with those conversations, their rights, and people who may be a bit different. That is incredibly important.

This is an aside that I did not intend to make, but I visited Bolsover School only a couple of weeks ago, and I was absolutely blown away by the tolerance and understanding that I saw there. It was a sign of progress from when I was at school, and a sign that things were being challenged that I did not think would be in my adult life. The subject that we are discussing inevitably leads us to focus on the bad, but it is important that we highlight and praise progress, because that encourages other schools and people to step forward and learn.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Member for being generous with his time. It is great to see progress in schools, and that progress should be celebrated. But is he concerned about the online harm to which children are being exposed—about what the web is offering them and the problems that that causes? And does he agree that that is why the online harms Bill will have to deal with those issues robustly?

Mark Fletcher: I absolutely do. We seem to be in general agreement, which may be more worrying for my Whips than anybody else. Obviously, the shadow Minister who is responsible for the online harms Bill is very much a mutual friend of ours. The question of what is accessible on the internet is worrying in a variety of lights, but critical thought and being able to understand what is normal and what is right are also important. It is incredibly important for that to be taught in a variety of fields in the 21st century. That ranges from everything that we do and discuss here and everything that we see in the news, through to how we behave in relationships.

I find some of these issues incredibly difficult to discuss, because I grew up in an abusive household. I have spoken about it in the past. I was a victim of domestic abuse—I had an incredibly abusive stepfather—when I was younger. I perhaps come at the subject from the viewpoint that nobody is perfect. I have struggled to define myself as an adult male and, not wishing to make a huge thing of my sexuality, as an openly gay male in Doncaster as well and to find my place. I understand that some of those things are a great challenge for any person, but being a role model, encouraging people to be the best that they can be and, as the hon. Member for Gower rightly says, ensuring that the pathways are there and that the things that people are looking at online are challenged in the correct way is really important.

I got waylaid by the intervention. Fortunately, we have a 90-minute debate and not many speakers, so if I may, I will return to a point that I wanted to make as an aside. Quite recently, we had another event, in Langwith in my constituency, and it resulted in a very high-profile murder. Derbyshire police were incredibly impressive in how they handled that, how they dealt with the community and how they briefed individuals. There are moments when we are very proud of our local police force, and I think it is only right to highlight in this discussion the fact that there is good as well as bad.

It is also worth stating that the Government have, I think, open ears and are very determined to take whatever suggestions will work. That is really important. There is £151 million for victim and witness support, but the most important bit of money that is being spent is the £3 million to understand better the social causes of violence against women and girls, because there are underlying issues of education and culture, some of which have been alluded to both in the opening remarks and in our general discussion, that I think are really important to tackle.

Therefore I thank very much those who brought forward and signed the petition, and I look forward to future contributions—I am sure that that of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) will be in a similar vein. The issue definitely should not be party political, because our women and girls are far too important for us to toss it around as a political football. It should unite the nation and unite us as politicians, because this problem must end. Those of us who have been victims, in whichever form, know the importance of standing up, and of seeing people stand up collectively, so I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's views as well. We need to work together to tackle a culture that must end.

4.54 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), a constituency neighbour. It is a great shame that the debate coincides with the Prime Minister's statement, because a number of other hon. Members would have liked to be in the Chamber and would have been in different circumstances. But these are the vagaries of the political calendar, as we all know.

I start by paying tribute to Richard, Alison and the whole family, because they have faced a grief and an anguish that is every parent's worst nightmare. There is almost nothing worse for a parent than attending their child's funeral, but to attend the funeral of their child in such circumstances, while thinking that steps might have been taken to prevent it, is an unspeakable anguish that no parent should have to tolerate. They have responded to that appalling chasm of grief by saying that they want to get something positive out of it. They know that they cannot bring Gracie back, but they want to support other families so that they do not suffer the same kind of grief. That is inspirational and it makes me very proud to have them as constituents and friends.

I would like to pay tribute to Jackie Barnett-Wheatcroft, who started the petition. Jackie leapt into action as soon as the funeral had passed, initially introducing a paper petition that was supported by the entire community and had over 17,000 signatures in a matter of weeks. Jackie counted them all, which was quite a performance. I will be presenting a paper petition later this evening that will also refer to that. Having being told that a debate in Parliament needed an e-petition, Jackie worked with the parliamentary authorities, assisted by the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), to get a petition on the parliamentary system. That has led to today's debate.

The funeral of Gracie Spinks was attended by thousands, and her murder sent shockwaves through the people of Chesterfield and beyond, as the hon. Member for Bolsover said. Many people in Chesterfield would have liked to have been here if covid restrictions had not prevented it. The outpouring of grief and anger that followed Gracie's murder did not surface just because of the tragedy of a vibrant life cut needlessly short. There was also the sense that more could have been done to save her and that the support a victim of stalking receives is so often inadequate. That is what brings us to the debate today. Gracie's family and the wider Gracie's law campaigners are determined that some good must come from that appalling tragedy and that we should all do all we can to prevent other families suffering the same heartbreak that Gracie's family endure daily. The petition is an important part of that campaign.

When the petition achieved 10,000 signatures, the Government responded and pointed out the contribution they have made to the stalking advocacy charity Paladin. They also referred to other stalking advocacy charities, such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. They referred to the tackling violence against women and girls strategy. I suspect that we will hear about those from the Minister today. Just like the hon. Member for Bolsover, I will hope that, in recognising the steps that Government have taken, there will also be a recognition that the experience of Gracie's family and others tells us that far more needs to be done.

I entirely agree with what the hon. Member for Bolsover said about cultural change and the difficulties that some men experience in recognising their role in an everchanging world, but there needs to be a real focus within the debate on policing, justice, access to the courts and enforcement of the law, as well as measures to prevent people from stalking. In advance of the debate, I spoke to Paladin to understand more about the barriers that victims face and to hear more what it sees as the steps that would make a difference. Paladin explained that stalking is often misunderstood, both by the wider public and by police forces. It can be misrepresented as domestic violence, but in Gracie's case, and indeed in many cases, there has never been a relationship between the stalker and the victim. Some victims have never even met their stalkers. The nature of the offence is often misunderstood and incorrectly recorded.

The nature of the stalking can often progress and change shape and increase in its intensity and obsession. It will also often be a series of acts, some of which are criminal offences and others of which are not. Offences such as vandalising a victim's car or making malicious communications end up being recorded as a series of individual criminal damage offences, rather than being recognised as a collective campaign of stalking. In common with many other crimes that take place predominantly against women, stalking charities tell me that police often place a huge burden of proof on victims before they start investigating, in a way that is not expected with other crimes. When someone phones the police to complain that they have been a victim of a house burglary or have had their phone nicked, it is accepted as fact that the crime they are reporting has been committed, whereas with this sort of crime, there is an expectation that victims will turn up armed with evidence to get an investigation going. That frustration at the lack of investigation and detection is a common complaint of stalking victims and their families.

Alongside the physical manifestations of stalking, the majority of incidents often have an online aspect. That could be threats made online, posting things that are designed to be embarrassing or intimidatory, posting abusive messages or posting about doing harm to a victim. That leaves a footprint, and often if police followed up and investigated the online presence of accused stalkers, they would identify the evidence they need. However, because such events are often recorded as criminal damage, malicious communications or other lesser offences, the wider investigation simply does not happen. A lot of the evidence I have heard and seen in this case is that if only a number of different events had been pieced together in a single picture, there might have been greater support for Gracie.

The petition asks the Government to increase funding to ensure that there are people advocating for victims of stalking in every police force. That aspect of the petition is incredibly important, and I stress it to the Minister, because the response given when the petition reached 10,000 signatures was predominantly about supporting stalking advocacy charities. Charities such as Paladin do amazing work going into police forces and training up officers and providing a kit that officers can use. However, we need that culture within the police—not a junior person doing that but someone with the authority within the force to ensure that that culture changes and that every single police officer protects people in the

ways that we should want for our own daughters if we were reporting the issue. The postcode lottery and inconsistency of service—both from force to force and even within forces, depending on which officer picks up the case—are entirely unacceptable. The need for all forces to have a specific case manager with an appropriately senior ranking to ensure that stalking is properly understood and appropriately policed is urgent. I stress that when we talk about stalking advocacy, we are talking about supporting charities, but we are also talking about having an advocate inside police forces who will make sure that the voices of victims are heard.

There are other aspects of the issue that we can deal with here in this place. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) referred to the appallingly lenient sentences handed out in the case she mentioned, which we have all seen. I will speak a little more in a moment about the impact of stalking on victims, and it is imperative that the Government recognise the physical and mental torture of stalking on its victims, and that sentences should be appropriately severe. It is also crucial that the backlog in court cases is tackled, because we cannot underestimate the number of people who go to the police and then find 12, 18 or 24 months later that offences that have been reported have still not reached court. Often victims will say, "I simply can't cope with waiting for this any longer. I want it over." As a result, they will not go through with the process and the perpetrators will get away with it. Often they will hear about the appalling situation in our courts and decide not to pursue the case with the police.

For Gracie, it was very much a case of her wanting it to stop. She was not necessarily looking to pursue the legal aspects; she wanted appropriate support. A whole range of victims out there are being failed by our police, by our sentencing regime, and by the fact that they are unable to get into court to have their cases heard. Each is central to the question, as are all the important points raised within the strategy about the culture, tackling perpetrators, trying to discourage and other things. We need to make sure that we get the policing, sentencing and court availability right.

As I said a moment ago, there is a key role for stalking awareness charities such as Paladin. They do great work in improving the knowledge base of police forces, but the charitable sector is only part of the solution. I reiterate that the petition demands that the Government recognise the failure that the Spinks family experienced and take action to ensure that a culture of understanding and zero tolerance is endemic in every police force. A specific stalking advocate within the police force would be expected to have regular oversight of stalking cases and ensure that officers developed the understanding and skills that are too often lacking. Gracie Spinks's case had the most appalling ending imaginable—the nightmare of every parent. Thankfully, most cases do not end in violent murder, but the impact on all victims of stalking is profound.

Stalking victims are not free. They are constantly looking over their shoulder and are forced, more than the rest of us, to be careful. They go out to their car in the morning, wondering whether it will have been attacked. They open their post, wondering whether they will be greeted by an abusive message. They turn on their computer, wondering what will have been posted to them or about them. Every time they answer their phones, they do not wonder whether it will be a payment protection insurance salesman, but whether the anonymous number will be spouting a torrent of hateful or disturbing abuse. They develop a habitat of looking out for a certain car; every red Ford Fiesta gives a victim a chill of fear if that is what they know their perpetrator drives, until they can assure themselves that it is not the same car. Not all victims of stalking end up in a graveyard, but they are all scarred and it is so important that we give them the support that they need. There are male victims and female perpetrators of stalking, but it is predominantly a crime committed by men against women. It is about power and control, and although it can take many forms, its effects are always debilitating.

The petition is of tremendous importance, as is the Minister's response. I was asked in a TV interview today how important the debate was, and I had to say, "I don't know. It's all about the actions that the Government take." We all know that we are in the process of discussing a huge number of issues in this place, and there is a widespread desire across the political spectrum to take action and prevent stalking. I am absolutely certain that the Minister takes the issue as seriously as I do, but it is a case of whether there are the necessary resources, legal backing, sentencing support and determination to address the court shortage, and whether we have taken all the steps that need to be taken for us to be able to look a family in the eye and say we have genuinely done all that we can. The petitioners demand that the Government recognise that the steps taken so far are not adequate, and that standards of policing must improve for stalking victims.

We are in the later stages of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, and we are told that the Government also intend to introduce a victims Bill. Both those Bills seem to be appropriate vehicles to bring forward a Gracie's law, to ensure that funding is provided for a stalking advocate in every police force, leading to better protection for victims of stalking, and that those obligations on police forces are written into law.

We can never say that Gracie Spinks will be the last victim of a stalker. Tragically, that is almost certainly not the case, but those of us in this place can resolve to do all we can to ensure that police forces understand the crime and have the resources to tackle it, so that more families like Gracie's are not left asking, "Why wasn't something done?"

5.10 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and all the Members who have spoken.

The hardest, but most rewarding, part of my job since becoming a Member of Parliament is getting to know the families of women and girls taken by male-perpetrated violence against women. It is always a total honour to meet the families. I am always totally bowled over by their resilience and desire to change the future for the better for other women; and Gracie's family, and the case of Gracie's law, is absolutely no exception. Gracie's law is never going to bring people's families back, but there is a desire to change things so that other families will not end up with their daughters' names being read out on a list. I have yet to read out Gracie's

[Jess Phillips]

name on the list—I will do it in March—but we have to all do whatever we can to make sure that that list gets shorter, not longer.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher)—with whom it is an honour to debate these matters—this is a totally cross-party issue. There was a time, perhaps even when I first got here, when I may have questioned some people's views on these issues, and there was certainly a time, when I started working in violence against women and girls services, when I absolutely felt it was party political issue, whereby some political parties—not necessarily just the one that he is a member of—did not take it as seriously. I do not think for a second now that that is the case or that there is any political party in this building that does not care about this issue. I do not doubt for a second that the Minister cares very deeply about the issue, but it is my job—and will be my job for the rest of time—to point out where things are going wrong and what needs to be done about that.

Quite rightly, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield pointed out that the case on which this petition hinges was not a domestic homicide; it was a case of an unrelated person, not an ex-partner, and—it is almost never that I think this—those cases can be even harder to prosecute and get action on, because there is now at least a base understanding in most police forces now around the idea that stalking is part of a pattern of domestic abuse. The role of stalking in domestic homicide must also be acknowledged, as well as the seriousness of the crime and what it can lead to.

Half of stalkers who make threats act on them, and some of these end in murder. Jane Monckton Smith has written extensively about what leads up to a fatal situation from stalking. Her study of 358 criminal homicides in the UK, all of which consisted of a female victim and a male perpetrator, revealed that stalking behaviour was an antecedent in 94% of all murders. So this is something very, very serious, and it is an alarm bell that should be being rung loudly, in order for us to end the most serious of crimes.

Between 2015 and 2017, a freedom of information request by news platform Vice and Paladin, the stalking charity that has already been mentioned, revealed that 60 women were murdered after they reported their partner, their ex-partner or a stalker to the police on grounds of domestic abuse and stalking. That is 60 women who had reported in just a two-year period. I stand here as a Birmingham Member, and I often outline that three women are murdered each week, on average, every year. In Birmingham, in the last nine days three women have been murdered—or killed, should I say. It just seems relentless. In those 60 cases in that two-year period, those men all had a history of harming other women, yet there was no proactive risk identification assessment or management of the perpetrators.

A previous history of stalking or abuse and a pattern of coercive control within a perpetrator's relationship with his victim have both been identified as stages in the eight-stage domestic homicide timeline outlined by Jane Monckton Smith. In short, stalking is an identifiable precursor to killing. We must see it as a pattern of behaviour and it must be appropriately identified. An intervention can save a woman's life, and we must ensure that reports are acted upon. The advocates that this petition calls for would undoubtedly help that.

Just last week, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) has already cited, there was the case of Yasmin Chkaifi. Without even having to go into the sub judice of Gracie's case—I really wish this was not the case—there are hundreds of cases we can lean on to identify the same failures. In the case of Yasmin, she was stabbed to death in Maida Vale this month by Leon McCaskie. In the press it is reported that a friend of Yasmin had said that she had received text messages two years ago saying:

"He's had cameras in my house recording me for months."

Yasmin added:

"He's stolen my mail, my phone, has access to all my personal data. I think he will kill me. I've tried everything."

The press reports that McCaskie was wanted by the police when he killed Yasmin. The warrant saying that he should be held without bail was issued on 4 January after he failed to appear in court. McCaskie was accused of breaching an interim stalking protection order.

I will come to those orders, as they have been raised. I have worked in domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and human trafficking services for a good many years. We can make up as many good orders as we like, but an order is absolutely worthless unless the police act on breaches of it and unless there is a well-resourced police force that can, in that moment, go out, investigate the breach and make an arrest that leads to somebody being imprisoned—which, in the case of Yasmin, would have saved her life. In my experience, when I say, "Have you ever considered getting an order?", this is the reaction I get: "Yeah, I've got about four." I have personally got four restraining orders; I have been a victim of stalking and harassment. There are people in prison and sectioned for undertaking that abuse against me; and unsurprisingly their orders did not stop them.

There are other cases. Asher Maslin stalked and murdered Hollie Gazzard. Myself and the Minister met Hollie's family. Maslin was involved in 24 violent offences, including three against Hollie, 12 against former partners, three against his mother and four against others. There was no proactive join-up of this information nor risk management. Ian Paton strangled Kayleigh Hanks to death in July 2018. He had strangled three other people, including his ex-partner, before he killed Kayleigh. There was no risk assessment or risk management of his behaviour.

Managing repeat offenders is a real concern. Research indicates that up to 56% of those charged with stalking go on to reoffend after prosecution. We already know that it is a tiny fraction who will have been prosecuted in the first place. Perpetrators' histories are not checked, and links are not made.

Two inspections by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary revealed deeply troubling findings. Its 2014 inspection into police responses to domestic abuse revealed no risk management of perpetrators. In 2017, "Living in Fear", a report specifically on stalking produced by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services—HMIC's name changed in the intervening three years, and got a lot longer—revealed a 100% failure in every police service and the Crown Prosecution Service

across the six areas it inspected. Out of 112 cases, not one case was properly investigated, and no stalker was proactively risk assessed or risk managed.

The most recent HMICFRS report was similarly damning. It identified that repeat offenders in the areas of stalking, harassment, abuse and violence against women were time and again not being monitored, with no offender management and no monitoring in the community of the most serious risk of harm perpetrators. Imagine if I was talking about terrorism—imagine if there were people like that living on your street and not being monitored by any intelligence agency. The trouble is that when the newspapers report these cases, the police say, "Don't worry, nobody else is at risk"—as if all women are not at risk from the kind of hatred that killed Gracie.

Operation Soteria has been undertaken already at Avon and Somerset police, and recently at the Met—we await the findings of that when the Home Office decides that we should have them. What was found in Avon and Somerset, and I have absolutely no doubt also in the Met, was that when people were being accused of rape, abuse and stalking on the streets, as well as in relationships, police forces were routinely not even checking the accused on the system to find out if they were a repeat offender. Imagine that: "This man raped me." "Maybe check it on the system." That is a fundamental failing, and I cannot look at these failings across the board for every crime that women are victims of and just fall back on the idea that it is complex. It is not that complex. It is like burglary of a house: it is not that complex. Every woman who comes forward and says, "I feel scared by this," should be listened to.

Victims have no faith in the system, and legal advocates would without question improve that. Out of 75 victim respondents surveyed, fewer than two thirds indicated that they had reported stalking to the police in the UK, citing a lack of trust in the police and the wider criminal justice system. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust's survey of over 1,000 officers in the UK found that only 35% of police respondents had ever received stalking-specific training and that 10% of respondents received training over five years ago, with only 3% indicating that they were very confident in their knowledge of stalking legislation, while 13% were not confident at all. Imagine that is the one who you get, who is sent out to you—the one who is not confident in stalking legislation at all. We need better training on stalking: 82% of those respondents indicated that they wanted better training and that it was needed for the police to be better equipped.

In September 2020, the University of Central Lanc—Lancashire; sorry, I am from the midlands, not the north. I know everybody thinks it is the same place, but it is not. The University of Central Lancashire published "They speak for you when you can't speak", an academic review of the National Stalking Advocacy Service run by the charity Paladin. That report found that the support of an independent stalking advocacy caseworker—the specific kind of advocate that we are talking about—was critical in improving the responses of criminal justice agencies. Many victims explained how grateful they were for that advocacy and support. High-risk victims of stalking confirmed that an ISAC's support increased their understanding of the nature and impact of stalking and the associated risk. The report also said that victims reported improved emotional wellbeing and enhanced safety as a result of the ISAC support. The advocacy improves victims' experiences. It is vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield mentioned the Government's response to the petition once it received 10,000 signatures. I pay massive tribute to people such as Jackie, who are the doers of changing the law. Every single change to the law was brought about by somebody sitting in a room saying, "This isn't good enough." It is people such as Jackie and Gracie's family who will change the law—I have no doubt.

The £90,000 for extra stalking advocates is absolutely to be welcomed, but it would cover only what is necessary in Birmingham. It has been said that it is a postcode lottery across the board in terms of support for victims of violence against women and girls, and it is absolutely the case that in one place, people get a great service, while in another, people get a dreadful service.

The hon. Member for Bolsover made the point that nobody is perfect. I wrote down that I must point out that that is absolutely one of the best things I have ever heard a man in this place say about violence against women and girls. As a society, we have come to terms with the idea that we all know a victim. With #MeToo and the Sarah Everard case, women have poured their hearts out, with thousands more coming forward now than ever before. Women have stood up and said, "This happens to us." As a society, we understand now that we all know a victim of abuse—such as the hon. Member, who spoke about what happened to him in childhood. It is deeply important.

However, the bit that we have not come to as a society—and we will not stop this unless we do—is this: we all know and love a perpetrator of violence and abuse. Statistically speaking, if we all know the victims, then we know the perpetrators—unless there is one very prolific, horrible man. We have to come to terms with the idea that these people, while they do those dreadful, monstrous things, are not necessarily the monsters they are described as. The people who stalk, abuse, rape and beat women and girls walk freely among us all the time. Until we can all come to terms with that as a society, whether through education or otherwise, cases such as Gracie's will keep happening. We have to accept that those people exist and that they need monitoring and actioning. We need to listen to the voices of victims.

What my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield said about police reform is vital. I was an independent sexual violence adviser; advocates such as ISVAs have existed for 20 years and, for a good long spell, that advocacy massively improved the conviction rate. However, we have seen those rates tumble. Advocacy in and of itself, without proper police prioritisation—which needs to come from political prioritisation—is no longer enough.

As we continue to fail to monitor repeat offenders and to follow up on case after case where people come forward, it is no longer good enough for hon. Members to sit here and say, "We're going to have a strategy. It's up to police force areas what they decide to do." With the greatest respect to Maggie Blyth—the officer put in charge of tackling violence against women and girls—when I had a meeting with her, she told me that, "I have to expect police force areas to take it on." She has no teeth to say, "You have to do this, otherwise you'll lose your job." That has to come from the Home Secretary.

Mr Perkins: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I was reading in detail the Government's response to the petition when it reached 10,000 signatures. It says that,

"the College of Policing provided a set of new advice products on stalking for police first responders and call handlers, and in November 2019 it released a new product for investigators."

I have no doubt that they are very useful things. However, it needs to be compulsory and it requires real leadership from the very top of the police force that this is a priority. Instead of it being something that officers can avail themselves of, I want it to be something that every single officer is doing. I want to see the recommendations acted upon.

Jess Phillips: I 100% agree. I take my hon. Friend back to my terrorism analogy: imagine if we allowed the police to freestyle how they dealt with terrorism—that we did not have specific tasks that police force areas had to follow.

The same priority is never given to male violence against women. It is never, ever considered to be the most pressing issue. More than 20% of all police call-outs are cases of violence against women and girls. Do we think that those cases get 20% of the policing budget in any area? Can we all guess? I do not want to turn this into a pantomime, Sir Mark, but I think we can all guess that they do not get anywhere near that amount. The reality is that this support has to be driven with the political will shown by the 100,000 people who signed the petition. The hon. Member for Bolsover said that he was proud that this was the issue that mattered to his people. The country has spoken again and again in the last two years—more so than ever before—to say, "This issue matters to us."

In my lifetime of working in this area, which now seems like many lifetimes, I have never known the country to push this as an issue of political will quite as much as it has in the wake of Sarah Everard's death. These things will only change when every police force area knows that if it does not, the chief constable will be sacked. This proposal will only work if the issue is addressed when allocations of budgets come from the Government. Although I like the £151 million, the Minister and I both know—because it has been announced quite a few times over the years—that £125 million is going to refuge accommodation and has nothing to do with the police. It will go to local councils to offer refuge accommodation—not necessarily to the standard that I would like to see, but still better than nothing.

The reality is that we in this place have to say that, crime-wise, this issue is our priority and we are going to push it through to the bitter end, so that when a Prime Minister stands up and says that the single most important thing a leader can do—the first line of Government—is to ensure the safety and security of their citizens, in their head they are remembering that women and girls exist.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): For information, the University of Central Lancashire is in Preston, in my constituency.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this debate and doing justice to this vital subject. It really is an honour to be here.

I thank the other Members who are present. I am sure that there would have been more had it not been for events in the main Chamber. Nevertheless, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) and the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) for doing an extraordinary job, as men advocating for the women and girls in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I may disagree on much, but I think we both agree that it is heartening and inspiring to see men coming together, because it is only when men stand up and demand change on behalf of women that we will see the change that we all want to see.

I also pay tribute to Jackie Barnett-Wheatcroft, who is with us today, for creating this petition. The amount of work that she has done to get this issue to the top of the agenda is not inconsiderable. It was a real pleasure and honour to speak to her and hear about her tireless efforts. She has taken this issue on because she cares about it, and that passion came across so clearly. It was wonderful to speak to her and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is also in the Gallery. As a Whip, he is not able to speak, but he was the conduit that allowed us to have that conversation. I pledge again that I will do everything in my power to help Jackie with her work to set up the charity, which I know will change people's lives and be a massive source of support. To Jackie, I say thank you so much.

Of course, we must honour Gracie Spinks. Her name is not mentioned in the petition itself, but it is a tribute to her. You have enjoined me not to transgress and go beyond what I am allowed to say, Sir Mark, because the IOPC's investigations mean this is a live case, but that does not prevent me from expressing my total shock and horror in reading about those awful events—I know that everybody shared that feeling. The issues goes wider than the area that Gracie comes from; constituents of mine in Redditch have signed the petition, as have people from across the country.

When we read about that tragic and senseless loss of life, we can all relate to it—whether or not we are parents does not matter. I extend my deepest sympathies and condolences to Richard and Alison, who are in the Public Gallery. I can only begin to imagine how terribly they must have suffered. I thank them for the tremendous amount of work they put into the petition, which has resulted in this hour-and-a-half discussion, and our dedication and effort. This is only the start of the change that they want to see.

I believe, Sir Mark, that I have enough time to set out what we are going to do, what we have already done, and what we will continue to do, as the petitioners have rightly requested.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I remind the Minister to leave time for the Chair of the Petitions Committee to respond.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for that reminder, Sir Mark; I will ensure that I leave enough time.

Stalking is at the heart of our "Tackling violence against women and girls" strategy, which we published in July. It is worth stepping back and reminding ourselves

of why we needed that strategy, the consultation of which received the greatest number of responses to any Government consultation. That highlights that need, and we must all keep fighting and pushing—I include myself and the shadow Minister in that—to keep the issue at the top of the priority list for Government and for Members across the House.

We all have so many important things to focus on every day in our lives as parliamentarians but, as the shadow Minister said, the public care deeply about this topic, and that was reflected in the responses to the consultation. Of course, that was an immediate response following Sarah Everard's death, but many other women have died—we all know about the work that the shadow Minister does every single year in Parliament to remind us of those deaths—and it is right that we continue to honour the victims in our work to take the strategy forward.

To reduce the risk of perpetrators committing further offences, as the strategy confirmed, we launched a fund for police and crime commissioners to run programmes to address the behaviour of domestic abuse and stalking perpetrators. The funds will provide programmes to cover a range of different methods for tackling stalking. It is right that we recognise that stalking only recently came on to the statute book in its current form. Our understanding is not quite as well developed as it is for many other crimes that involve serious violence against women and girls. That is why it is important that we have those programmes and evaluate the evidence so that we can understand what works. That work includes the development of a multi-agency stalking intervention project in Cambridgeshire, and the development of the compulsive and obsessive behaviour intervention programme in Surrey. The aim of all such programmes is to encourage behavioural changes to reduce the frequency and gravity of the abuse presented by the perpetrator, thereby improving the safety of and protection for the victim.

The strategy also refers to our commitments to improve the use of stalking protection orders. We introduced these orders just two years ago, and they can protect victims of stalking at the earliest possible opportunity and help to address the behaviour of perpetrators before they become entrenched or escalate. They have the flexibility to impose both restrictions and positive requirements on a perpetrator, and I am proud that the Government introduced them.

We know that there is more to do. We know that some forces have been applying for more of these orders than others. The violence against women and girls strategy confirmed that the Home Office would work with the police to ensure that all forces make proper use of the orders. That is why I have recently written to all chief constables whose forces have applied for fewer stalking protection orders than might have been expected to encourage them to always consider applying for one in stalking cases.

I did that in October, and I received responses from several forces setting out the measures they are taking to make sure these orders are being used appropriately. I am pleased that one of the responses I received was from Derbyshire police, which is rightly taking a number of actions, including the delivery of a force-wide training programme specifically for stalking offences.

Jess Phillips: Specifically on that point, it is my understanding that as of June 2021 stalking protection orders were used in response to around only 2% of stalking arrests. Is the Minister expecting any factor of increase after her letter and after the police forces have said they are going to do this? Will it go from 2% to 4%? Obviously, I would like to see it go higher. Is the Home Office putting a target on police forces?

Rachel Maclean: Absolutely, we want to see the number go up. We will be publishing the figures as soon as we are able to.

This debate has rightly focused on the police response, not just in Gracie's case—which I am not commenting on—but generally across the country. I want to talk about some of the things that the police have done. The hon. Lady referenced the 2017 inspection, which showed a number of failings, to put it that way, in the police response. Since then, forces have identified a number of improvements that have been taken forward, and they have published a national stalking and harassment improvement plan.

Every force must now have a single point of contact for stalking concerns. There is also a change in the Home Office's crime counting, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Chesterfield. Each force must ensure that stalking is recorded as the main crime before anything else—for example, criminal damage. I think that it is a very helpful point.

Mr Perkins: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I will, but briefly—I do not have much time left, and I have a lot to say.

Mr Perkins: On the question of the single point of contact, is that for the victim or is there a single person managing the cases? If the latter, could she tell us about the seniority of the officer?

Rachel Maclean: I will respond in writing to the hon. Gentleman, because I cannot do justice to that question in the time that I have left. I will come back to him on that.

I want to get on record some of the other vital protections and improvements in the police response across the country. It is vital that the police are provided with the correct materials and training to deal with stalking appropriately to ensure that they are confident in identifying stalking cases. That is why new advice and training products are being made available to police first responders, call handlers and investigators, making clear the key differences between stalking and harassment.

The hon. Member for Gower asked for information on the west midlands pilot. We have confirmed £11.3 million funding for PCCs to run programmes to address stalking and to evaluate the success of this work. The project is in its early stages, but we will provide her with an update from the west midlands police and crime commissioner when we are able to.

The violence against women and girls strategy also confirmed that the Home Office has this financial year tripled the funding that we provide to the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, which runs the national stalking helpline. That funding is enabling it, among other things, to expand its advocacy work. Since July, the trust has used the funding to provide advocacy support for 29 people who are particularly vulnerable or whose cases are particularly

[Rachel Maclean]

complex. I visited the helpline in November, and it was an incredible experience to see at first hand its vital work and how it is helping so many victims.

Hon. Members will be aware from our response to the petition last August of the additional funding for the national stalking helpline and of the almost £100,000 that we provided to Paladin, which many Members mentioned. I thank Paladin for what it does. We provided funding to it between April 2020 and March 2021 to provide additional independent stalking advocacy caseworkers during the height of the pandemic. The provision of ISACs trained by Paladin is also part of the Home Office's funding to the Merseyside police and crime commissioner to address the behaviour of stalking perpetrators.

In the current financial year, the Ministry of Justice will have provided just over £150 million for victim and witness support services, including an extra £51 million to increase support for sexual violence and domestic abuse victims. That includes funding for independent domestic violence advisers. Domestic abuse funding can include stalking that takes place in a domestic context, where the stalker might be a former partner or a family member of the victim. It is open to police and crime commissioners to use their core, un-ringfenced funding to fund ISACs. The point has been made that stalking does not always take place in a domestic violence or abuse context. It is also correct to say that we do not ring fence funding for independent stalking advocacy caseworkers in the same way that we do for equivalent roles in domestic abuse and sexual violence, as the petition and many Members have referenced.

I will move on to the work that is being led by the Deputy Prime Minister on the victims Bill. A consultation that includes questions about advocacy services is open, and the consultation paper is clear that it focuses primarily on domestic abuse and sexual violence advocates. That is because we have a more developed understanding of those positions, Government funding for the roles and what is needed, but we appreciate that similar roles, such as ISACs, exist and are helpful. There are questions in the consultation that apply equally to all advocacy services. The consultation remains open until this Thursday, and I encourage anyone who is interested to submit their response.

Mr Perkins: Is it the Minister's view that the proposal made in the Gracie's law petition would be best applied to the victims Bill or to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, or is her argument that we do not need legislation in this area?

Rachel Maclean: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am making no such argument. On the victims Bill, I encourage him to continue his conversations via the consultation process with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministry of Justice. I am setting out the work that the Government are doing. If the hon. Member for Chesterfield will forgive me, I will come on to the response to the consultation, and work that is happening across Government.

Mark Fletcher: I understand that the Minister is against the clock, but in relation to the question that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) just asked, will the Minister undertake to write to the Deputy Prime Minister to make him aware of today's debate, and the recommendations that have been outlined by various Members? Perhaps whether they are appropriate can then be considered.

Rachel Maclean: That is an excellent suggestion. If we have not already done so, I will ensure that that happens. In any case, the Ministry of Justice will look very closely at all the consultation responses received on this issue and many others.

I will briefly touch on what is happening in terms of the multi-agency public protection arrangements—MAPPA for short—because they are vital. They are specifically about how offenders are managed, which several Members have touched on. It is important that agencies make use of MAPPA to strengthen the effective management of serial and high-harm perpetrators of stalking and domestic abuse, and the national MAPPA team works closely with local strategic management boards to support implementation at a local level. This is about having the most appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that we keep people safe from harm.

We are also shortly due to publish a domestic abuse strategy that will seek to transform our response to domestic abuse in order to prevent offending—of course, stalking is a key part of the domestic abuse pattern of offending—support victims and pursue perpetrators. That will include a specific section on the risks associated with stalking. Some very good points have been raised about the pattern of offences and the escalation process. A couple of Members touched on education and what we are doing in schools, and we are already working with colleagues in the Department for Education.

I also want to let Members know that we will release a national education campaign about violence against women and girls. This will be quite a groundbreaking piece of work. We are talking about changing that misogynistic culture that everyone has spoken about, and making it absolutely clear that we probably all know a perpetrator—not necessarily a murderer, but someone who is not behaving in a respectful way to their female friends, associates, colleagues or partners. This communications campaign is specifically designed to make crystal clear what is and is not acceptable in the public and domestic sphere. I am really looking forward to the campaign and will pay close attention to it, as I am sure will all hon. Members here, and I encourage them to amplify it through their own communication channels, to get out the message out that this Government do not put up with those kinds of behaviours, whether they are on the street or whether they are serious crimes such as stalking, harassment and murder.

I once again thank the hon. Member for Gower for introducing the debate in order to raise this important issue. I will of course follow up on the points Members pressed me on. I could say a lot more, but unfortunately time is short, and I want to allow the hon. Lady the opportunity to respond to the debate.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I call Tonia Antoniazzi, who is a member of the Petitions Committee, not the Chair.

5.52 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Chair for his correction; I had been elevated quickly.

Mark Fletcher: Deservedly.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

I thank the Minister for her response, and all Members who have spoken. It was disappointing, as we have all said, that other Members were not able to join us in for what has been an important debate. I thank the petition maker, Jackie, Gracie's family—it has been an absolute pleasure to meet you today—and everybody who signed the petition. The Minister spoke about the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) spoke about charities such as Paladin that have given a lot of support. The Minister cannot respond now, but I really hope she will hold police forces' feet to the fire, because we need to know that what she outlined as having been done since 2017 is being done. It cannot be, otherwise we would not be where we are today. It is integral that her role incorporates holding them to account and making them act on what they should act on.

In 1986, Suzy Lamplugh went missing. I was 15 years old at the time, and it really sticks in the memory, as a teenager, knowing that women are going missing. It is great to hear about the conference, and about National Stalking Awareness Week, from 25 to 29 April, but we have to do so much more.

The petition is so important, and speaking today has been an absolute honour. I also hope that Gracie's sister, Abi, who I met today, will follow her dream, go on to study politics and join myself and other female Members in this place to fight for the memory of her sister, Gracie. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, stalking is an identifiable precursor to murder. Minister, we cannot allow this not to be changed; we have to change it. She made the comparison to terrorism. We know where our terrorists are. We tag them. We look for them. We need to do the same as for terrorism.

I will end on this note—it is a nice note. The strength of the feeling of the family and the petitioners must be noted. Having two brothers myself, I was so pleased to hear Abi tell me earlier that her brothers are great, and what a great strength they are, because they look after her. Families are wonderful things, and theirs has been through hell. So many families have been through hell that it is our responsibility in the House to ensure that we do our best so that this is never repeated. I thank the Minister and everyone who has spoken, and I thank you, Chair.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 593769, relating to funding for stalking advocates.

5.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Future of the NHS

[James Gray *in the Chair*]

6 pm

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

That this House has considered e-petition 598732, relating to the future of the NHS.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Today I have the privilege of bringing the petition to the House for debate. I congratulate Marcus Hynes, the writer of the petition and a proud Unite member, on achieving over 135,00 signatures. Marcus and other esteemed members of Unite shared their views ahead of the debate.

The NHS is a truly British innovation. It is there to help us in our hour of need, supporting us from cradle to grave. The NHS has an enormous role in the lives, health and welfare of British people. As a result, it is rightly at the centre of much debate in this place, as we constantly look at how it can be expanded, improved and made more efficient. I thank the NHS and all its amazing doctors, nurses, staff and volunteers for what they do. Throughout the past two years, they have been the crutch that has kept this country upright. No words will ever be able to articulate how thankful people across the UK are for the work that they do for us every day.

The NHS is a great British institution, founded in the wake of the war by a society that wanted better for everyone. It is, and always shall be, free at the point of use. The NHS carries the weight of our country's health problems on its shoulders, which is why I am delighted to support the Government's ongoing commitment to it.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The hon. Member referred to the NHS being free at the point of delivery, but NHS dentistry is on its knees. In my constituency, Rachael Elizabeth has been waiting over two years to see a dentist. It is the same in Runcorn, Frodsham and so forth. There is a similar situation in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), in Ellesmere Port and right across the country. Does the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) agree that NHS dentistry is in crisis?

Matt Vickers: I have shared concerns about NHS dentistry from my own part of the world, and I am fairly confident that the Minister will fill us in and give a more extensive response.

The NHS carries the weight of our country's health problems on its shoulders, which is why I am delighted to support the Government's ongoing commitment to it. The biggest cash boost in the history of the NHS is allowing us to put thousands more doctors and nurses into our hospitals, coupled with major capital investment programmes that have already benefited my local hospitals. I know that the Minister is only too aware of my ongoing campaign to secure more sizeable improvements at the University Hospital of North Tees. That said, I know from my constituency that there remain huge challenges for the NHS and its role in improving the health of the nation.

In 2018, Stockton was labelled England's "most unequal town" by the BBC. It is a town where people born in one area can be expected to live 18 years fewer than

[Matt Vickers]

those living just a few miles up the road. Such health inequalities are not acceptable in modern Britain. The NHS rightly looks to prevention as well as cures, and furthering this cause requires not just more resources and improved efficiency, but joined-up co-operation with other agencies, which lies at the heart of the reform agenda.

Putting my experiences and observations aside, the lead petitioner, Mr Hynes, and those from Unite wanted to let me know that they are fundamentally opposed to the Health and Care Bill. As part of their reasoning, petitioners cited concerns about the staffing crisis, overwhelmed human resource departments and the backlog as core reasons for their belief that the Bill should not be brought on to our statute book. Petitioners shared their concerns about staff shortages and worker fatigue in an NHS that already stretches itself to meet the needs of the UK's ageing population and the exponential growth in the public's health needs. They talked of how the pandemic has compounded this problem.

Moreover, the pandemic paused elective surgery, leaving the NHS to deal with backlogs and extended waiting lists. The view of the petitioners was that the NHS should be given time to stabilise and respond to those challenges before taking on the challenges of reform. On a more institutional level, Unite said that it fears that this Bill would open the NHS up to deregulation, worsening staff shortages, and create a pay-for-use system akin to America's.

The petition states that

"The Government has no democratic mandate to privatise the NHS".

I agree: the Government have no democratic mandate to privatise the NHS, which is why they are doing no such thing. Access to NHS services will continue to be based on clinical need, not an individual's ability to pay.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured this debate. I put to him—this is perhaps a challenge to the Minister and the Government—that we need to be careful with the NHS as it is today. We all love the NHS—we love the workers and we love what it does—but if we are not careful, it could come to a point where if a person does not have the money, they cannot pay for their care. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if that were to happen, the whole principle of the NHS would be knocked on the head?

Matt Vickers: This is a debate that we have in every election campaign, and other than the issues around dentistry, which I am sure we will come to, the NHS remains free at the point of use. I will fight the corner to keep it that way, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will do so as well.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I think everybody in this room would agree with the principle that the NHS was founded on—care that is free at the point of use—but the NHS has had many structural forms since its inception immediately after the second world war. My concern is that its current form and the proposals that the Government are bringing forward further centralise the NHS, and waste further money on bureaucracy, mimicking the private sector and creating an artificial market. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a waste of money, and that the NHS should be decentralised in order to provide better services to local communities?

Matt Vickers: I am sure we are going to hear about the ways in which these structural reforms will take place with that very aim in mind. I am going to try to get through my speech, because I am sure that Members would prefer for everybody to get in and to hear from the Minister, who is wiser on this issue than I am.

In my view, the Health and Care Bill does not represent an attempt to create a "pay for play" system—quite the opposite. While I am sure the Minister will go into detail about this point in his response, my understanding is that the Bill is largely the work of the NHS itself, inspired by NHS England's own desire to restructure its organisational system to be more efficient and effective. It builds on the NHS's own long-term plan, as set out in 2019, and the NHS people plan, which was published in 2020. Many of my conversations with leaders from my local NHS trust suggest that the answers to improving health outcomes require multi-agency working and empowerment of local health agencies, and my understanding is that the reforms and structural changes in the Bill set out to do exactly that.

One point on which I strongly agree with the petitioners is the need to drive value for money within our NHS, reducing management costs and excessive use of consultants, so that the huge increases in funding for the NHS can actually reach the frontline, not just fund more fruitless layers of bureaucracy. I am hopeful that the Minister will update us on what is being done to drive efficiency in that regard. Another point that I fundamentally agree with is the petitioners' view that private finance initiative contracts have no place in our NHS. I know all too well the debilitating effect they have on the ability of the NHS to administer care across our country. Nationally, PFI contracts cost our NHS £1 billion a year and restrict numerous hospitals across the breadth of Great Britain.

I have seen at first hand how PFIs have damaged our local services in the Tees Valley. South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, in particular, has been plagued by a dodgy new Labour PFI contract. The James Cook University Hospital was completed in 2003, but its PFI contract does not run out until 2034, and will cost over £1.5 billion. The trust currently has to meet annual payments of £57 million a year—more than £1 million every week. Of course, hospital upgrades and rebuilds are expensive, but that trust is paying £17.5 million over and above what an equivalent Treasury-funded hospital would cost annually. Shockingly, that is enough to pay for more than 530 nurses. It is ludicrous.

Even if there were not an extra 530 nurses at South Tees, there is so much the hospital could do with this money, such as investing in its building, equipment and staff to help improve health outcomes and inequalities. Excessive costs from historic PFI contracts are listed as the largest single contributory factor to the hospital's troublesome financial position. At time when retention is a huge issue for our NHS, this money would be crucial to making a substantial difference to the working lives of our NHS heroes. I am glad that in 2018 a Conservative Government decided that PFI contracts would be phased out. However, hospitals up and down

the country are now stuck dealing with a Labour legacy that has damaged our NHS, our people and our ability to tackle health inequalities across this country.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Matt Vickers: I will carry on; I am sure that there will be a chance for the hon. Member to contribute. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate and to listening to the input of Members from across the House.

James Gray (in the Chair): Members will see from a glance around the room how many people intend to speak. I do not intend to impose a formal limit, which seems to sacrifice quality in favour of quantity, but I do suggest that, as a courtesy to one another, speeches are limited to around three minutes.

6.11 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

There are actually a couple of aspects of the speech of the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) that I agree with and congratulate him on. First, I do not support PFI either. History suggests that although that hospital was completed and perhaps started under a Labour Government, PFI was originally a Conservative initiative under the Major Government, so I would not be too confident about attacking it but I am pleased that it is gone.

I also profoundly agree with the hon. Member's support for NHS staff; I think we will be hearing a lot of that this evening. The NHS is recognised and envied around the world. It is something that we should celebrate and admire, not chop up, neglect and sell off piecemeal at every opportunity. It is the NHS and its staff that are getting us through this pandemic. I would like to take this opportunity, as I am sure all hon. Members would, to once again thank the NHS and care staff who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much over the last two years.

The NHS cannot continue to look after us if we do not look after it. Tory mismanagement over the last decade and the pressures of the pandemic mean that the NHS is running on empty and surviving solely on the good will of its employees. Even before the pandemic, we were seeing record waiting lists and staffing shortages. Now the numbers are through the roof.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): On that point, my hon. Friend mentions that the NHS is running on empty—of course it is. A Unite survey published in January 2022 showed that 77% of the NHS workforce believe that they are worse off than they were a year before, 55% are working during their lunch breaks, and more than 50% are working in excess of their contracted hours. Is it any wonder that the NHS is running on empty?

Christian Matheson: I could not have put it better myself. The NHS is running on empty, but also on the good will of the staff because they believe in the NHS and in what they are doing. There were 6 million people on the waiting list in England in November—the highest number ever recorded. In my constituency of City of Chester, the latest figures show that 36,000 people are waiting for care at the Countess of Chester Hospital.

Those record waiting lists are also true for NHS dentistry, as my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), has pointed out. Some people are being told that they may have to wait up to two years for a NHS dental appointment. Over the past few months, many of my constituents have told me the difficulties that they have had in finding and accessing an NHS dentist in my constituency and the surrounding areas. On average, there are only 4.4 dentists per 10,000 people in England, and the number is shrinking. With shortages of staff, a lack of funding, the pressures of the pandemic and dissatisfaction with NHS dentists' contracts, the waiting lists are growing. Many dental practices are feeling pressure to turn private just to be able to cover wages and equipment costs, and to survive as a business.

Dr Simon Gallier, who owns a dental practice in my constituency, wrote to me with a heavy heart to say that earlier this month, he had to make the difficult decision to make his dental practice private; he had to inform over 7,500 patients that they will no longer be receiving NHS treatment. Practices around the country are doing this not through choice, but out of necessity and lack of funding. Dr Gallier just cannot make ends meet. Indeed, in the last year for which figures were available, 2018-19, the amount spent on dentistry fell in real terms, compared with the six years previously. While the £50 million announced recently by the Minster is welcome, only £7 million of that will go to dentistry in the north-west, which is clearly insufficient when the national budget for England was over £2 billion in 2019. With fewer NHS dental practices, many constituents have no choice but to go private—an option many will not be able to afford, especially given the cost-of-living crisis we face. I worry that the Tory masterplan all along has been to starve the NHS of funding, resulting in inevitable back-door privatisation—or perhaps there has been a more sinister scheme to monetise dentistry, as there has been in similar services, including some GP practices and many vets practices.

Dentists cannot afford to operate under the NHS, so they sell the practice to an umbrella company, which is the front for a finance company. That company then offers quasi-insurance or membership programmes, in which the patients pay an amount every month that entitles them to an annual check. That stream of money from numerous practices becomes a valuable commodity in the City of London, which the Conservative party exists to serve, along with Putin-linked Russian oligarchs, but we will not mention that now.

Talking of privatisation, what I fear is not the sale, lock, stock and barrel, in a public floatation, as happened in the 1980s, but sale bit by bit, behind the scenes, to private companies that extract money for their profit—money that should surely instead be spent on patient care. NHS dentistry is in crisis. I will not look that £50 million gift horse in the mouth, but let us be clear: much more is needed.

6.16 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am proud that so many of my constituents in Hornsey and Wood Green signed this important petition about funding for the national health service, and about keeping it in the public sector.

[Catherine West]

There is no doubt that the national health service is the most popular public service in my constituency, but there is a basic lack of staff, whether we are talking about primary care, GPs and other practice staff—they always seem to be looking for more staff—the 40,000 nurses of whom we are in desperate need nationally, or the thousands more doctors who are needed. Compared to other European countries, we simply do not have the correct ratio of patients to doctors. For example, in psychiatry there are increasing numbers of patients, particularly following the stresses and strains of coronavirus, waiting days and days in a hospital bed to see a consultant. I heard a story this week about a patient who waited 10 days to be seen during doctors' rounds. That is a very long time to use a bed without getting the correct medical attention.

Many Members have mentioned the insufficient funding for dentistry. Sadly, my constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green, and the London Borough of Haringey, has some of the worst rates of caries in children's teeth in Europe.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said, 77% of NHS staff believe that they are worse off this year than last year. We know that they are working in excess of their hours, and that since 2010, hourly pay has been frozen or increased by a tiny increment. That does nothing to help staff cope with the challenges of the Tory-driven cost-of-living crisis, be it domestic fuel bills, the cost of food, children's clothing, basic travel to work, or petrol to drive to work.

The Health and Social Care Levy Act 2021 has recently passed through Parliament. Social care is crucial to fix bottlenecks in the health service. We need a properly funded care system in which the hourly rate is correct in the light of the needs of the people working in it, and we need better overall management to get people into the right sort of care as quickly as possible, so that we can free up the national health service to look after people coming into hospitals through accident and emergency. That is a basic point that every Member in Westminster Hall has made on a number of occasions, but it still seems as if this Government are sitting on their hands and failing to address the crucial question of how we get the flow through the system. The problem also comes down to the terrible cuts to local government. If local government was adequately funded, we would have a much better, more proportionate system. I will stop there, Mr Gray, as other Members wish to contribute.

6.19 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is, of course, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Time does not permit me to repeat the excellent points made by my hon. Friends the Members for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), but I certainly align myself with what they said.

I want to concentrate on two areas of huge concern to my constituents. The first, which has already been mentioned, is privatisation. Three years ago, in Bradford, I fought alongside trade unions and NHS staff to stop plans to introduce dangerous back-door privatisation into our local hospitals. Although we beat those plans to move key services out of the NHS and place them in the hands of private companies, the danger of the privatisation of our NHS in Bradford has not passed.

That threat has only grown as a result of this Government's Health and Care Bill. While removing enforced competition, the Bill does nothing whatever to roll back the wave of privatisation that successive Tory Health Ministers have unleashed on our NHS over the last decade. Rather than improving patient care, the Bill allows private companies with a vested stake in driving greater privatisation in the NHS to sit on local health boards and make decisions about our health care; at the forefront of their mind are not patients, but profits. There is no greater threat to the future of our NHS—free at the point of use and in public hands—than the Health and Care Bill and this Tory Government. We must stop both before it is too late.

We also have to look at the future of our NHS for GPs, who are at the coalface of health care but are all too often overlooked. Each week, without fail, a worrying number of constituents tell me that they have been unable to get any form of appointment, let alone a face-to-face appointment with a GP; that they have been left on hold when calling, waiting for phones that are never answered; or that, when they are given an appointment, it is weeks away, even when it is an urgent issue that simply cannot wait.

I dealt with two such cases this week. I heard from a son whose 82-year-old mother went to accident and emergency, but was sent away and told to go see her GP the next morning. Her son began ringing the GP practice first thing next morning, but when he eventually got through, hours later, he was given an appointment in two weeks' time. In the other case, involving very similar circumstances, my constituent was once again told to wait for weeks. It is unacceptable.

That level of service would be unacceptable anywhere. However, in Bradford—where we have higher rates of deprivation, where life expectancy is below the national average and where we have greater rates of preventable illnesses—it is beyond serious, and can even be fatal. No one should have to wait for more than a fortnight for an appointment, and certainly not for urgent cases, but as the inner city of Bradford has one of the worst GP-to-patient ratios in the country, that comes as little surprise.

Although fewer GPs being forced to see more patients explains the scarcity of appointments, it does not explain the poor service that patients in Bradford are reporting to me. I want to use this debate to put on notice those practices that are letting their patients down. I want to be clear: there should be a better service to ensure that urgent cases receive urgent appointments, and to help close the health inequality gap between the richest and the poorest in Bradford.

Finally, I listened to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), who opened this debate. His speech implied that he was anti-privatisation. I say this to him and all those on the Government Benches: the reality is, over the last decade, we have seen an ideological, intentional attack on our NHS. Let us not beat around the bush: if the hon. Member for Stockton South and others wish to stop the back-door privatisation of our NHS, they should be opposing the Health and Care Bill. Any form of privatisation needs to be taken out of the Bill. We do not need the smoke and mirrors that we see in the current legislation.

6.25 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I speak in full support of the petition. I would like to make particular mention of the recent Health and Care Bill. The clearest example of what could happen to our NHS if this Bill goes ahead lies in NHS dentistry. Net Government spend on general dental practice in England has been cut by about one third in the last decade. The results of this are stark; there are reports of people resorting to pulling out their own teeth because they cannot afford private treatment.

The British Dental Association states worryingly that the Bill worsens the situation and

"does not ensure that the voice of three quarters of NHS primary care professionals is heard in the making of commissioning decisions".

Whose voices will be heard, then? The Bill would put private companies right at the heart of NHS decision making and service delivery—on the new integrated care system boards, where they will be given power to make decisions about people's care and how NHS money is spent. The Bill will allow private healthcare providers to award contracts for clinical care without considering any other bids. The doctor-led campaign organisation EveryDoctor states:

"This Bill will embed private companies in the NHS in England, and give them the power to decide who gets what treatment when."

Members on the Government Benches might wax lyrical about the NHS being free at the point of use, but what happens when people cannot access the care that they need? It might be because of rationing, or because of lengthy waiting lists due to lack of funds. It might simply be because those with a seat at the integrated care system board table determine that a person's care should not be available on the NHS, because it is just not profitable enough. The result is this: if a person cannot afford private medical cover, they do not receive treatment. That is already happening in NHS dentistry, where it has been normalised. The risk is that it will be normalised throughout the healthcare system.

This is not a Bill to tackle the crisis facing the NHS. It is not a Bill to tackle the care backlog, or to properly fund our NHS. It is a Bill to reduce our rights to access healthcare and to privatise our NHS. It must be scrapped.

6.27 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I begin by praising all the staff in the NHS, who, often at enormous personal risk, have provided dedicated care to so many of us over the past two years. The Minister must know—and the Government should acknowledge—that they are exhausted. As a country, we must show that we care for all of them as they address the backlog of over 5 million people waiting for treatment.

That care must be more than warm words and clapping. It must be tangible and financial, and it must be realistic. That means expanding workforce capacity, both as regards beds and staffing, in order to reduce the pressures our NHS heroes are facing. It means meeting the capital maintenance backlog of more than £9 billion. It was dereliction by the Chancellor to entirely omit any funding for infrastructure and building repairs when announcing the NHS settlement. There are two futures for the NHS: the disastrous one contained in the Health and Care Bill, or one that integrates health and social care in an efficient, comprehensive service that is free to everyone, from cradle to grave, whatever their medical need. It would be delivered entirely by, and be accountable to, our public sector—staff who are fairly treated and properly rewarded. I want to pay tribute to all the unions, particularly my own, Unite the union, for the work they have done to ensure that that is the case for staff.

By "comprehensive", I mean that the service should include mental health and public health. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it should be the importance of public health, yet the integrated care boards have no delegated places for directors of public health, mental health or adult social services. There is not even a place for the voice of the patient, around whom everything should be centred.

By "efficient", I mean that the service must deal with the backlog of 5.3 million patients waiting for treatment. By "whatever their medical need", I mean that it should definitely include dentistry, as we have heard from my hon. Friends. By "accountable public service", I mean that there should be no conflict of interest that allows a private company to sit on the ICB and commission contracts from which it will then be able to benefit. In 2012, I railed against the imposition of section 75 because it put competition, rather than co-operation, at the heart of our health system. I thought—correctly, as it turned out—that this would give rise to increasing privatisation, the rationing of care and the lessening of patients' access to the care they need. Putting competitive tendering at the heart of the service destroyed trust and introduced a profit motive, rather than allowing a focus on successful medical care outputs.

It may be wondered why the reversing of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, introduced by Andrew Lansley, would be of concern to me. In 2012, none of us could have conceived of the fact that doing away with competitive tendering might mean not less, but more privatisation, unregulated by the tendering process. In 2012, we would not have believed that we would see VIP commissioning routes, through which contracts for medical equipment worth billions—not millions—of pounds would be given out to friends of Ministers, but that is what we face in the Bill. It puts that ability into legislation, which is why the Bill should be stopped.

6.32 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The impact of the Health and Care Bill on Wales is limited, but I have come to speak in the debate because over 150 of my constituents signed the petition, and because it is right for people from across the UK to defend the NHS as a service that is run publicly, in the way that the great Welsh hero Nye Bevan intended. I have real concerns about the situation faced by the health service and the care sector, both in England and in Wales.

The King's Fund has estimated that NHS commissioners spend £9.7 billion on services delivered by the private sector, which represents around 7% of NHS revenue spending. While we are handing over NHS provision to the private sector, waiting lists are going up, waits for treatments are getting longer, NHS pay is going down, staff sickness is going up and staff vacancies are going up. The Health and Care Bill does nothing to address that—indeed, it will make things worse. Many of my

[Beth Winter]

colleagues have already set out concerns, particularly about the new integrated care boards and the private sector's increasing role on them. The Bill will also reduce oversight of how contracts are awarded, and move the NHS from being a regulated market to a less regulated one.

The Bill will do nothing to improve social care. It has been two years since the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised a plan for social care. When will we see that plan? Unison has found that more than two thirds of care staff said they were so busy at night that they managed to get only a couple of hours' sleep, and staff are sleeping on makeshift beds in offices. A quarter of the workforce are on zero-hours contracts, and only about 10% are getting the real living wage. Why is this Tory Government continuing to fail our social care sector, its recipients and its workforce? In 2019, I stood on a manifesto that pledged to establish a national care service. That would have been a historic development along the lines of the establishment of the NHS in 1948, but regrettably, we are not in a position to implement it.

I want to make a few comments about the position in Wales. I suggest that people look at the Welsh Government, because in spite of Tory austerity Governments and years of underfunding, we have successfully managed to retain a largely public sector NHS. We have free prescriptions, and we are now proposing significant extra funding for local authorities to help with maintaining and developing the social care sector. Last year's co-operation agreement and the programme for government in the Welsh Senedd committed to the implementation of the real living wage and to establishing a Welsh national care service, which will be implemented by the end of 2023. Before Christmas, the Welsh Social Services Minister, Julie Morgan, pledged that the Welsh Government would provide Welsh local authorities and health boards with £43 million so that they can implement the real living wage—not the living wage that the Tories are proposing—from April.

I reiterate my support for those campaigning to defend a publicly owned and run NHS and to deliver a similarly public national care service. We are trying to do it, and we will achieve it in Wales, despite the barriers put up against us by the Tory Government. I really hope that we will have a Labour-led Government in Westminster soon to do the same. Diolch yn fawr.

6.36 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I concur with the comments of others. Like the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), I acknowledge the incredible work of all healthcare workers across all spheres of the health system over the past two years, through the pandemic. The commitment and dedication that they have all demonstrated throughout the public health crisis is of course not unique to the pandemic but is a defining characteristic of all the staff our wonderful national health service produces. Each one of us present is here to say thank you to them from the bottom of our heart.

I commend the NHS staff who have been working hard day in and day out to ensure that their patients are looked after in the same caring way as they are in normal times. It is important that we acknowledge the sacrifices made by the families of nurses and doctors who have been called in at short notice when wards and A&Es have been short-staffed. Many of my constituents do that every day, and have done it almost every day through the crisis. Many do so having only just left a long overnight shift, and many saw very little of their families during those times. We tend to take it for granted that our NHS staff will go above and beyond to serve the public, which should make us even more proud of them. There is an onus on us in this House, and on the Minister and the Government, to ensure that we deliver for our staff for all that they have done.

The NHS is very different in the scope of the services that it delivers from how it was at its inception on 5 July 1948. I am certain that if Florence Nightingale walked its corridors today she would be more than impressed by how far the delivery of medical services has advanced, but she would also see the familiar aspects of local doctors delivering a first-rate service in community hospitals. The building blocks remain unchanged, and as our NHS looks to the future it is vital that the foundations never change. The NHS is central to our society. We do not want it to be Americanised. We all know what that means: that we would have to pay for it, which would be wrong. We have a duty to deliver for the people we represent, without having to gauge whether their wage packet can pay for treatment, or whether their wallet is big enough.

The future of our NHS will be supported by revolutionary technology, just as revolutionary as the first penicillins when they worked what seemed to be miracles. We do not have a crystal ball, but we can be certain that increased funding will be necessary to support the radical adoption of innovative technology, to improve resources and, without question, as the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said, to pay our NHS workers a wage that reflects the work that they do, have done, and will do in future.

I will conclude, as I am conscious of the three-minute limit, Mr Gray. Today, GPs and hospitals are under severe pressure, which I believe will not ease for the next generation of GPs and NHS workers. In order to ensure that the original building blocks of the NHS that we cherish remain in place, we need, as policy makers, to build firm bridges between now and then. Most importantly, the NHS of the future must have the same ethos of care and compassion at its core in 2050, when we may not be here, as it did at the beginning in 1948, when I was not here either.

6.39 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. It is a truly extraordinary achievement that we have the national health service. We are so indebted to Nye Bevan and all those people who have fought for it. I pay tribute to everyone who signed the petition, which refers to the Health and Care Bill

"locking in privatisation and dividing the English NHS into Integrated Care Systems."

If the Bill is enacted, we can expect to see the NHS split up into 42 locally managed health systems, which will be required to balance the books each year, rather than a national health service responding to patient

need. Following intense pressure from the Labour party, campaign groups and other stakeholders, the Government have conceded that anyone who

"could reasonably be regarded as undermining the independence of the NHS because of their involvement in the private healthcare sector"

will not be able to sit on integrated care boards. Such individuals will still be able to have significant influence through a complex array of sub-committees, however, including place-based partnerships and provider collaboratives. It is there in black and white in NHS guidance:

"The Health and Care Bill, if enacted, will enable ICBs to delegate functions to providers including, for example, devolving budgets to provider collaboratives."

That exposes the Government's real intentions of increasing the involvement of private companies in the running of the NHS.

The Bill also includes measures to revoke the national tariff and replace it with an NHS payments scheme. As private providers would be consulted on the NHS payment scheme, it would effectively give the them the opportunity to undercut NHS providers. I am concerned that as a result, we will see more and more healthcare delivered by the private sector rather than by the NHS, with money going into shareholders' pockets rather than being spent on patient care. If that happens, NHS staff could be forced out of jobs that are currently on the agenda for changed rates of pay and the NHS payments scheme, with only private sector jobs available—potentially with far worse pay and conditions.

I am also concerned that the Bill will lead to an increased rationing of services because ICBs would have strict financial limits each year. Once that money has been spent, patients would have to wait longer or go without treatment. Some may be tempted by the adverts for private healthcare, of which we are seeing more and more, but it is worth looking at where that path leads. According to William Russell, a provider of international health, life and income-protection insurance, the average annual cost of health insurance in the US is an eye-watering $7,470 for an individual and $21,342 for a family. Employers typically fund roughly three quarters of those bills, so they also create a massive burden on businesses. The average cost for an individual of purchasing their own health insurance is $456 per month, according to a 2020 survey by eHealth.

In this country, we can only imagine just how devastating such costs would be to individuals, businesses and the economy. We cannot afford to let such a system take hold here. We must defend the NHS as a universal comprehensive national service that is there to treat us when we need it. Time is running out. I urge MPs across the House to appreciate just how fortunate we are to have the national health service, to join the campaign against NHS privatisation, and to oppose the Health and Care Bill.

6.42 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow the powerful contributions of my hon. Friends. I draw hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for my ongoing links with Unite the Union, which has played such a central role in the fight against privatisation of our health service.

I am enormously grateful to the hundreds of people in my constituency who put their names to the petition, and to the countless others who got in touch to ask me to speak in this incredibly important debate. They know what the Government so clearly do not know: the reforms are totally wrong and come at the worst time. Our NHS is in the midst of the darkest day of its long history. Exactly two years since the first covid patient was admitted to a UK hospital, morale is collapsing, staff are past the point of exhaustion, and many frontline services are at breaking point. For all the Government's talk of life after covid, the virus continues to stalk hospital wards across the country—85 patients have died of covid in the last day alone.

Instead of doing anything in their power to tackle a catastrophic staffing shortage and a record-breaking backlog, Ministers instead seem intent on forging ahead with reforms that threaten to open the doors of our precious health service to ravenous multinationals that are interested only in making a quick buck, not in addressing the country's health needs.

We should not be surprised that the Government have so cynically sought to exploit the crisis to advance an agenda of privatisation and fragmentation. After all, that is the logical next step of a project that has been consistently pushed forward by successive Prime Ministers and Health Secretaries since 2010. When the last Labour Government left office, they entrusted to the Conservatives the care of a health service that was world-beating by every conceivable metric. Despite the best efforts made by our healthcare heroes, the NHS entered the pandemic woefully unprepared and under-resourced, having had its resources and resilience sapped away since the passage of the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

I fear that the Government's latest reforms, which include the introduction of integrated care systems and American-style healthcare management systems, will leave our NHS in a far worse state for confronting the public health challenges of the coming decades. I urge the Minister not only to listen to what has been said today, but to take heed of the public anger surrounding this issue. The British people are not in the least convinced by the claims that the Government have the NHS's best interests at heart, and they look anxiously towards America as a sign of what might yet come to pass. They want an NHS that lives up to its founding principles—a public service that is free and accessible to all—which is why Ministers must return to the drawing board.

6.45 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray, and it is wonderful to hear all these passionate speeches today. We need to be clear that whether they admit it or not, the Conservatives have always had a problem with the national health service. They might try to rewrite the history books, but the truth is recorded: they voted against the creation of our national health service on more than 20 occasions, and the reason is purely ideological. They see it as an unwelcome intervention into the market, a point I will return to in a second.

Some of the more vocal supporters of that neoliberal agenda see the NHS as a last bastion of socialism in our society. I am proud that our national health service was created by socialists, and I think it is the greatest example in this country's history of socialist principles put into

[Richard Burgon]

practice. What does that mean? It means that there are some things in life more important than the pursuit of profit. However, what we now see—what we have seen since 2010—is an increased drive for the Americanisation of our national health service. The Conservatives want to turn it into a system where they feel for a patient's wallet before they feel for their pulse. The truth is that however the history books are rewritten, it was a struggle to create the NHS in the first place, and it is now a great struggle to maintain it in accordance with its founding principles.

There are two key issues for our health service—deep underfunding and greater use of the private sector—and they go hand in hand, with the national health service being underfunded so that people can supposedly be persuaded to stomach greater and greater private sector involvement. First, the Conservatives defund things so that people get frustrated, and then they say that there is no choice but to hand them over to the private sector—that is the plan. We hear from the Conservatives that the staffing crisis in our national health service was caused by omicron or by covid, but the truth is that the huge vacancies and understaffing in the NHS did not start with omicron or with covid: the vacancies have been there for a long time, and now there are nearly 100,000 of them. An unbelievable £100 billion has gone to non-NHS providers of healthcare over the past decade alone. Every pound spent bolstering the private companies means less spent on people's healthcare, as the profits are creamed off.

People out there are right to be worried about what the Conservatives want to do with the NHS. I mentioned earlier the Conservatives' historical and ongoing objection to interventions in the market, but the truth is they believe in free markets for the 99%—with all the harm it brings them in their lives, their pay packets and their health service—but believe in intervention in the market for the benefit of those at the top. That is what we saw during the covid crisis, with all those corrupt contracts, the VIP fast-track lane, and billions of pounds going to Serco for the failed test and trace system. What the Tories did with the corrupt covid contracts, they want to do right across our national health service. That is why the Health and Care Bill would be better renamed the corporate takeover Bill. We cannot allow that to happen. The Conservatives want to create a race to the bottom, and we know that cuts and privatisation go hand in hand.

Before I finish, I will say a word about our NHS staff. We saw the Prime Minister—who no one trusts anymore, and quite rightly so—standing outside Downing Street clapping for the NHS heroes, but claps do not pay the bills. If we have a Government that values NHS staff in the way they say they do, they need to pay those staff properly. I put on the record my support for the 15% pay increase for NHS staff, who have suffered a decade of real-terms pay cuts. We need to be clear about what that means: that 15% increase would bring their pay back in line with where it was a decade ago.

What is the way forward? It is for us to realise that no Prime Minister or Government will say to the public, "Do you know what? We're going to privatise the NHS. Do you know what? We're going to turn it into an American-style healthcare system." Of course they will not do that. They will manufacture consent for those changes through underfunding and through creeping privatisation carrying on at ever greater pace. It was a struggle to create our NHS, and it will be a struggle to save it from this final Americanisation. Regardless of which party we are in, history will judge us poorly if we betray those who went before us and created our national health service—the greatest achievement in our country's history, and the greatest example of socialist principles put into practice, which may be why this Government dislike it so much.

6.51 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. The future of the NHS hangs in the balance, and the petition is entirely correct in calling on the Government to renationalise the NHS, scrap integrated care systems and end private finance contracts.

The Health and Care Bill threatens to open the floodgates to further privatisation by implementing a healthcare model that incentivises cuts and closures and rations funding to health boards while welcoming private profit-driven companies such as Virgin and Serco on to the boards of integrated care systems, giving them a say on where NHS money gets spent. The new legislation will further dilute the voice of patients and the public, with the new boards covering populations of up to 3 million people that will be remote and centralised, with no obligation to be open, transparent or accountable to ordinary people.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that if we have that lack of transparency we might see a repetition of the Government's wasting £4 billion during covid? There is a fear about related-party transactions, where people know exactly where the money is going—into their pockets.

Kim Johnson: I fully support what my hon. Friend says. The boards will be remote and centralised and will seriously restrict the power of local authorities to protect local services. With these changes, private healthcare giants will not only have a bigger say over the NHS but will be granted contracts with even less scrutiny than now.

By opening the door to private healthcare providers to take decisions on NHS budgets and services, the Bill makes it easier for public health contracts to be distributed to private providers, with less transparency and accountability. Safeguards in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 will be excluded, watering down protections for employment and environmental provisions in procurement processes. There is no doubt that the Bill will put on steroids the cronyism we have seen during the pandemic while our NHS heroes have worked day and night, putting their lives on the line. The Government have cut real pay for nurses while handing out billions of pounds of contracts through an illegal VIP system to their mates and donors and to the failed track and trace system.

The NHS is the jewel in the crown of our public services—our proudest achievement. However, 12 years of Tory austerity, and now the pressures of the pandemic, have stripped it to the bone. An unbelievable £100 billion has gone to private healthcare providers in the last decade alone. The last thing the NHS needs right now is

a dangerous overhaul that puts the private sector at its heart. We must take this and every opportunity to support amendments to the Bill that establish the NHS as the default option for all NHS contracts, to mitigate the worst parts of it. We must stand up to these new attacks or risk losing the NHS to privatisation by stealth. We must go further in our demands to roll back the damage done, reinstating the NHS as a truly national service and establishing a fully integrated national care service with staff and patients at its heart.

6.54 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. The privatisation of the NHS has been a lengthy and well-documented process that started during Thatcher's Conservative Government in the 1980s. It has shifted the responsibility for the long-term care of the elderly and the vulnerable from the NHS to local authorities, and allowed hotel-type charges for long-term care. This violated a key NHS principle that patients should not pay health charges. Charges became means tested, and homes had to be sold to pay for the bills. Local authorities were forced to pass on their responsibility for healthcare to outsourced private companies. That created a for-profit industry worth £6 billion a year.

Ninety per cent. of nursing home beds are now operated on a for-profit basis. Almost 400,000 elderly patients are now a source of income in an increasingly privatised sector. The staff in those nursing homes are an increasingly casualised and deskilled workforce. The privatisation of care for the elderly created such a mess that we are still trying to sort it out 40 years later. That is the shameful legacy of privatisation in one sector of healthcare. We can see clearly that the process of privatising the NHS itself will follow the same pattern. It will be run by private contractors who will de-professionalise and casualise a temporary workforce.

There has been a creeping privatisation of the NHS. In 2012, an Act was passed that, among other things, required all NHS contracts to be tendered to any qualified provider. Now we have ambulance services run by taxi firms, private companies that have taken over GP practices covering half a million patients in London, and a private company taking over an NHS hospital and cancelling the contract when there was no more money to be made. I have seen first hand, working for Unite and organising outsourced workers in the health sector, the damage that privatisation does to our essential care services.

If that tale of incompetence was not enough, the Government are now pushing through a new reorganisation, this time to establish what they call "integrated care". It does the complete opposite, instead butchering our NHS into 42 separate areas. It should not be called integrated care but "disintegrated care". Each area has a fixed budget that cannot be overspent. This will create a postcode lottery and force each area not to co-operate with each other to save cash. Each area board will allow private healthcare companies—another play on words: they are mostly private health insurance companies—to make decisions about the provision of healthcare.

Here we go again: the Government's answer to underfunding our NHS is to let private companies run it. History has taught us that this is not the solution. NHS staff employed by 42 different organisations face a most uncertain future of casualisation, deskilling and the introduction of poorer terms and conditions. The people of England face a regional, not a national, health system, which will have different terms and conditions for its workforce and different provision of treatment. It is chaotic and irresponsible.

Every Government of the day have been entrusted to preserve and protect one of the country's greatest achievements—to cherish, not cherry-pick and hive off to the private sector. I urge the Minister to listen to the calls of my constituents, campaigners and the trade unions and scrap the catastrophic Health and Care Bill, which destabilises, fractures and imperils our NHS.

Andy McDonald *rose—*

James Gray (in the Chair): I apologise to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough; I fear we have no time.

6.58 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank all those who signed this petition. The position of the SNP on this matter is clear: the NHS was created to be free at the point of use and to treat all citizens equally from cradle to grave. That is the NHS we want to see back—an NHS for the people, by the people and firmly in the hands of the people. Despite the fact that the Government lack a democratic mandate to privatise the NHS, vast sums of public money are being wasted on business managers, private providers, PFI debts, multinational accounting firms, and corporate consultants. By enshrining privatisation in NHS England, the Tory Government continue to jeopardise access to care and universal standards.

Let us look at social care, for example. Scotland has successfully integrated health and social care services since 2014 and has put in record investment to allow continued quality improvements in services year on year, and that is without any privatisation. It has been achieved even with the culture of cuts to public services that has been forced on Scotland by Westminster's austerity agendas. If Scotland can create a social care system that works with one hand tied behind our back, what is England's excuse?

We have heard hon. Members refer to dental health and the lack of dental care in England. Of course, in Scotland we made provision for free NHS dental care for 18 to 25-year-olds in our last manifesto, and that is coming through the Scottish Parliament just now. That is on top of free annual and biennial eye tests for everybody, because those are the things that matter and they can have a better effect on the management of our NHS and address the clogging up of appointments.

For the UK Government, it seems that healthcare is a hassle; for the Scottish Government, it has been our priority. The covid crisis has demonstrated why the NHS is our most important public service, and Scotland has recognised that. We gave our NHS workers a bonus as we came out of the pandemic. The Scottish Government have also put record funding into our health and social care services of up to £18 billion, with resource funding up 90% under the Scottish Government. Frontline health spending is £111 higher per head in Scotland than it is in England. These figures speak for themselves.

[Steven Bonnar]

The SNP Government in Holyrood have a history of making different parts of the health and social care system work together. They have used legislation to get these efforts under way. We also contributed to the betterment of the UK system by voting against the Health and Care Bill going through this House. That Bill gives the UK Health Secretary enormous powers over NHS England—over its structure, functions and budget—giving him more leeway during trade negotiations, with particular risks from American healthcare interests. Such ministerial control over NHS England is concerning, as there will be long-term consequences for the national health services in Scotland and the other devolved nations, particularly in terms of funding and what is included in any free trade agreements. The Bill eliminates the requirement for competitive bidding and allows NHS bodies to award some contracts directly. Can you imagine if the future care of your family and friends, your children and relatives, was all dependent on how much money was left in somebody's locker, as opposed to whose expertise and resources were best to deliver it? The SNP has been clear that those in charge of services should have only the best interests of patients at heart, not the vested interests of private healthcare.

We appreciate our healthcare system and in particular its staff, who have been invaluable to every member of our society before and throughout the covid pandemic and will be after the pandemic has, thankfully, gone.

We heard what was said by Dr Pelle Gustafson, the chief medical officer of the Swedish patient insurer. When asked which country he would

"hold at the very top of the pillar"

with regard to patient safety, he replied:

"If you take all preventive work as regards patient safety, I would say that I am personally very impressed by Scotland. In Scotland, you have a long-standing tradition of working. You have development in the right direction. You have a system that is fairly equal all over the place and you also have improvement activities going on. I am very impressed by Scotland."

If the Minister is listening to that, this is the NHS that the UK Government could and should be using as a basis to drive improvements for the health and social care sector across these nations, because if they do not, we are at a very real risk of doing citizens the greatest injustice that this country has ever seen.

7.3 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. This has been a spirited and emotional debate, and one that captures the unique place that the NHS holds in the heart of this nation. On behalf of the Labour Front Bench, I want to personally thank the petitioners and the campaigners behind the petition, because the NHS is more than just an institution. It is an example of the difference that politics, society and individuals can make. It gives us hope that Governments can make real differences to people's lives, so long as there is the requisite willpower and determination to do so.

Over the last 12 years, NHS staff have had to move heaven and earth just to keep the service on its feet. They have faced extraordinary upheaval, underfunding, neglect and Government mismanagement. I would like to place on record my thanks to all NHS staff, at every level, for the work they have done—not just over the last 12 years and before, but particularly in the last two years, when we were hit by the covid pandemic and the NHS was placed under enormous strain. I am in awe of the work that the staff have done, but I am angry that they have had to step up to try to mitigate the failures of this Government.

Even before the pandemic, the scale of the crisis in the NHS was stark. Covid has compounded the problems, but it did not cause them. Any attempt by the Government to blame covid for the state of our national health service is nothing more than an abdication of responsibility.

This debate is about the future of the NHS, but to understand the future, we must understand how we got here in the first place and how the steps we must take are informed by principles that have been too easily forgotten by the Conservative Government. The NHS is Labour's finest moment: emerging from the tragedy and upheaval of world war two, the British public decided to put their faith in a Labour Government. British people suffered from endemic health inequalities and squalid living conditions, and were bearing the brunt of decades of public health neglect.

The NHS, spearheaded by the great Aneurin Bevan and Clement Attlee, aimed to change all of that. Many said it could not be done, but it was. It was done through courage of conviction and a belief in the necessity of a service based on need rather than income—a simple principle with revolutionary consequences.

We now find ourselves in 2022, almost 74 years on. If the Labour pioneers who built our health service were here today, what would they see? They would see record waiting lists, an acute staffing crisis, morale at its lowest ebb, health inequalities growing, and a Government fundamentally incapable of addressing their own failings. Yet if they twisted the dials of their time machine to 2010, they would see an NHS in a pretty healthy condition. Waiting times had dropped, public satisfaction was at the highest level ever, and hospitals were staffed at record numbers. In 12 years, that progress has been systematically undone.

The first priority of the next Labour Government will therefore be to sort out the immediate mess that the Tories have left our health service in—once more. That means throwing everything at slashing waiting times and reducing the care backlog, and it means recruiting, training and retaining the staff we need across the NHS and social care. The last Labour Government brought average waiting times down from 18 months to 18 weeks. We will have to do the same again as a matter of urgency. That must all come alongside a long-term plan for the care workforce and wider reforms to fix social care.

However, the Government are doing none of that. Instead, they are faffing around with an unnecessary and distracting top-down reorganisation of the NHS, in the form of the Health and Care Bill, while doing precious little to tackle waiting lists or address the staffing crisis. I would be grateful if the Minister recognised those concerns in his response and outlined what steps the Government will take to ensure that any NHS reorganisation comes alongside a proper plan to address soaring waiting times and critical staffing shortages.

However, the future of the NHS is about more than just addressing the immediate crisis; it is also about adapting to the needs of our population and recognising

that health is about more than just surgeries and hospitals. Last week, here in Westminster Hall, I spoke about health inequalities and about how health is all too often viewed as an isolated issue, without considering the external factors that influence our wellbeing. Wellbeing is linked to our communities, our access to green spaces, our mental health, our opportunities and much more. If we fail to consider those influencing factors, our health service will always be geared to address the symptom, as opposed to the root cause of the symptom.

That is why the future of our NHS relies on prioritising preventive health measures. One example of that is Labour's recent announcement that we would recruit more than 8,500 mental health professionals to support 1 million more people every year. That is exactly the kind of progressive, proactive and preventive policy that the Government should be driving. Such an investment in mental health would mean that every community had access to a mental health hub for young people, and every school specialist support. Wellbeing would be addressed beyond the clinical setting, and the health consequences of stress, depression and anxiety addressed before they reached the hospital waiting room.

So far, I have seen little evidence from the Government that they realise the importance of preventive health measures. In fact, I would go as far to say that the withdrawal of funding from community centres, green spaces and sports clubs over the past 12 years shows that the Government are not sensible and are not serious about preventive health policy. In his response, perhaps the Minister will correct me on that and advise how the Government intend to reverse their disastrous cuts to local services, which have had a calamitous impact on health outcomes.

Our NHS was built to provide security. It was built to recognise that our prosperity is innately linked to our health, and that we all deserve to live long, fulfilling lives—all of us, irrespective of our background or where we have come from. It is an issue of basic respect. To be healthy and have access to care is not a privilege; it is a fundamental right of every human being, a right that we expect the Government to protect and defend at all costs. The job of the Government of the day is to pass the national health service on in a better condition than they found it in when they came to office. I am afraid to say that this Government have failed in that obligation massively.

I am hopeful, however, that with the right support, the right investment, the right approach and the right values—values matter when it comes to our health and wellbeing—Labour can undo years of neglect and equip the NHS with the tools it needs to survive and then to thrive. That day cannot come quickly enough.

James Gray (in the Chair): We have a few minutes in hand so, unusually—although I am told it is perfectly in order—I will call the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, Andy McDonald, to make a brief contribution.

7.13 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Gray; I am grateful to you for accommodating me. I declare an interest as a private member of Unite the union.

The level of involvement of private interests that has built up in our NHS over decades is deeply troublesome. That concern has been expressed forcefully in the demands set out in the petition that we are debating. That petition has garnered more than 135,000 signatures.

In our manifesto at the last election, Labour stated:

"Our urgent priority is to end NHS privatisation",

because

"Every penny spent on privatisation and outsourcing is a penny less spent on patient care."

We committed to repealing the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and reinstating the responsibilities of the Secretary of State to provide a comprehensive and universal healthcare system. We also committed to ending the requirement on health authorities to put services out to competitive tender, to ensure that services are delivered in-house and that subsidiary companies are brought back in-house.

In the moments remaining to me, I will address the issue of the private finance initiative. The hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) set out a lot of the detail very accurately. He told us about a hospital in my constituency, the James Cook University Hospital, and I pay tribute to the work of all its team, ably led by Sue Page, the chief executive. That hospital has performed marvels during this period, and offered services to other hospitals across the entire north of England.

I am appealing to the Minister for some help for my hospital, because the burden of PFI has been absolutely colossal: the hospital has cost £1.5 billion to build and maintain since it opened in 2003. The amounts paid by the trust increase every year until the final payment in 2034. I do not want to get into debate about how rotten the PFI deal was, quite frankly. All PFI deals were rotten. They were started in 1992 under John Major's Government—please, let us not have any of that nonsense. The PFI deal costs an absolute fortune: £20 million more than an equivalent hospital would have to pay for maintenance.

What was missing is what we are going to do about it. As an initial solution, we could look at the decisive action of the Department of Health in 2012 to make £1.5 billion available in grants—not loans—to seven hospitals in England with some of the heaviest PFI debts through a stability fund. The seven trusts were able to use that money, rather than their usual budgets, to meet their PFI payments. It has been done elsewhere. I appeal to the Minister to look very carefully at providing assistance to get this PFI albatross from around our neck and let my hospital thrive and continue to do the wonderful work it has done for many years.

7.16 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for leading this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I am pleased we were able to find time to hear from the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald); I offered to take an intervention from him, which I suspect was a brave offer on my part given the intervention that might have come my way. I am pleased he got to give his speech.

I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). I think this is the first time we have properly been opposite one

[Edward Argar]

another since his appointment to this role on the Opposition Front Bench. Although I did not agree with everything he said, he made a typically well-informed and well-argued speech. He is right to pay tribute to all hon. Members who have spoken today, regardless of whether one agrees with the positions advanced. This has been a passionate debate. At its heart is, perhaps, the most precious of our country's institutions; understandably, right hon. and hon. Members and our constituents have very strong views on the subject.

Before turning to the substance of the debate, and although I may not agree with their position, I pay tribute in a broader context to the work of Unite, Unison and other trade unions. I do not always agree with the stance they adopt, but they play a hugely important role in our democracy and society. It is right to put that on the record. As always in these debates, and as the shadow Minister has done very clearly, I also put on the record our gratitude—from both sides of the Chamber equally—to all NHS staff and those working in social care, local government and other key workers across the country for what they have done across the past two years and, indeed, what they do every year, day in, day out.

As I have said before, the Health and Care Bill reflects evolution, not revolution. It supports improvements already under way in the NHS and, crucially, builds on what the NHS recommended and consulted on back in 2019.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will make a little progress before giving way; I will always give way to the hon. Lady. The Bill is backed by not only the NHS but many others working across health and social care. In a joint statement, the NHS Confederation, NHS providers and the Local Government Association state that they

"believe that the direction of travel set by the bill is the right one",

noting that local level partnership is the only way we can address the challenges of our time.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is talking about a consultation that, as I recall, took place over the Christmas period, when NHS staff are absolutely exhausted. He talks about these changes being requested by the NHS, but what percentage of NHS staff does he actually think took part in the consultation?

Edward Argar: As the hon. Lady will know, the former chief executive of the NHS, Lord Stephens, was clearing in saying that the

"overwhelming majority of these proposals are changes that the health service has asked for."

We should do the right thing by them and by patients. It is the right time for the Bill: it is the right prescription at the right time.

The substance of the petition, which has framed many speeches by hon. Members today, calls for the Government to renationalise the NHS. I have to say that it has never been denationalised. The NHS is and always will be free at the point of use. The Government are committed to safeguarding the principles on which the NHS was created. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish set that out very clearly. We have no plans for privatisation.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will make a little progress; if I have time, I will give way to the hon. Lady, with whom I sat on a committee of London councils when we were looking at social care reform way back in 2010.

We all recognise the importance of preserving this great national asset for the future and ensuring that the NHS remains comprehensive and free at the point of use, regardless of income, on the basis of need. The Government remain steadfast in their commitment that the NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector.

We are determined to embrace innovation and potential where we find it, but that is different from many of the accusations in the speeches we have heard today. I know it is tempting to scaremonger and set out accusations about what this Act does, even when people know better, as I know hon. Members do, but that reflects scaremongering rather than reality. There has always been an element of private provision in healthcare services in this country. Labour Members should know that because, as the Nuffield Trust said in 2019,

"the available evidence suggests the increase"—

in private provision—

"originally began under Labour governments before 2010".

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will just finish this point and then give way to the hon. Lady. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) made the point, which the hon. Member for Middlesbrough touched on as well, that it is important to look at the extent of the involvement of private sector providers, which accelerated when the Labour party was in power. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby talked about the 2012 legislation and "any qualified provider", but that was not brought in by the 2012 legislation; it was brought in by the Gordon Brown Government in 2009-10, under the term "any willing provider." The name was changed, but nothing substantive changed from what the Labour Government had introduced in terms of the ability to compete for contracts.

Christian Matheson: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: One more sentence and I will give way to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West); then I will try to bring in the hon. Gentleman.

One of the key changes allowing private sector organisations to compete for and run frontline health services came in 2004, again under a Labour Government, when the tendering for provision of out-of-hours services by private companies was allowed.

Catherine West: The Minister is being very gracious. How is the Act going to ensure that there is no conflict of interest between private providers who sit on integrated care boards and who then provide services? Are we going to end up with another Randox scandal?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know that when it comes to integrated care boards we, as a Government, introduced an amendment building on the already clear provisions in the Bill to prohibit conflicts of interest. I do not know whether she voted for the Government amendment, but it did exactly that, making it clear when the Bill was on Report that private providers and those with significant private interests could not sit on NHS integrated care boards.

Christian Matheson: The Minister is being generous with his time. Let us get the history right. The reason why the Labour Government increased the involvement of private sector bidders was simply to be able to increase capacity quickly—to get the waiting list and waiting time backlogs down, which they had inherited from the previous Conservative Government and that were massive. In terms of the 2009 Bill, I seem to remember that there was a provision in there that gave preference to NHS bidders.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Although we occasionally cross swords in the main Chamber or here, he knows I have a great deal of respect for him. All I would say gently on the point about the 2004 changes is that they came seven years into a Labour Government, so I do not know the reason why they had not been able to make progress before then.

We continue to work closely with the NHS to implement the changes that it has asked for, so that we can build back better and secure our NHS for future generations. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, rightly said, the covid-19 pandemic has tested our NHS like never before, and all our NHS staff have risen to meet these tests in extraordinary new ways.

Hon. Members on both sides have rightly raised the point about the pressure that NHS staff have been under. Those who have been under pressure dealing with this pandemic are the people who will also be working flat out to deal with waiting lists and backlogs. We need to ensure that we are honest with the British people and that those staff have the time and space to recover, emotionally and physically, from the pressures they have been under. That is hugely important and we acknowledge the workforce.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will not give way to the hon. Lady now. I have given way to her before. I will try to make progress, but if there is time I will try to give way to her.

We have seen innovative new ways of working: new teams forged, new technologies adopted and new approaches found to some old problems. There is no greater example of that than the phenomenal success of our vaccine roll-out. That would not have been possible without the staff, who are the golden thread that runs through our NHS. As we look to the future and a post-pandemic world, we know that, as the shadow Minister said, there is no shortage of challenges ahead of us: an ageing population, an increase in people with multiple health conditions and, as he rightly says, the challenge of deep-rooted inequalities in health outcomes and the need to look at the broader context. I do not know the shadow Minister as well as I knew his predecessor, but both his predecessor and I had a career in local government as councillors. I suspect that the shadow Minister may have had one too, so he may well know that I understand his point about the broader context.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will make a little more progress. If I can, I will then try to give way to hon. Members.

More needs to be done, and we are giving the NHS the support that it needs and has asked for. In addition to our historic settlement for the NHS in 2018, which will see its budget rise by £33.9 billion a year by 2023-24, we have pledged a record £36 billion for investment in the health and care system over the next three years. The funding will ensure that the NHS has the long-term resources that it needs to tackle the covid backlogs and build back better from the pandemic.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Stockton South referred to recruitment within the NHS. What is the Government's response to that, to ensure that we have the recruitment and the staff in place?

Edward Argar: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there are 1.2 million full-time equivalents in the NHS—a record number of staff. Take one example: our pledge for 50,000 more nurses by the time of the next scheduled general election in 2024. Last year alone, we saw the number of nurses in our NHS increase by 10,900. We have a plan in place, and we are recruiting and training more staff through increased numbers of places—at medical schools, for example.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will not, because I have only two or three minutes left. If I make sufficient progress, I will try to give way, but I cannot promise the hon. Lady.

We know that different parts of the system want to work together and deliver joined-up services, and we know that when they do, it works; we have seen that with non-statutory integrated care systems over the past few years. The petition calls for the Government to "scrap integrated care systems", but to do so would be to let down our NHS. The reforms have been developed by the NHS, and integrated care systems are already in place. The Health and Care Bill places them on a statutory footing to allow for that integration and joined-up working to continue.

In the minute or two I have left before I hand back to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South, I will touch on PFI contracts, which is an issue that he and other hon. Members have raised. In 2018, the Government announced that PFI and PF2 will not be used for any future public sector projects, including those in the NHS. The Government will honour existing PFI contracts, as wholesale termination would not necessarily represent good value for money. We need to look at each on its merits; many have clauses for early termination, which would cost a lot more than the life of the contract.

However, we have committed to undo the worst of the contracts inherited from the previous Government. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—I hope he will let me tweak his tail a little on this—chided my hon. Friend the Member for

[Edward Argar]

Stockton South by saying he should be careful about references to PFIs. Of the 124 significant PFIs currently in place, 122 were signed between 1997 and 2010.

Mr Gray, I think you want me to give my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South some time to sum up, so I will conclude. We believe that this Government are doing everything necessary to ensure that the NHS remains free at the point of use. We are working with the NHS to deliver what it has asked for through the Health and Care Bill. There is huge support from those working in the system for the direction of travel. The Bill will create a more efficient and integrated healthcare system that is less bureaucratic, and allegations that this is privatisation by the back door are simply misleading. Through the legislation, we will ensure better and more joined-up services, improving health and care outcomes for all.

7.28 pm

Matt Vickers: I thank the 135,000 petitioners for triggering this important debate on our most essential and treasured service. I thank Members for their valuable, emotional and passionate contributions, and I thank the Minister for what was a comprehensive response. The NHS is a great British institution, and we should be proud of it. From Borough to Burnley, our NHS staff are rightly celebrated as heroes. Their dedication got us through the pandemic and will help us reach the 6 million people on our waiting lists. We owe them a gratitude that cannot be expressed in words.

Dentistry remains an issue for constituents across the UK, and I look forward to the debate on NHS dentistry, which I understand is to take place in the near future. I am delighted that the NHS has the biggest cash boost in its history, and I am delighted to see thousands more doctors and nurses working in our amazing hospitals. I look forward to more debates on the NHS, so that we can continue to appreciate, extend and improve our great British NHS.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 598732, relating to the future of the NHS.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 31 January 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Regulation of Business, and Water, and Water Energy and Telecoms

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): The UK has left the European Union. We have regained sovereign control over our laws, borders and money. For the first time in half a century, we have the freedom to conceive and implement rules that put the UK first. This means that now is the time to think boldly about how we regulate in order to modernise our approach, unlock cutting-edge technologies, ease burdens and cut red tape, and boost competition.

In July 2021 I jointly launched the consultation on "Reforming the framework for better regulation", to capitalise on the regulatory freedoms provided by leaving the European Union. In the consultation I set out that the Government are committed to a regulatory system that is smart, proportionate and considers the needs of business. The system Government use to manage the flow of regulation and understand its impacts is key to delivering this commitment and plays an important role in helping to drive behaviour and approaches to policy making across government.

An overwhelming majority of responses to the consultation welcomed some degree of reform. A full summary of responses to the consultation will be published today, alongside the Government's policy document, "The Benefits of Brexit".

Our proposed reforms to the framework for better regulation are underpinned by four core policy changes, which aim to improve and control the flow of regulation across government, and assess its value:

> Adopting a greater emphasis on proportionality, to ensure that we regulate in a way that focuses on allowing businesses to grow, while giving greater flexibility to try innovative new approaches.
>
> Ensuring that we are making the best use of alternatives to regulation by introducing an earlier scrutiny point at which departments will be asked to justify their decision to regulate.
>
> Improving how we evaluate regulation, including post-implementation reviews.
>
> Improving how we measure the overall impact of regulation, including consideration of a more holistic approach and the removal of the Business Impact Target (BIT) in its current form.

While these reforms represent a streamlining of process and a change of emphasis, they do not undermine or reduce the requirements for Departments to produce options appraisals and quantified impacts in accordance with the Green Book.

The reforms proposed to the framework for better regulation will not take place at once. There will be a transitional year, with one final BIT report, while we bring forward legislation to make changes to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. BEIS will use that time to agree with Departments the details of metrics, targets and exemptions.

Alongside these reforms, today I will publish a policy paper on the future of economic regulation of water, energy, and telecoms within the UK. This follows a commitment in the National Infrastructure Strategy for Government to produce an overarching policy paper in this area.

The policy paper will set out Government's vision to incentivise increased investment needed to create world class utilities infrastructure that helps protect consumers, promote economic growth and sector resilience, while meeting our ambitious environmental targets. The paper covers the following areas:

> How the Government intend to ensure that the regulators' duties will allow them to meet these systemic challenges, conducting a review of duties in 2022;
>
> how the Government will provide strategic clarity on our long-term aims for these sectors, publishing a letter of strategic guidance to the CEOs of Ofwat, Ofgem, and Ofcom;
>
> how competition for strategic investment opportunities can be enhanced for the long-term benefit of consumers and investors; and
>
> how transparency and consistency in key processes can be improved; in particular seeking appropriate alignment on economical calculations and the regulatory appeals system.

This policy paper is the first step to updating our model of economic regulation. In 2022, we will be launching a consultation setting out more detail on a package of measures to ensure the UK model of economic regulation fits the needs of the modern age.

I will place a copy of the future of economic regulation of water, energy and telecoms within the UK paper in the Libraries of the House.

In putting all these reforms into practice, the Government and our independent regulators must always remember that the way we make and enforce regulation makes a tangible difference to people. Our job is to help people and businesses to achieve better outcomes for themselves. That was what taking back control for the UK was about.

I will place a copy of the "Benefits of Brexit" paper in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS571]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19: Purchase of Critical Supplies

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): This statement is on the accounting impairment impact of equipment purchased in response to the covid pandemic

Today, we are publishing information relating to our purchasing efforts for critical supplies that have helped this country in our fight against the pandemic.

Since this unprecedented global pandemic erupted our absolute priority throughout has always been saving lives.

In a highly competitive global market, where many countries imposed export bans, we secured billions of items of PPE and have delivered over 17.5 billion items so far to protect our frontline workers. The Government acted quickly to achieve the target of obtaining 30,000 ventilators by the end of June 2020. The supply of these vital items

has helped to keep the NHS open throughout the pandemic and enabled it to deliver a world-class service to the public.

The scale of the challenge we faced in sourcing these goods should not be underestimated. Globally there were significant logistical challenges in sourcing, procuring and distributing goods. The rapid rise in international infection rates during the early stages of the pandemic created unparalleled demand.

The disruption to the market, coupled with the unprecedented spike in demand, resulted in a huge inflation in price for goods and intense global competition to secure scarce supplies. For example, the average cost of a nitrile glove increased over six-fold at the height of the pandemic compared with pre-pandemic levels.

In this unique situation, we had to change our approach to procurement and our appetite for risk. The risk that contracts might not perform and that supplies were priced at a premium needed to be balanced against the risk to the health of frontline workers, the NHS and the public if we failed to get the PPE we so desperately needed. We make no apology for procuring PPE at pace and volume so that we could protect thousands of frontline healthcare workers in the NHS and social care.

The Department assessed PPE requirements at the beginning of the pandemic. However, as this was a new disease, we did not have data on actual levels of need. The Department of Health and Social Care developed a sophisticated model to assess demand. Our estimates of demand relied on reasonable worst-case scenario planning, information about the prevailing IPC guidance and the likely number of patient interactions in every healthcare setting. The Department's approach to cover all settings for healthcare workers means that we have additional stock of £0.8 billion.

Our planning also had to take into account the likely non-performance of contracts. Our buying activities were more successful than we predicted, such that 97% of the units purchased have been assessed as adequate to provide protection for health care workers. A small proportion (3%) of items have been deemed not suitable for use, equivalent to £0.7 billion.

We are now in a position where we have high confidence that we have sufficient stock to cover all future covid-19 related demands, even in the face of the omicron variant. The PPE stocks we secured have allowed us to meet demand through 2020-21 and 2021-22. Our existing PPE stocks will continue to support us throughout 2022-23. Indeed, the high standards of protection we set for NHS workers means that we have an additional 10% of units that may not be suitable for use within the health and social care sectors but may have alternative uses than those we originally envisaged—£2.6 billion.

Within the Test and Trace and Ventilators programme the high standards we have set means that we have items of kit and other equipment that are not suitable for use—£0.3 billion.

As part of the Department's annual reporting, we have prepared a statement outlining the diminishment in value of the Department's covid stock holding at 31 March 2021 due to:

> For stock we expect to use, changes in global prices between the point of purchase and market prices at 31 March 2021. As the world market has now stabilised and we are returning to more "business as usual" conditions, the value of some categories of goods is now much lower than the price they were purchased for. For example, we now estimate the value of aprons that we purchased is a third of what we paid during the height of the pandemic.
>
> Stock that has failed quality testing and/or technical assurance and is considered not fit for use in any setting. In these cases we are seeking recovery of funds from suppliers wherever possible.
>
> Stock that we do not intend to use for its original intended purpose, perhaps because it was bought as a contingency or has characteristics that prevent its use in a UK healthcare setting but could be considered for alternative use or resale; and,
>
> Stock in excess of current forecast requirements where alternative use or resale is required to maximise the value of the stockpile and prevent wastage through future date expiry.

Our efforts to manage the stockpile effectively, and in doing so maximise its value, are ongoing. The Department has established a redistribution team to identify alternative uses and resale potential for inventory we do not intend or expect to use. For example, donating masks to both the Department for Transport and Department for Education to aid the reopening of the economy on public transport and to support schools following their reopening in March 2021. Any repurposing or resale of inventory is carefully considered as maintaining adequate supplies for frontline workers remains our priority.

Medical professionals within the Department's quality control and assurance function and colleagues within Medical Surveillance Authorities have recognised that stock which has exceeded its manufacturers use-by date, is not necessarily unusable. The Department has begun a tender for a third-party medical laboratory to provide official testing of PPE products with a view to extending shelf life to maximise the usefulness and therefore value for money from the PPE purchased without compromising the quality of goods made available for use.

In addition, the Department is currently working through a revision to the pandemic preparedness stockpile, incorporating the learnings from this pandemic. We now have a more strategic approach to our supplier base, signing contracts with over 30 UK-based companies, reducing our reliance on established manufacturers in the far east and our carbon footprint. Environmental considerations are at the heart of the Department's strategy for the ongoing management of the covid inventory stockpiles, including inventory disposals.

[HCWS572]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

UK-India Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Negotiating teams from the UK and India came together—virtually—between 17 and 28 January 2022 for a first round of talks on a UK-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA). This swiftly followed the launch of negotiations on 13 January when I visited India.

Both sides are committed to progressing negotiations at pace, without compromising on the quality of the deal. We aim to reach a balanced and mutually beneficial trade agreement, delivering benefits for all sectors and across all of the UK. Officials from a range of Departments and Ministries in the UK and India conducted over 90 hours of virtual discussions across a broad range of policy topics.

Technical experts from both sides came together for discussions in 32 separate sessions covering 26 policy areas including: trade in goods, trade in services including financial services and telecommunications, investment, intellectual property, customs and trade facilitation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, technical barriers to trade, competition, gender, Government procurement, SMEs, sustainability, transparency, trade and development, geographical indicators and digital.

The discussions were open, collaborative and productive, reflecting the shared ambition of the UK and India Governments to secure a broad deal to boost trade between the fifth and sixth largest economies in the world.

The second round of negotiations is scheduled to commence on 7 March 2022.

A deal with India would help to put Global Britain at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, cement our position as a leader among a network of countries committed to free trade and support the levelling up agenda across the UK.

Any deal the Government strike must be in the best interests of the British people and the economy.

The Government will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS570]

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Monday 7 February 2022

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